

Philosophical Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Perfection: An Intellectual History of Barack Obama's Foreign Policy

Jonathan Middleton

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of East Anglia

School of History

September 2020

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived therefrom must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

Abstract

This thesis explores the role played by philosophical pragmatism in shaping Barack Obama's approach to foreign policy. Extending the efforts of James Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama* into the foreign policy sphere, the thesis posits that such an approach is more fruitful for understanding Obama's foreign policy presidency than previous efforts which have tended to employ conventional IR categories to situate Obama.

This is a work of intellectual history, taking seriously the notion that we can draw understanding of actors in the past through the ideas and contexts which shaped their modes of thinking. This effort will thus place key Obama-era foreign policy issues in their proper intellectual context. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars, crises in Libya and Syria, the "Pivot to Asia," and the controversial use of drone technology in a continued counterterrorism effort will each be examined.

Obama's engagement with philosophical pragmatism will not be argued as being a *Deus ex machina* - that which explains all - but instead forms an explication for a mode of thought that is complex and varied, but crucially, also best captures the essence of the central Obamian effort at reconciling those same contradictions. The logic of Obama's foreign policy will thus be found as having greater coherence at its heart than prior critiques nominally allow. Philosophical pragmatism will be examined as an imperfect vessel for Obama's own search for *perfection* in America's approach to the world.

Access Condition and Agreement

Each deposit in UEA Digital Repository is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the Data Collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission from the copyright holder, usually the author, for any other use. Exceptions only apply where a deposit may be explicitly provided under a stated licence, such as a Creative Commons licence or Open Government licence.

Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone, unless explicitly stated under a Creative Commons or Open Government license. Unauthorised reproduction, editing or reformatting for resale purposes is explicitly prohibited (except where approved by the copyright holder themselves) and UEA reserves the right to take immediate 'take down' action on behalf of the copyright and/or rights holder if this Access condition of the UEA Digital Repository is breached. Any material in this database has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the material may be published without proper acknowledgement.

Joseph Wade, 1923-2019

Thank you, for everything

Contents

Introduction Where the perfection begins.....	6
Chapter One Fair-minded words.....	29
Chapter Two Not on reason but on passion	67
Chapter Three Those of us with the best intentions	103
Chapter Four With every element of American power	152
Conclusion How we have come this far	204
Bibliography	222

Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank.

Firstly, the School of History and HUM faculty who offered the faith and funding for the research to commence.

David Milne has been a constant source of wisdom, advice, patience, and reassurance. I owe him a great deal and have grown immeasurably as a historian thanks to him. Similarly, Lee Marsden has played a great role in encouraging me to get this far, his advice and insights have always been greatly valued. Tori Cann, Nick Wright, Matthew Sillence, Roger Baines, and Thomas Otte each helped along the way, as did countless others across the faculty at UEA.

Michael Kyriacou has been an inspiration, and a reliable source of probing philosophical discussion and constant good cheer. Meanwhile, countless hours of conversation with Jack Massie imparted upon me a great deal of his own practical wisdom.

Everyone in the Floor 0 office - while not always being conducive to 'hard work' - together we shared an environment of kinship, mutual support, and good times. To conduct PhD research can be to plough a lone furrow. It was never so with all of them there along the way.

Thanks to the History boys...even the medievalists.

Thank you to my family. My parents and brother taught me above all to be a good and diligent person. They've always believed in me. And I owe them more than I could ever possibly express.

Last, and of course *most* of all, thank you to Charlie. She puts up with my nonsense, and has supported me without hesitation throughout this project. The perfect research partner in life, she makes every day better and every tomorrow another adventure to come.

Introduction

Where the perfection begins

Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States riding a wave of liberal enthusiasm. He promised hope and change and, in repeating the mantra “yes we can,” offered the credo that - united across race, religion, geography, and political beliefs – America could dare again to aspire to its promised greatness. With an overwhelming sense of optimism among supporters, the ensuing presidency was primed to struggle to attain the lofty heights of those expectations. It was also a presidency set to raise the hackles of those not so enamoured with him. Republicans opposed him *en masse*, almost reflexively. The party’s leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, ultimately declaring in 2010 “the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.”¹

Obama’s agenda often infuriated those on his right for being too progressive, an affront to American values. Conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer warned his audience of “an ambitious president” who intended “to enact the most radical agenda of social transformation seen in our lifetime.”² While another, Jennifer Rubin, suggested that Obama’s legislative programme “would permanently refashion the role of the federal government in the lives of every American.”³ There was a fear of a President untethered in the pursuit of big government. Simultaneously, he disappointed those on his left as being insufficiently radical, failing to grasp the mantle and take grand enough steps in that progressive direction, while too often kowtowing to the demands of moneyed interests.

Upon entering the White House, Obama immediately confronted a challenging set of circumstances. A failure of the financial system threatened the biggest economic downturn since the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and portended a twenty-first century Great Depression. Combined with expensive wars and George W. Bush’s tax cuts, the financial crisis served to heighten the problem of an ever expanding fiscal deficit. Meanwhile an ideologically polarised polity was incubating ever more hostile attitudes across party lines. Ideological zeal and purity had steadily replaced bipartisan concerns. Obama had famously declared that there was “not a liberal America and a conservative America;

¹ A. Barr, “The GOP’s No-Compromise Pledge,” *Politico* 28 October (2010), <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/10/the-gops-no-compromise-pledge-044311>.

² J. Chait, *Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied His Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail* (New York: Custom House, 2017).

³ *Ibid.* p. xii

there's the United States of America."⁴ The America he became president of, however, failed to resemble such a vision.

Obama faced similar difficulties in global affairs, entering the West Wing with the millstone of two Bush era wars as well as an expansive war on terrorism around his neck. The situation was made worse by a sense that the foreign policy misadventures of his predecessor had dragged America's reputation through the mud and left it in the bad graces of much of an on-looking world. The enthusiasm which met Obama's election globally was born of hostility to George W. Bush and, a growing fascination with a man whose Kansan mother, Kenyan father, and Hawaiian childhood (alongside four years in Indonesia), demonstrated that an American president could be cosmopolitan and broad-minded. In his own words, he was a "citizen of the world."⁵ David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, suggested that "if George W. Bush's foreign policy was largely a reaction to 9/11, Obama's has been a reaction to the reaction."⁶

Yet, echoing the response to his domestic approach, Obama's actions on the world stage antagonised allies and opponents alike. He conducted foreign policy with a variance of approach that defied conventional definition. In a May 2012 article on Obama's counterterrorism practices, Jo Becker and Scott Shane of the *New York Times* reported on a memo sent by his campaign national security team, advising a course of "pragmatism over ideology." This was, Becker and Shane noted, counsel which "only reinforced the president's instincts."⁷ Obama's embrace of pragmatism has been noted and commented on by a series of scholars, public officials, friends, and wide segments of the media and commentariat. Such assessments do not always stray too far beyond surface definition, but the persistence of the characterisation is striking. Two thinkers in particular, however, have offered deeper considerations of these pragmatist influences. James Kloppenberg and David Milne have each sought to consider the ideological taproots of Obama's thought and have thus traced out the implications which are provoked by such a consideration.⁸

⁴ PBS Newshour, "Barack Obama's Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention," *PBS Newshour* 27 July (2004), <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics-july-dec04-obama-keynote-dnc/>.

⁵ CNN Politics, "Full Script of Obama's Speech," *CNN Politics* 24 July (2008), <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/24/obama.words/>.

⁶ D. Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama," *The New Yorker* January 27 Issue (2014), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

⁷ J. Becker, and Shane, S., "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will," *The New York Times* 29 May (2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>.

⁸ J. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).; D. Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). p. 20; "Pragmatism or What?: The Future of Us Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012).

This thesis will be focused on the foreign policy of Obama, and will - following examples set by Kloppenberg and Milne - seek to examine what a foreign policy informed by philosophical pragmatism and its relationship with other ideologies looks like. Obama has often cut a professorial figure in his approach to policy. This is perhaps no surprise, given his education at the elite institutions of Occidental, Columbia, and Harvard Law School, as well as his long-held role as an instructor at the University of Chicago. But he also exhibited depth of insight in the authorship of two books and in his propensity for long, nuanced answers in interviews. It is within this depth of thought that we can trace a foreign policy approach that frays the ends of conventional interpretation. Each issue was seemingly weighed with a cerebral dexterity that probed for ever more detail, balanced options against one another, and sought a more complete picture before a decision could be made.

Perhaps the most incisive book written on Obama is one that - ironically for the purposes of this thesis - was published five years before the conclusion of his presidency and that does not touch extensively on his foreign policy. The success of James Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama* lies in its engagement with Obama as a thinker and an intellectual.⁹ Kloppenberg depicts Obama as a figure who has been steeped in great fissures of thought in the American academy for the duration of his education. He places great emphasis on the current of philosophical pragmatism running consistently through Obama's education, writings, and proclamations: "locating Obama's development in the frameworks of the history of American democracy, the ideas of philosophical pragmatism, and the intellectual turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s reveals how Obama thinks and why he sees American culture and politics as he does."¹⁰

In arguing that pragmatism "has provided a sturdy base for Obama's sensibility," Kloppenberg asserts that such a sensibility "challenges the claims of absolutists - whether their dogmas are rooted in science or religion - and instead embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation."¹¹ As such, pragmatism "stands for openmindedness and ongoing debate."¹² Kloppenberg acknowledges that "precisely because consequences matter to pragmatists, one can never say dogmatically, in advance, that one policy or another follows necessarily from the commitment to experimentation."¹³

In this sense, pragmatism does not offer a map for how to proceed, but instead offers a means of reading a map. Ascribing a pragmatist worldview to Barack Obama cannot explain how he arrived at

⁹ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. xxxiii

¹¹ *Ibid.*; *ibid.* p. xxxiv

¹² *Ibid.* xxxv

¹³ *Ibid.*

specific policy actions, but it does offer a key insight into a sensibility – to borrow Kloppenberg’s phrase - which shaped efforts to avoid “swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.”¹⁴ It also offers an explanation of the means by which Obama trod carefully between the conflicting notions of universalism and particularism that Kloppenberg persuasively argues formed a crucial part of his thought.

Kloppenbergr defines universalism as an embrace of ‘timeless ideals’ whereby values and truths remain absolute and foundational regardless of time and place.¹⁵ Such a perspective on the world dictates a vision of both the moral and political ways in which it should be organized. A particularist worldview, on the other hand, challenges this conception by refuting the notion that universal, unchanging truths exist. Instead, meaning is contextual and historical, relying on a constant process of interpretation and re-evaluation. Pragmatism plays a complicated role in this dichotomy. As Kloppenberg demonstrates, the quintessential pragmatist thought of William James and John Dewey was predicated on a connection between uncertainty and democratic politics in which “a culture of inquiry should supplant a culture of fixed truths” and “processes of experimentation should replace proclamations of dogma.”¹⁶ This speaks to a philosophy centred around a particularist conception, yet crucially, it is also a philosophy which sought to avoid the trappings of nihilist relativism and instead embraced the possibilities of democratic politics, whereby “the most attractive political ideas are those that have survived the rigorous historical tests of trial and error, and no politics offers as many tools for self-correction as does democracy.”¹⁷ In the absence of absolute truths, it is a means by which to achieve a consensus that enables lasting change to occur.

As such, truths may not be absolute, but the advances made towards a *better* reality become more secure in the face of history’s contingencies. This scepticism of absolutes formed the backbone of the shifting atmosphere in American universities in the 1980s and 1990s, and thus Obama encountered and wrestled with these ideas at Occidental, Columbia, and Harvard Law School.¹⁸ Crucially, Kloppenberg notes that whilst Obama shares “the scepticism of those critics who eroded the foundations on which mid-twentieth-century universalism stood” he also understands and is “haunted” by “the residual appeal that timeless ideals continue to exert.” For Kloppenberg this leaves Obama in a position whereby “as he has been throughout his life, as president he remains

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. xxxi-xl; D. Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *The New York Times* 26 April Issue (2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html?mtrref=www.google.co.uk&gwh=F403E90B178C139885B59A708BA20AC8&gwt=pay&assetType=opinion>.

¹⁵ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. 88

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 110

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 132

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 117

caught in the force field between universalism and particularism.”¹⁹ Philosopher Bart Schultz offers a useful simplification of this tension in Obama’s thought: “from the many, one, from the particular, the universal, and from the transient, the permanent.”²⁰

In outlining the complex contours of Obama’s thought, Kloppenberg achieved considerably more than many subsequent accounts of Obama’s foreign policy. Such efforts have often sought to place Obama into an ideological box, checked off against a list of characteristics befitting of one perspective or another. These are often accompanied by a snappy doctrinal title such as the Truman and Bush Doctrines, Eisenhower’s ‘Massive Retaliation,’ Clinton’s ‘Democratic Enlargement’ or, most famously, the Cold War era’s ‘Containment.’ But such a designation seems insufficient as a complete analysis of Obama as a foreign policy actor.

It is of course wrong to argue that Obama’s foreign policy was meritorious by virtue of being complicated; that it is worthy of praise merely because its essentials cannot be reduced to a bumper sticker. Eluding narrow definition does not inoculate his foreign policy from worthy criticisms. Yet it does necessitate a more thorough engagement with the ideas that animate it. Following Kloppenberg’s example, this thesis seeks to understand Obama as a writer, a politician, and a thinker, by examining his arguments as laid out in his books and speeches, but crucially also through “placing his ideas in the deeper and broader contexts of the American political tradition.”²¹ Writing in 2011, Kloppenberg suggested that “neither pundits nor prophets who dominate contemporary American public discourse” had shown much interest in such an undertaking.²² Not much has changed in the years hence. Many critiques of Obama’s foreign policy centre around questions of his fealty to the mores of doctrine mentioned above, trying to place his worldview purely in context of existing ideological frameworks, such as realism, liberalism, isolationism, retrenchism. Each exacts their own yard-sticks to measure success and failure. Under such critiques, Obama’s foreign policy is viewed as *not realist enough, too liberal, too isolationist*, and so on. This comes in contrast to considering the means by which his foreign policy was shaped, not simply by those aspirations for doctrinal cogency, but instead by his own intellectual predispositions.

This thesis thus seeks to enter into waters mostly uncharted by Kloppenberg, and tested by Milne - applying their methods of intellectual history to Obama’s thinking as it pertains to foreign policy. Following Kloppenberg, Milne included Obama in his book *Worldmaking* - a broader examination of

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 88

²⁰ B. Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy: Pragmatism, Politics, and the University of Chicago," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2009). p. 48

²¹ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. xxxvii

²² Ibid.

foreign policy intellectuals - and in doing so took the first valuable steps in considering the specific means by which Obama's ideological instincts mapped on to foreign policy.

In terms of examining Obama's foreign policy specifically in relation to pragmatism, Brian Butler offers perhaps the most thoroughgoing effort, in seeking to evaluate the extent to which Obama's foreign policy was shaped by philosophical pragmatism in the context of international relations (PPIR).²³ It offers valuable insights into the utility of pragmatism as an explanatory lodestar. Its aspiration to be an IR theory competing with traditional IR theories of Liberalism, Realism, and Constructivism, however, limits it. The notion of PPIR is still trapped in an IR theory paradigm which seeks to limit enquiry to ways in which Obama does and does not exhibit PPIR in his foreign policy. It seeks to force Obama into yet another ideological box.

In the same volume, Shane Ralston offers a more valuable conceptualisation of an IR theory in the pragmatist tradition whereby "policy ends are never fixed; theory is integrally related to practice; and policy means are always malleable and interchangeable with ends."²⁴ This sets the stage for scholars of International Relations to "forego uncompromising values and grand theories in international affairs, embracing instead a situationally-specific approach to understanding and addressing emerging global problems," an approach which he argues to be similar to Obama's. Ralston does however depict Obama as broadly embracing a Deweyan pragmatism in his approach to foreign policy.²⁵ Through an examination of two of Obama's speeches, Ralston emphasises Obama's pragmatist faith in progress, but also the ensuing necessity of foreign policy decisions to be made "in the spirit of meliorism."²⁶ He suggests a prescriptive theoretical framework favouring soft over hard power. This is indeed a fair reflection of much of Obama's worldview, yet it fails to encapsulate an approach which still willingly embraces and emphasises 'hard power.' It produces a narrowing of the implications of pragmatism in foreign policy, and introduces a prescriptive element - ascribing specific policies to a pragmatic foreign policy - which does not entirely capture the greater breadth of Obama's ideological approach to the world.

A turn towards Kloppenberg's approach of intellectual history offers the means by which to examine and emphasise pragmatism's important role in Obama's thought, and its influence on foreign policy. But it also recognises pragmatism as offering the scope to embody more of a "sensibility" which

²³ B. E. Butler, "Obama's Pragmatism in International Relations: Appropriate or Appropriation?," in *Philosophical Pragmatism and International Relations: Essays for a Bold New World*, ed. S. J. Ralston (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013).

²⁴ S. J. Ralston, "Presidential Rhetoric and Pragmatism's Possibilities," *ibid.* (Lexington). p. 178

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 178-179

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 178

inspires an approach to the world, and to recognise its connection to other ideas in Obama's toolkit.²⁷

The result when applying such an approach is to uncover Obama as a foreign policy actor engaged with ideas which encourage a more supple and flexible attitude to the world. It seeks to avoid imposing a "one-size-fits-all" approach to issues as they arise in different parts of the world. Crucially, it emphasises eschewing dogma in favour of context-based solutions which reflect what is possible, even if sometimes falling short of what is desirable.

This approach puts Obama at odds with much of the conventional Washington D.C. establishment "consensus." Jeffrey Goldberg, editor of *The Atlantic*, notes that Obama "secretly disdains" this foreign-policy establishment.²⁸ In an interview with Goldberg, Obama bemoaned the existence of a "playbook" which prescribes conventional thinking, arguing "it's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions."²⁹

===

Critiques of Obama's foreign policy are varied and plenty. As such, it is beneficial to outline the broad spectrum they cover. Firstly, one critique argues that Obama has overseen and underwritten a process of American retreat which has led to a severe weakening of the nation's standing in the world and its ability to influence world affairs. Instead, the vacuum created by American abdication has been gleefully filled by entities hostile to American ideals. Bret Stephens, Robert Singh, and Colin Dueck offer cogent explications of these ideas. Stephens argues that under the Obama presidency, America retreated from the world, turning instead to isolationism, inviting global disorder.³⁰ Singh argues that Obama "took an unprecedented axe to the *Pax Americana*," and through a process of retrenchment, failed 'strategic engagement,' and "an unwillingness to employ America's military might where, when and how it really mattered" significantly lessened America's standing in the world.³¹ Dueck meanwhile argues that Obama's foreign policy strategy is one which "emphasises

²⁷ Kloppenber, *Reading Obama*. pp. xxxi-xl

²⁸ J. Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic* April Issue (2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ B. Stephens, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Sentinel, 2015).

³¹ R. S. Singh, *After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). p. 101; *ibid.* p. 12

international retrenchment and accommodation, in order to allow the president to focus on securing liberal policy legacies at home.”³² Bleeding into each other, these criticisms all critique Obama for exhibiting a combination of wild naivety, fecklessness, and a reckless streak in his approach to foreign policy. In failing to exhibit the necessary strength and will, he has allowed for America’s crown to slip and for cracks to appear in the liberal world it forged in the embers of WWII.

A second prominent strain of criticism has come from those who argue that Obama’s efforts at shaping foreign policy were incoherent. This incoherence derived primarily from a perceived failure to articulate a clear sense of grand strategy. Such critics take particular umbrage with Obama for displaying what Kloppenberg terms to be “vulgar pragmatism,” defined as being “merely an instinctive hankering for what is possible in the short term.”³³ Under this view, failure to exhibit a strong sense of direction, of a singular track, depleted America’s ability to execute effective foreign policy, with preference for the expedient undermining any ability to undertake necessary actions. Robert Singh suggested that “Obama was a domestic policy president and foreign policy naïf whose statecraft proved an improvisation in reactive tactical adjustments.”³⁴ Vali Nasr, a former State Department official in the Obama administration, argues that to allies “constant tactical manoeuvres don’t add up to a coherent strategy or a vision of global leadership,” and given the frequent adjustment of policy “it seemed everyone was getting used to a directionless America. The best they could do was to protect themselves against our sudden shifts and turns.”³⁵ For Nasr, such uncertainty about America’s role in the world itself is a cause for global leadership slipping from its hands.³⁶

A third, more distinct, critique of Obama’s policy concerns his use of American military power, primarily in his prosecution of a ruthless drone-strike programme. David Remnick summarizes the criticisms of the drone policy as “a one-size-fits-all recourse, in which the prospect of destroying an individual enemy too easily trumps broader strategic and diplomatic considerations, to say nothing of moral ones.”³⁷ Indeed, Pakistani activist Malala Yousefzai, famously a victim of the Taliban’s vicious persecution of women, told Obama, in a visit to the White House, that drone strikes were a fuel for terrorism and resentment in her homeland.³⁸

³² C. Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2015). p. 14

³³ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. pp. xxxiii-xxxiv

³⁴ Singh, *After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order*. p. 19

³⁵ V. Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

³⁸ Ibid.

This critique is also more generally concerned with Obama's embrace of military action. The prime example cited as a case of military excess is the intervention in Libya, whereby Muammar Gaddafi was removed from power, while another oft-cited cudgel is that during Obama's presidency, military force was used in seven countries.³⁹ The drone programme and its deployment particularly in Yemen, gave rise to criticism of Obama as a man who not only committed violent acts, but who also set a dangerous precedent for the use of American power and questions of extrajudicial killings of American citizens, foreign combatants, and non-combatants alike.⁴⁰ For the man who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, the road to war was taken far too frequently. For critics predominantly from the political left, such as Daniel Bessner, Stephen Wertheim, and Perry Anderson contrary to the critiques from the likes of Stephens, Singh, and Dueck, Obama's failure was not in abdicating American responsibility and power, but instead was in his lack of a true reckoning with the relentless and violent pursuit of U.S. hegemony. It was a failing that condemns him to being a figure not of hopeful change, but of disappointing continuity, as Obama's presidency represented simply more of the same in its determination to uphold U.S. imperium.

Can Obama be both a belligerent hawk, indiscriminately using US military force to uphold an unchecked imperial regime, whilst simultaneously being a feckless dove, unable and unwilling to use American power to reinforce a benevolent order made in its image? Beauty may lie in the eye of the beholder, but the dissonance between perceptions of Obama's foreign policy appears jarring. The preferences of those who interrogate matters of international relations and foreign affairs often tend towards imposition of an order and simplicity that obscures the complexity of what lies beneath.

Obama told David Remnick that he was "comfortable with complexity."⁴¹ He embraced the uncertainty that accompanies the hard decisions faced in office. He continued on to offer perhaps the most finely honed exegesis of his thought:

I think I'm pretty good at keeping my moral compass while recognizing that I am a product of original sin. And every morning and every night I'm taking measure of my actions against the options and possibilities available to me, understanding that there are going to be mistakes that I make and my team makes and that America makes; understanding that there are going to be limits to the good we can do and the bad that we can prevent, and that there's going to be tragedy out

³⁹ D. Cole, "The Drone Presidency," *The New York Review of Books* August 18 Issue (2016), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/the-drone-presidency/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

*there and, by occupying this office, I am part of that tragedy occasionally, but that if I am doing my very best and basing my decisions on the core values and ideals that I was brought up with and that I think are pretty consistent with those of most Americans, that at the end of the day things will be better rather than worse.*⁴²

This thesis will examine how this mode of thought and its ideological implications shaped Obama's foreign policy, focusing primarily on specific areas of international affairs and international incidents that have confronted Obama during his time in office. Each chapter will centre around a notable speech given by Obama in relation to a specific area of ideology or foreign policy matters, and will seek to uncover the ideas underpinning his thought as reflected by his own words. Speeches and oratory performed an outsized role in Obama's political ascent and continued to function as a crucial means by which he was able to communicate an array of ideas, reflections, and decisions to the American people and to the watching world. A gifted orator, Obama's own input into writing and shaping the speeches he gave is important to note.

Obama is often described as being a *writer* in spirit, and as such he brought a writer's mind to bear when approaching the messaging of his politics. David Axelrod, Obama's former strategist and advisor, noted that his charge's "willingness to entrust his words to others is limited."⁴³ Importantly, Jon Favreau, his youthful chief speechwriter from 2007 until 2013, was described by Obama as his "mind-reader," able to channel the president's thoughts. Together, in honing speeches, there would be a process of constant back-and-forth of drafts until both were satisfied they had reached a final product.⁴⁴ The writer in Obama seeps onto the teleprompter, emphasising the value of his speeches as narratives that tell a story, oftentimes with his own personal narrative entering in from the margins. Above all - whether with the help of Favreau, Favreau's successor Cody Keenan, or Ben Rhodes (the extra pair of eyes on foreign policy matters) - Obama's voice came through clearly in his speeches.

Former Governor of New York Mario Cuomo famously noted "you campaign in poetry; you govern in prose."⁴⁵ For a president celebrated for his soaring rhetoric, such a warning is stark: an inspirational linguistic spark will only get you so far before the reality of political murk extinguishes it. A

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ M. Dorning, "His Words, the President's Voice," *Chicago Tribune* 8 March Issue (2009), http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-03-08/news/0903070224_1_chief-speechwriter-jon-favreau-barack-obama-president.

⁴⁴ M. D'Ancona, "Jon Favreau Has the World's Best Job," *GQ* 6 December (2012), <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/gq-comment-jon-favreau-president-barack-obama-speechwriter>.

⁴⁵ E. Kolbert, "Postscript: Mario Cuomo (1932-2015)," *The New Yorker* 2 January (2015), <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/postscript-mario-cuomo>.

consistent criticism of Obama portrayed him as maintaining a belief that his speeches - with a broad appeal to hope and reason - could change the enmities of people all around the world, while also provoking substantive change in international politics. This, for such critics, displayed excessive arrogance and naïveté about how the world works.⁴⁶ But this perspective undersells the value of speeches as a means to express strong convictions, and to convey the thought process and ideals held by the highest office in the land. David Axelrod, in discussing speechwriting with Cody Keenan argued that:

*The difference between an Obama speech and speeches that a lot of other people in politics makes is...often political speeches are a bunch of lines cobbled together by connective tissue, but they're not an argument...they're not a reasoned argument. He makes arguments in his speeches...he develops a case in his speeches in a way that I don't think...any president has done in quite the same way since Lincoln.*⁴⁷

Obama believed, Remnick suggests, “that his words – at microphones from Cairo to Yangon – can encourage positive change abroad, even if only in the long run.”⁴⁸ Obama’s speeches offered a crucial vessel for him to develop and put forward a case for his vision of the world. Examining Obama through the lens of his speeches is no novel approach, and indeed the likes of Shane Ralston and Bart Schultz have utilised just such a method to draw out the pragmatist elements of his rhetoric.⁴⁹ This thesis will thus build upon their example.

===

As with all presidential administrations, it is possible to trace the influence of the philosophers, theologians, and scholars who had shaped Obama’s thinking, as well as the circle of individuals present in the decision making process. This means through engaging with Obama’s thought it becomes necessary to also engage with the thought and dispositions of figures ranging from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, presidential luminaries James Madison and Abraham Lincoln, and philosopher Jürgen Habermas. There also needs to be an engagement with the environments in

⁴⁶ R. S. Singh, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). p. 57

⁴⁷ D. Axelrod, *The Axe Files: Ep. 116 - Cody Keenan*, podcast audio, The Axe Files, accessed 10/02/17, 2017, <http://podcast.cnn.com/the-axe-files-david-axelrod/episode/all/E2PZtocfVZcHEI/1uckf4.html>.

⁴⁸ Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

⁴⁹ Ralston, "Presidential Rhetoric and Pragmatism's Possibilities." ; Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy."

which Obama was raised, educated, and worked in terms of how they influenced and shaped the man before he became president. His education at prestigious academic institutions provided a fertile breeding ground for ideas and the complexities of the philosophical world. While his time as a community organizer in South Chicago reinforced an altogether different brute reality of a tough world with setbacks frequent and victories hard-won.

An intellectual history of Obama's thought would not be adequate without engaging with those texts which he has written himself, the primary two being books written before he became president. The first, *Dreams From My Father*, published in 1995, is a personal memoir reflecting on his youth and upbringing, and contextualising a man in search of his identity.⁵⁰ The second, *The Audacity of Hope*, published in 2006, is a more conventional political meditation timed for an election cycle, but it nevertheless contains thoughtful engagement with a variety of issues enveloping the American experiment.⁵¹

===

The first chapter will examine the ideas and framework of philosophical pragmatism. The roots of pragmatism go deep in American history, and their influence on Obama will be argued to be manifold. In particular they hold a key relationship with the means by which Obama developed a particular vision of society ideally functioning through the coming together for common goals, and a rejection of absolute principles. His reading of the Constitution weaves philosophical pragmatism into the very fabric of American political organisation and its history. An important aspect of this discussion is the valuable notion of why pragmatist ideas play such a prominent part in Obama's thinking. That contends with the crucial notion of the imperative he held as so important in political life: of finding mediation between conflicting ideas.

The second chapter will consider the concept of "necessary" wars as opposed to wars of choice. It primarily focuses on the policy process surrounding the war in Afghanistan. But attention is also given to the ideological factors which drove the Iraq war. Obama's opposition to that war was vitally important, and his framing of his opposition in a manner that emphasized the ideological choice which underwrote the war, was significant. It spoke to this notion of choice, the ideology behind

⁵⁰ B. Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).

⁵¹ *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008).

that choice was significant – but so too was Obama’s affirmation that ideology should not play such a role. Philosophical pragmatism will be argued to have been particularly prominent in the means by which Afghanistan policy was developed, and especially pertaining to how Obama shaped an approach to the conflict that appeared to go against his instincts.

The third chapter examines Obama’s response to the crises ignited by the Arab Spring, most significantly the Libyan intervention, and the decision to forego a similar action in Syria. It will consider the ideas expounded in Obama’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and contend with the means by which he balanced his charge to both pursue peace, while also leading America into war. The competing philosophies that animated his speech form a dialectic between visions of a universal morality which the United States should seek to uphold, and a more restricted vision of humility which constrains the belief that any one nation can act to shape the world. Obama’s approach to these matters of war and peace were refracted through his own visions of what America’s responsibilities in the world are, and the means by which it should be willing to achieve its goals on the international stage. For Obama, this was manifested primarily in a desire to seek multilateral action, though he nevertheless still embraced a vision of unique American primacy.

The fourth chapter will examine the relationship between two pivotal planks of the Obama foreign policy approach and nascent legacy. The ‘Pivot to Asia’ was a signal policy aimed at ‘rebalancing’ U.S. attentions from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, in the search of economic opportunity, but also with an undertow of geopolitical concern over the ascendancy of China as a global power. The chapter will show that this strategic turn was counter-weighted by an escalation of the drone programme. The use of drones as tools of counterterrorism was a technological development which could enable the continued prosecution of the campaign against ‘terror’ - the locus for America’s very presence in the Middle East – without the same commitment of forces, and without the same risk of being stuck in a continual quagmire. Accompanying these two poles of American foreign policy output stands once again the overarching question about what the appropriate role of American power in the world is and how it should be calibrated. The chapter will also consider aspects of Obama’s identity.

The concluding chapter will consider the indelible mark left by philosophical pragmatism on Obama’s foreign policy. But in doing so, it will also weigh the implications that arise from such a way of thinking shaping a worldview. Legacy is an important watchword for any president, and whilst this thesis does not concern itself toward the goal of discerning Obama’s legacy, it will nevertheless be an unavoidable task to examine the ways in which Obama’s approach could have lasting vestiges in the future of U.S. foreign policy. In part, this is tied up in the very nature of the philosophical

pragmatism Obama exemplifies, and his world view that rests so firmly on the notion of a “long game” and a vision of perfection as a process which is unending.

A thesis is, by its nature, constrained in scope. As such, there are numerous aspects of Obama’s foreign policy presidency which deserve detailed treatment and analysis and yet which here are not discussed in such a manner. Primary among these, are a triumvirate of what are arguably Obama’s key achievements in foreign policy: the Iranian nuclear deal, the diplomatic opening to Cuba, and the Paris Climate accords. These were all achievements which in a sense demonstrated Obama’s foreign policy working at its optimal best. They were achievements predicated on the style of multilateral diplomacy that other aspects of the thesis will establish as being key to Obama’s outlook. The omission of a more thorough examination of such successes than what follows is due more to the nature of the subjects that *are* discussed in greater depth - those instances of foreign policy that challenged Obama more explicitly in drawing out the conflicts, contradictions, and consistencies in his modes of thinking in the face of the outwardly unmanageable.

The bias in foreign policy scholarship towards events that involve violence, explosions, and death, is not one that this thesis escapes. Discussions of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and drones hold prominence here, but this should not obscure the importance of the Obama administration’s engagement in other matters. A longer thesis would rightfully examine the administration’s response to the Ebola crisis, its pursuit of energy security, a closer consideration of its pursuit of a range of trade agreements, and along with the Paris climate agreement a broader examination of the administration’s approach to the climate crisis. Again, as it is, the thesis contends with the episodes that it does because they are the policies and actions which demand scrutiny. They demand to be problematized due to the degree by which they challenged Obama’s approach to the world. In opening up potentials for inconsistencies and failings they lay bare a foreign policy that was nuanced, complex, and *imperfect*.

The sources consulted for this thesis were simultaneously constrained and boundless. The nature of the near-contemporary history at hand provided limitations in the absence of archival materials. Key documents pertaining to foreign policy remain classified. The histories based upon such materials will follow in the future. In the meantime, this thesis stays true to its form as a work of intellectual history. As Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen puts it the “historical sensibility” of intellectual history “gladly welcomes any source to use for eavesdropping: legal documents, novels, private letters, diaries, photographs, or a painting. No source need be too imposing – like a major tome of

theological disputation. And no source is too insignificant – like marginalia in a text of an advertisement in a magazine.”⁵²

The thesis takes this to heart, and examines Obama through the sources that are available to us now. Such key sources include his books, his speeches, and other writings by him. Also significant are the many journalistic interviews conducted with him, contemporaneous accounts of events as they transpired in the administration in book or news article form, and the myriad sources of reflections from former members of the administration, be they memoirs, comments and interviews in magazine articles, podcasts, or other outlets for such perspectives. The four biographies written on Obama are also valuable texts.

But as a work of intellectual history, this thesis has also relied on sources of philosophy, history, and criticism that help to bring context to the world of Obama’s intellectual make-up. As Ratner-Rosenghagen writes of the breadth of sources “that can awaken us to all the ways” people have “constructed their realities and made meaning in their lives,”⁵³ this thesis argues for using such sources to awaken us to the ways Obama constructed his approach to foreign policy.

The author was also able to conduct interviews of three former members of the Obama administration - Charles Edel, Edward Fishman, and Michael Kimmage. Each were members of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, but are also trained historians. Conversations with them offered unique insights, drawn from their experiences in government, but also from their placing of those experiences in historical context. They were each able to speak to the importance of ideas in guiding foreign policy, but also of the immediate imperative of situating those ideas within the demands of the moment.

===

Barack Obama, junior senator from Illinois, began his 18 March 2008 speech in an almost wistful manner. He quoted the opening words of the United States Constitution “We the people, in order to perform a more perfect union...” and in doing so bore the weight of history: of the Founders of the

⁵² J. Ratner-Rosenghagen, *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

p. 2

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 3

republic, the American Dream, and of his unlikely ascendance to front-runner in the Democratic primary for President of the United States.⁵⁴

He was speaking at the National Constitution Center, an edifice of angular stone and glass, with those same words quietly stated inside boldly inscribed on its face. On the other end of the grassy Independence Mall in downtown Philadelphia stands the modest yet elegant Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States were debated and signed. Across the street from Independence Hall stands the Liberty Bell, an enduring symbol of American nationhood. In this venue so steeped in American history, Obama's speech laid out a complicated vision of the United States in its ongoing wrestle with the imperfections of its past, and aspirations for a better future. He grappled with an issue personal to himself, that of race, its implications for inequality, and its ever-present place in America's history.⁵⁵ He reflected a nuance of thought which would come to be a recognisable trait of a politician so enamoured with detail, so comfortable in weighing paradoxes against each other.

In the speech Obama laid out those depths and nuances of his thought in clarion vision. But as a candidate for the highest office in the land, his stop in Philadelphia was not one to tip his hat to the pantheon of American greatness, to put on a show of patriotism, or indeed a play for the photo opportunity. It was with an altogether more sober purpose which Obama stepped to the lectern that night. Videos of Obama's long-time pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, had surfaced in which he railed against aspects of American society, even proclaiming in one sermon, "not God bless America. God *damn* America."⁵⁶ Such excoriations of the way in which the U.S. government fails Black Americans might never have passed beyond the walls of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, if it were not for the status of his most eminent parishioner.

Obama had met Wright during his days as a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago, and it was through encountering Wright at Trinity that he testifies to have found God.⁵⁷ Reverend Wright was a charismatic figure, who built his Trinity United Church of Christ congregation up from 87 in 1972 to more than 8,000 three decades later.⁵⁸ Raised in Philadelphia, he was the son of a Baptist minister. In 1961, aged 20, he left University in order to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps. After two years of service he moved to the Navy's corpsman school, becoming a cardiopulmonary technician,

⁵⁴ NPR, "Transcript: Barack Obama's Speech on Race," *NPR* 18 March (2008), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ D. Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (London: Picador, 2010). p. 519

⁵⁷ Obama, *Dreams*. pp. 292-295

⁵⁸ E. C. McLaughlin, "Rev. Wright More Than Sound Bite, Obama's Ex-Pastor," *CNN Politics* 29 April (2008), <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/29/wright.bio/index.html?iref=nextin>.

even caring for President Lyndon B Johnson after surgery in 1967. He finished his bachelor's degree before then attaining a master's at Howard University. He completed another master's at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and then a PhD at the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.⁵⁹ In short, Jeremiah Wright was an accomplished man who had given a lot to respectable American society. Yet, in his sermons he would frequently challenge the conventional norms of the polite American Sunday morning. The motto of Trinity was "unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian,"⁶⁰ and taking this to heart Wright used his sermons to tap into the roots of black liberation theology, placing emphasis on the church as a vessel for a movement of the advancement of the African-American and non-white community, one that was keenly aware of the subjugations of America's history.⁶¹ In the heat of an already vicious primary battle against Hillary Clinton, the footage of Wright's sermons caused a media storm, and threatened to derail the Obama campaign. For Obama, the issue of race would need to be addressed. Despite the affectation of a 'post-racial' figure and the ushering in of a society to mirror him, the possible reality of the election of the first black man to the office of president was of momentous import.⁶²

The speech in Philadelphia - entitled "A More Perfect Union" - focused on the scars inflicted by the issue of race on America, scars both historic and fresh in the national memory. That someone who was so close to Obama and who had played the role of a spiritual leader and mentor not only to Obama but also to a section of Chicagoan society, could hold views so violently contrary to conventional America, demonstrated the weight of race and its shackles around America's soul. It was thus a speech that interrogated the very heart of America the imperfect, the flawed creation of flawed men. Obama invoked the Constitution of the United States as being "ultimately unfinished," "stained" as it was by the nation's "original sin of slavery." He offered a repudiation of Reverend Wright's particularly hostile statements, but he noted that the controversy generated by them and their relation to his own candidacy for President "reflect the complexities of race" that had, in his mind, never been confronted or resolved. As such, for Obama, it was "a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect." Obama argued that Wright made "profound mistakes" in his sermons in the way that he "spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made." Instead, he countered this notion by pointing to the very possibility of his own run for office as proof that America could change. This reflected "the true genius" of the nation. This ability to gradually improve was emphasized by Obama and opens a window onto his thinking, with a simple message of

⁵⁹ Ibid.; L. Korb, and Moss, I., "Factor Military Duty into Criticism," *Chicago Tribune* 3 April Issue (2008), http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-04-03/news/0804020775_1_marines-real-patriot-active-duty.

⁶⁰ D. Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* (New York: Amistad, 2007). p. 76

⁶¹ Obama, *Dreams*. pp. 282, 291-295; Mendell, *Obama*. p. 75

⁶² K. Taylor, "Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-Racial Illusion," *The Guardian* 13 January (2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system>.

optimism at its heart; he argued in Philadelphia that - rooted in its foundational history - "this union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected."⁶³

For Obama, the notion of *perfect* was not a noun or an adjective - something that is - but instead it took on the properties of a verb - something to be done. Perfecting the Union, for Obama, was a process which has been carried out since a disparate group of interests, of both the self and of divergent communities, declared their truths to be self-evident and declared the independence the United States of America.⁶⁴ This was the very same group that declared "we the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union." '*More perfect*' appears almost as a rhetorical oxymoron, but Obama reflected the idea of perfection not as an absolute end goal, but instead as a constant effort to continually make things better, even if being tethered by a humility that acknowledged the difficulties, and potential futilities of the pursuit of *perfect*.

Bart Schultz, in discussing Obama's use of 'perfection' as a verb, argues that such a use is "the means by which Obama pragmatizes the American Dream."⁶⁵ The struggle of Black Americans discussed openly and honestly by both Reverend Wright and Obama is intertwined with an American history and the struggle within it for the *American Dream*. While Obama recognized the anger and pessimism of Wright, he offered instead a place "where the perfection begins" as a matter of embracing the process of people coming together to work towards a better reality, a process which is itself embedded in that American Dream.⁶⁶ Obama's idea of perfect and perfection did not guarantee things would necessarily be as they should. Nor did it preclude generations of struggle and moments of sacrifice. What it did provide however, was the hope and impetus for things to get better.⁶⁷

The notion of history carrying a direction of travel invokes a teleological perspective that locates purpose in that direction. In his book *The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama*, Richard Leeman argues that Obama has consistently exhibited a "teleological discourse grounded in the American ideals of freedom and equality."⁶⁸ Teleology captures a notion that "our very goal and purpose in life is to actualize – to become – that which our essential nature 'make' us."⁶⁹ *Telos* "serves as the transcendent ideal which undergirds everything," it stands as the "essential nature," of an entity and as such it stands not only as a guide for means of acting in the world, but also acting in accordance

⁶³ NPR, "Transcript: Barack Obama's Speech on Race".

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy." p. 149

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ R. W. Leeman, *The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012). p. 246

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 36

with it is itself an “instantiation of the *telos*.”⁷⁰ In terms of the address in Philadelphia, Leeman argues that “*telos* is not an adornment to the speech; it *is* the speech.”⁷¹ The “more perfect union” that Obama strives for carries a *telos* not only which seeks a union that is more just, equal, and free, but Leeman suggests, “Obama also defines the *telos* as a union that embraces diversity even as it affirms its common purpose regarding the pursuit of those qualities.”⁷²

In his useful work *Barack Obama: American Historian* Steven Sarson examines Obama’s engagement with American history, and the means by which that engagement has shaped him. Through this endeavour, Sarson makes the assessment that in the notion that “out of unity comes progress” we can locate Obama’s “ultimate historical theme.”⁷³ It is a significant theme. Obama’s vision of perfection is rooted in the embrace and achievement of these facets of unity through diversity, in overcoming divisions and instead finding common purpose. In enacting the *essential nature* of the United States, the United States can improve and become ultimately a better version of itself.

===

The speech in Philadelphia did not discuss matters of foreign policy. But it is nevertheless a valuable source for examination. Obama’s speeches often provide a platform, as Axelrod suggested, to advance an argument, to draw out complications, and to weigh them against each other; jurist in the court of ideology.

David Milne notes that “few things in history are as important as the life of an idea.”⁷⁴ In a review of his book *Worldmaking*, Daniel Bessner suggests that Milne “demonstrates that epistemology shaped the thought of foreign policy intellectuals.” For Bessner, “this is an incisive observation that diplomatic historians, who generally pay the most attention to a thinker’s beliefs and not the means by which she or he arrived at these beliefs, should incorporate into future work.”⁷⁵ Indeed, this thesis holds that one cannot conceive of foreign policy without first examining the ideas that lay behind it and the context in which they fomented. Ideas seep out of every pore of Obama’s engagement with the world around him. It is imperative for us to take them seriously.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 16

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 44

⁷² Ibid. p. 45

⁷³ S. Sarson, *Barack Obama: American Historian* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). p. 279

⁷⁴ Milne, *Worldmaking*. p. 20

⁷⁵ D. Bessner, “Thinking About the U.S. In the World,” *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 5 (2017). p. 1020

In her brilliant study of the intellectual history of the United States, *The Ideas That Made America*, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen extolls the value of an intellectual history approach. “It is,” she contends, “an approach to understanding the American past by way of ideas and the people who made or were moved by them.” It enables the effort “to understand where certain persistent concerns in American thought have come from and why some ideas, which were important in the past, have faded from view.”⁷⁶ With “a careful attention to time and place” it allows for questions such as “Why did they come to those conclusions? Why *then*? Why *there*?” Ratner-Rosehagen contends that for an intellectual historian “the context of the idea is as important as the idea itself.”⁷⁷

For Christopher McKnight Nichols, “intellectual history matters deeply to the ‘U.S. in the World,’ in part because it can illuminate the ideas and mind-sets – as well as the widest range of intellectual actors – in terms of what Michael Hunt refers to as the ‘interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.’”⁷⁸ Intellectual history is a means of excavating sets of “convictions or assumptions” that help shape pathways of action.

In a review of a set of post-administration memoirs, political scientist Corey Robin refers to the staffers who authored them, somewhat derisively, as “the Obamanauts.”⁷⁹ In examining the nascent Obama legacy as treated in these memoirs and the picture of Obama they paint, he contends that “instead of a clear outline of the man, we get the shadow of his enemies.” Robin concedes “that’s not fair to Obama,” yet argues that “as he’s the one who chose these people to speak for him while he was in office, they are the ones who’ve chosen to speak for him when he’s out. So it will remain, until he writes his memoirs.”⁸⁰ Robin asserts that in the absence of Obama’s own perspective we can only get an understanding of what he represented - “what Obamaism, beneath and beyond Obama, was all about” - from these figures, and as such, when interrogating the question of “What is Obama’s legacy?” Robin suggests that “for better or worse, and at least for now, it’s the Obamanauts themselves.”⁸¹

Whilst the specific matter of ‘legacy’ is thorny, this thesis ultimately rejects this notion that the absence of Obama’s voice in contemporary evaluation cedes ground to other actors in this search

⁷⁶ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History*. p. 1

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ C. M. Nichols, “United States in the World,” in *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times*, ed. R. and Hartman Haberski, A. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). p. 217

⁷⁹ C. Robin, “The Obamanauts,” *Dissent* Fall Issue (2019), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-obamanauts>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

for understanding. Instead, it contends that his voice has always been apparent, and can be found by examining his speeches, tying them in to his older writings, drawing him out from interviews, and from reading contemporary accounts of his presidency. In short, we can examine the *ideas* which resonated for Obama and the contexts which shaped them. We can understand his mode of thinking, and locate the convictions and assumptions which shaped his worldview. We can start doing that work of intellectual history *now* and, in the future, fold future Obama memoirs into that understanding. When the time comes, declassified memoranda and other such archival materials can add to the well of understanding of how the ideas of the Obama administration shaped the pursuit of his foreign policy.

This is a process that Robin himself actually engages with, even if implicitly. He notes that certain efforts to understand Obama and the Obamanauts – assessments that find them making “an error of judgment” in their doomed efforts at engaging with intransigent Republicans - fail “to reckon with...elements of Obama’s public philosophy that render his refusal to confront the Republicans not a failure of tactics or strategy but a faithful reflection of his commitments.” This failure “begins with a misunderstanding of Obama’s radical-sounding rhetoric,” with Robin instead suggesting “Obama’s radicalism was, from the very beginning, bound up with a narrow notion of what politics was about.” “His was,” Robin maintained, “a vision less of power than of process, the culmination of twenty years of political theory journals where democracy was deliberation and deliberation was democracy.”⁸²

Robin here seems to accept, and exemplifies how, in attempting to understand Obama’s presidency, more can be gleamed through engaging with the very ways in which Obama himself conceptualized politics than through a mere examination of the manifestation of those politics themselves. Ratner-Rosenhagen helpfully reminds us that “the primary responsibility of the intellectual historian is not to issue verdicts on moral decision-making of the past but rather to comprehend how those actors came to their understanding of their world and their role in it.”⁸³ Keeping this in mind, regarding Obama’s foreign policy, this thesis will seek to develop understanding of the means by which his intellectual influences shaped how he viewed the curation of American foreign policy.

===

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History*. p. 78

In the case of Barack Obama, a particularly persistent *idea* emerges time and again, reflected in the “More Perfect” speech and beyond. It is a cornerstone output of a teleological worldview: that of taking a long view of history. Former member of Obama’s National Security Council, Derek Chollet, has written a glowing assessment of his foreign policy entitled *The Long Game* in which he lays out eight criteria which guided Obama’s long game: balance, sustainability, restraint, precision, patience, fallibility, scepticism, and exceptionalism.⁸⁴ Importantly, he emphasises that “Obama believes that playing the Long Game requires a clear North Star to aim toward, with persistent and steady progress to get there” and couples this with a comfort with incremental outcomes, “believing that some problems can only be managed, while just a few can be immediately solved,” the skill lies in distinguishing between them.⁸⁵

Ever the writer, Obama is keenly aware of being part of a “long running story” in which he is just trying to get his paragraph right.⁸⁶ He expanded this notion in a series of metaphors. One such metaphor has each president as “a relay swimmer in a river full of rapids, and that river is history” where “you don’t start with a clean slate, and the things you start may not come to full fruition on your timetable. But you can move things forward. And sometimes the things that start small may turn out to be fairly significant.”⁸⁷ He has alternately offered the vision of “tacking like a sailor toward a particular direction but [you] have to take into account winds and currents and occasionally the lack of any wind, so that you’re just sitting there for a while, and sometimes you’re being blown all over the place.”⁸⁸ Once more on the nautical theme, he told Marc Maron of the process of making policy and affecting change in the world is like steering an ocean liner, whereby “sometimes the task of government is to make incremental improvements or try to steer the ocean liner two degrees north or south so that, ten years from now, suddenly we’re in a very different place than we were.”⁸⁹ He put great emphasis on the slow process of making two-degree turns to make steady progress, rather than turning at fifty degrees and tipping over.⁹⁰ The theme of slow and steady progress, with optimism for victory in the long game, has been a consistent metronome keeping time for Obama in his presidency and beyond.

Whether “perfection” as a moment of action is aimed at addressing the failings of the nation’s constitution, at bringing change to society, or at the challenge of foreign policy decision making and

⁸⁴ D. Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).; *ibid.* p. xv

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. xvii

⁸⁶ Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ A. Gopnik, "Liberal-in-Chief," *ibid.* May 23 Issue (2016),

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/23/president-obama-speaks-his-mind>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

steering a course for America in the world, it is reflective of Obama's sensibility that draws heavily on pragmatism and navigating a course between permanent ideals of the absolute and the contextualised, of the universal and the particular. It reveals a worldview which is reflective, nuanced, and altogether, complicated. For Obama, perfection begins in a moment of disparate interests and ideas conversing with each other, working together to build a bridge between them, to reconcile what is difficult in order to take steps towards building something better.

Chapter One

Fair-minded words

In weighing the disappointments of America's past against hopes for its future, Obama rooted his thought in a patient vision of constant *perfection*. His instincts tended toward the pursuit of progress over a broad sweep of time. It was incremental but, in projecting the act of perfection into an indeterminate future, it was forward looking. As briefly sketched in the introduction this mode of thought spoke to a collection of philosophies and ideas which orbit around the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism. It is thus necessary to engage more fully with the ideas and history of pragmatism as a philosophy and mode of thinking. In acknowledging the complicated interplay between the particular and the universal, the contingent and the permanent, the undulating patchwork of paradoxes and paradigms, the opening chapter demonstrated the multiplicities at play in any effort to conceptualise the political ideology of Barack Obama. This is the context Obama's pragmatism must be considered within.

This is a thesis about foreign policy and the ideas that shape it. In understanding the political ideology and philosophy of any actor in foreign policy, we must seek to uncover the thinking which underwrites their approach to the world. But connecting ideas to policy is challenging. Indeed, it is a task that could easily be neglected for the sake of expediency or to evade the mire of complex argumentation. To do so in this thesis would lose the context that lies behind later foreign policy focused discussion.

As such, what might feel like an unnecessary detour from matters of foreign policy is instead crucial for establishing the ideas which undergird Obama's thinking on foreign policy matters. The interaction of pragmatism with other traditions in political theory forms a vital, albeit complicated, prism through which Obama's political decisions can be examined. A crucial part of this philosophical consideration will centre on the tendency of Obama's thinking to straddle the divide between opposing, often conflicting, perspectives. The frequent performance of such mental gymnastics provoked staunch criticism of a man who could apparently stand for both everything and nothing all at once. An empty vessel to be filled by the flavour *de rigueur*. But crucially, there exists enough of a cache of Obama's writings and proclamations where the examination thereof can allow us to locate consistency in his thought. We can find a coherent philosophical outlook which offers cogency for that which had seemed contradictory.

This detour starts in the perhaps unlikely realm of the ‘culture wars.’ Though seemingly far removed from the concerns of foreign policy, the culture wars offer a starting point for understanding an intellectual climate which promoted and reified opposing conceptualisations of values, morality, and their place in time. It is worthwhile establishing how and where Obama takes his place in relation to the debates that animate the culture wars. Considering his place in those arguments over the very means of belief and epistemology is a crucial endeavour. It encapsulates the competing instincts of universalism and particularism that permeate his thought: the constant tension between acceding to the contingencies of time and the aspiration to escape it.

After first examining philosophical pragmatism, the chapter will then consider how Obama contended with the division wrought by the culture wars, particularly as it attained a prominent place in his reading of the United States Constitution. This will necessitate a discussion on Obama’s specific legal grounding, significant in its congruence with his broader philosophical outlook. The importance of Abraham Lincoln as a guiding light for Obama and the specific vision of pragmatism he encapsulated will then be evaluated as a means of conceptualising Obama’s own complicated entanglement with ideas of absolute morality, doubt, and human limitation.

===

In 1991, James Davison Hunter defined the ‘culture wars’ as the gradual creep of conflict between opposing moral ideals into the everyday of American social and political life. Hunter declared that America was “in the midst of a culture war” that put the question of how people ordered their lives together at stake.⁹¹ He defined this cultural conflict as being representative of a “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding.”⁹²

Hunter characterised this divide as being of those who held an impulse toward *orthodoxy* set against those with an impulse toward *progressivism*.⁹³ The former was a commitment to “an external, definable, and transcendent authority.” This authority offers the promise of “a consistent, unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, what is true, how we should live, and who we are.” An authority that assumes a quality “that is sufficient for all time.”⁹⁴ This perspective is countered by cultural progressivism which assumes the notion that “moral authority tends to be

⁹¹ J. Hunter, D. , *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). P.34

⁹² Ibid. p. 42

⁹³ Ibid. p. 43

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 44

defined by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism.” As such, progressive moral ideals curate a vision of truth as “a process, as a reality that is ever unfolding.”⁹⁵ Under this view, historic faiths are re-symbolized in accordance with the “prevailing assumptions of contemporary life.”⁹⁶

In *Age of Fracture*, a superb exploration of this fragmentation of American society through the last quarter of the twentieth century, Daniel Rodgers notes that under the rubric of the culture wars “the emergent talk of fluidity and choice grew in tandem with contrary desires for centers and certainties, each drawing on each other’s energy.”⁹⁷ It was “a battle over the very foundations of morality: between those who thought of ethics as adaptive, progressive, and socially constructed and those who thought of morals as fixed, timeless, and non-negotiable.”⁹⁸ It was a battle which would shape the academic and intellectual environs within which Barack Obama would rise.

Having attended a prestigious private preparatory high school in his home city of Honolulu, he was able to leverage a fairly inauspicious academic start into a scholarship to attend Occidental College in Los Angeles. After two years he jumped at the opportunity to transfer to Columbia University in New York. Though not the most diligent of students in his younger days, Obama showed a burgeoning intellectual curiosity. Before attending university, he read the writings of key Black intellectuals such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois, spurred as he was by the yearning for a sense of identity and belonging within the African-American community.⁹⁹ Over the course of his undergraduate years, whilst continuing his search, he developed a growing interest in politics, including keen involvement in anti-Apartheid and anti-nuclear proliferation campaigns.¹⁰⁰ Be it a concern for personal matters of race and identity, or wider political issues, he was demonstrating a propensity for serious engagement with large ideas.

At Occidental, Obama took two courses - taught by Roger Boesche - which proved pivotal to his intellectual development. In addition to being Obama’s favourite instructor at Occidental, Boesche was later credited by the president as fully sparking his interest in politics.¹⁰¹ Boesche’s courses, ‘American Political Thought’ and ‘Modern Political Thought,’ provided an important basis from which Obama would engage seriously with a wide range of political thinkers and texts. It would lead to his

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 44-45

⁹⁷ D. Rodgers, T., *Age of Fracture* (London: Belknap Press, 2011). P. 145

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Obama, *Dreams*. P.85

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. pp. 105-107; Remnick, *The Bridge*. pp. 109-111, 116-117

¹⁰¹ The Associated Press, "Roger Boesche, Professor Who Stirred Obama's Interest in Politics, Dies at 69," *The New York Times* 25 May (2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/us/roger-boesche-dead-obama-favorite-professor.html?_r=0.

reading of *The Federalist Papers* and key philosophical thinkers such as Nietzsche, Sartre, Marcuse, and Habermas, along with Boesche's subject of specialism, Tocqueville.¹⁰² It was to be but a taste of Obama's reading over the course of his years studying in higher education, where he also encountered a broad spectrum of important intellectuals including Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, Lincoln, Niebuhr, Machiavelli, Marx, Weber, and Fanon, as well as an array of classical Roman and Greek thinkers.¹⁰³

At Columbia, Obama confesses to having turned to a somewhat ascetic lifestyle, focusing more and more on intellectual pursuits.¹⁰⁴ Boesche remarked upon Obama's later persistence in reading the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, that "Nietzsche calls everything into question. You have to call everything into question. He says God is dead... So if he kept reading Nietzsche, he went through a whole reasoning process in which he re-evaluated all the core beliefs that he had – and then came out on the other side."¹⁰⁵ He was developing a sceptical and philosophical mind.

It was Obama's third stop on the elite university tour, however, which bought him into direct contact with the culture wars. At law schools across the United States, the culture wars had manifested itself into a strident debate that left them in turmoil and formed a tense atmosphere of intellectual conflict.¹⁰⁶ Harvard Law School was not immune to this. It was here Obama breathed in an atmosphere alive with debates over opposing visions of society and the means by which the law should interact with it. Rodgers reflects on how it was around this time that a gradual turn emerged in which conservative intellectuals began to see the culture wars as being less and less a conflict between different moral positions, but instead became more "a choice between 'virtue' and 'nihilism' – between having morals and having none at all."¹⁰⁷ Rodgers again pithily displays the choice on hand, where "to stake one's claims in certainties was to frame the alternative as an abyss of nothingness. Encounter with truth, on the one hand: the quicksands of relativism on the other."¹⁰⁸

These debates, focused on whether ideas could be tied to the mast of absolute truths, were a crucial aspect of the academy as Obama became ensconced within it. Kloppenberg suggests "immersion in that intellectual maelstrom not only shaped Obama's approach to law, it left a permanent imprint on

¹⁰² Remnick, *The Bridge*. p.99

¹⁰³ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. pp. 16-17

¹⁰⁴ Remnick, *The Bridge*. p. 113

¹⁰⁵ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 61

¹⁰⁶ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. 37

¹⁰⁷ Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*. p. 174

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 177

his ideas about American history and politics.”¹⁰⁹ It stands to reason that it would have similar impact on his ideas about America’s foreign policy.

It bears repeating from the introductory chapter Kloppenberg’s suggestion that whilst Obama shares “the scepticism of those critics who eroded the foundations on which mid-twentieth-century universalism stood” he also understands and is “haunted” by “the residual appeal that timeless ideals continue to exert.” From this, Kloppenberg asserted of Obama that “as he has been throughout his life, as president he remains caught in the force field between universalism and particularism.” Each ideas that stand as broadly analogous for Hunter’s *orthodoxy* and *progressivism* respectively.

While much of the remainder of this chapter will place emphasis on the importance of pragmatism in Obama’s thinking, it is first important to note Bart Schultz’s warning that “the universalizing, Platonizing, Christianizing elements of Americanism are the very things pragmatism usually seeks to undercut.”¹¹⁰ It is thus a significant point of interest for Obama to be wedded to such ideals, anathema as they appear to his broader ideological instincts to be traced below. Herein lays a central enigma of Obama’s philosophical outlook, but also the political and foreign policy ramifications of it. As such, what follows will also examine the process by which Obama sought congruence between two contrasting worldviews. This again is not to suggest Obama’s approach is entirely anomalous, or exceptional. It is possible (perhaps probable) for every person in the policy making realm to carry conflicting views animated by different sources, constantly at friction with one another, competing for prominence. For political figures, decision makers, and foreign policy actors such is the demand on their attention of predetermined priorities and fundamental duties, they are almost compelled to encompass a broad dichotomy of perspectives from one issue to the next. Yet, Obama retained a notable place among such figures given the detail in which his writings and speeches have expressed the desire for a means by which contrasting ideas can reasonably be brought together to cohere in a functional manner.

In foreign policy terms this becomes particularly pertinent, given the longstanding presence of schools of foreign policy thought which tend towards binaries. These binaries run on a spectrum ranging from the more conventional – interest-focused *realist* opposed to the values-oriented *idealist*, to the more nuanced “exemplarist” versus “vindicationist,” transactional or transformational approach, or the varied intellectual consequences of an “artist” contra “scientist”

¹⁰⁹ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. 37

¹¹⁰ Schultz, “Obama's Political Philosophy.” P. 145

foreign policy outlook.¹¹¹ Binaries often form a familiar and comforting lens through which to contend with the ever-changing contours of the international realm. In examining Obama's apparent instinct to transgress the confines of such binaries, and his emphasis on speaking to multiple perspectives and viewpoints, we can establish a framework through which such a mindset and outlook can be applied to matters of foreign policy. In doing so, we can provide context for a president who overtly expressed that he was "comfortable with complexity," and truly grapple with the implications of that, and the depth of the intellectual well from which he drew.¹¹² Doing so will enable us to develop a more rounded perspective on Obama's curation of a foreign policy than would be allowed by those that merely pick at his failings to adhere to a core doctrine, strategy, or ideology.

===

In June of 2006, Jim Wallis and his Christian association Sojourners held a conference in Washington D.C. Obama, Senator for Illinois, was invited to give the keynote speech at the event and he used the opportunity to address a cornerstone piece of the culture wars divide: that of religion and its relationship with politics. In so doing, his determination to navigate between intractable societal divides were prominently displayed.

Sojourners is an organisation dedicated to applying articles of faith to issues of social justice, seeking to fuel discussion that places the Christian faith into context with political and social issues of the day.¹¹³ With this in mind the 2006 conference was entitled 'Building a Covenant for a New America.' Obama's speech was an 'address on faith and politics,' and he began by praising the conference and its other speakers' ideas about the pressing concerns of poverty and justice in the United States. He in turn celebrated the impetus provided by the idealised 'Covenant.' But he noted that the ideas held within could not be impactful unless "the mutual suspicion that sometimes exists between religious America and secular America" was tackled head-on. He therefore wanted to use the platform to talk about "the connection between religion and politics" and in doing so to offer

¹¹¹ H. W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).; Jr. Nye, J. S., *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).; Milne, *Worldmaking*.

¹¹² Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

¹¹³ Sojourners, "Our History," <https://sojo.net/about-us/our-history>.

thoughts on how to “sort through some of the often bitter arguments that we've been seeing over the last several years.”¹¹⁴

He discussed a gap that had built up in American society between those who attended church regularly and those who did not. In doing so, he noted nevertheless that on the part of liberals (among whom he counted himself) it was to err in failing “to acknowledge the power of faith in people’s lives – in the lives of the American people.” As a result, it was time to “join a serious debate” about how faith could be reconciled with a modern, pluralistic democracy. He was hopeful “that we can bridge the gaps that exist and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate.” This could later be recognized as signature Obama: advocating an implicit underlying notion that by bringing perspectives together to a more workable shared ideal, society could – and would - do better. We will later see how this extended in significant ways to the foreign policy realm.

Wittingly or not, in his Sojourners speech, Obama was evoking thinking that had been put forth a century before, when William James sought to bridge his own time’s intractable philosophical divide. In a series of lectures given late in 1906 at the Lowell Institute, James began his efforts to establish pragmatism as a field of enquiry. He proffered to his audience that philosophy was divided into two conflicting modes of thinking. He saw a schism between rationalists and empiricists; the former committed to a worldview led by the heart and by emotions, the latter encountering the world on a basis of factual discovery, concerned only with what was empirically proven to be true.¹¹⁵

James deemed this unsatisfactory polarization to be the most pressing dilemma in philosophy of the day. It was thus his ambition to present pragmatism as a middle course that could correct for the failings of each perspective and instead foment a more fruitful mode of enquiry. He too was seeking to speak across divides, to find a functioning path of action between two opposing ways of thinking. Drawing from the insights of his contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce, James forged a new philosophy (albeit one he termed as being ‘a new name for an old way of thinking’). He defined the pragmatic method as being one primarily of “settling metaphysical disputes that might otherwise be interminable.”¹¹⁶ He offered examples of disputes he deemed unending; “is the world one or many? – fated or free? – material or spiritual?” As a response, he argued:

The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical

¹¹⁴ "Transcript: Obama's 2006 Sojourners/Call to Renewal Address on Faith and Politics," Sojourners, <https://sojo.net/articles/transcript-obamas-2006-sojournerscall-renewal-address-faith-and-politics>.

¹¹⁵ W. James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2000). pp. 7-23

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 25

*difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.*¹¹⁷

The influence of Peirce's earlier overtures was clear. In an essay first published in the January 1878 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*, the logician had laid the foundations for what would become America's novel contribution to philosophy. He wrote of his desire "to point out how impossible it is that we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but conceived sensible effects of things. Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects." From this, he curated his definitive maxim: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object."¹¹⁸

For James, pragmatism was to stand as a radical perspective on notions of *truth*. To assume the pragmatist method is to turn "away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins," and to turn instead "towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power."¹¹⁹ As a method, pragmatism means "the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth."¹²⁰

Literary scholar Morris Dickstein argues that James developed pragmatism "as a critique of abstractions and absolutes and as a philosophy oriented toward practice and action."¹²¹ In rejecting the rationalist emphasis on eternal truths, James established pragmatism as an effort at finding truth centred upon a premise of provisionality and experimentalism. As such, "it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method."¹²² For James, an idea "makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works." Indeed, "truth is *made*...in the course of experience."¹²³ Truth cannot be conceived of separately from the actual practice of living, of asking

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ C. Peirce, S., "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (1878), <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p119.html>.

¹¹⁹ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. p.27

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ M. Dickstein, "Introduction: Pragmatism Then and Now," in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. M. Dickstein (London: Duke University Press, 1998). P. 1

¹²² James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. P. 28

¹²³ Ibid. p. 96

what it would mean for one idea to be true over another.¹²⁴ Truth is found in the assimilation, validation, corroboration, and verification of ideas.¹²⁵

In engendering this “attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities” pragmatism turns to a process of “looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.”¹²⁶ It is concerned with the practical outcomes of experience and practise. This focus on ‘last things’ necessitates a crucial consequentialism that once again rejects the notion that you can fully conceive the *truth* of something separate of an engagement and contextual experience of it. In a 2011 *New Yorker* article on Obama’s response to the Arab Spring, Ryan Lizza noted that an aide had referred to Obama as “consequentialist.” They perceived him as “an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works.”¹²⁷ Here, we already see the language of pragmatism seeping into discussion of Obama’s thought, and the implications that might carry for foreign policy. It bears remembering, from the introduction, Becker and Shane’s assertion of Obama’s instincts of “pragmatism over ideology.” At its core, pragmatism in foreign policy appears, in the first instance, as the notion of rejecting ideological considerations as a predicate for taking action on the world stage. It instead takes its cues from reacting to the realities and constraints of the moment.

Dickstein argues that pragmatists see “the quest for certainty” as a “futile and misguided remnant of an outworn metaphysics, and they take the new, contingent, human-centred world as a source of opportunity and possibility. For the pragmatists, truth is provisional, grounded in history and experience, not fixed in the nature of things.”¹²⁸ Prior to its migration into the mainstream of social argumentation, James and his contemporaries were making early moves in the intellectual unwinding which would rupture into the culture wars. By beginning to question the very foundations of truth, they were beginning to muddy the waters of whether such truths could ever be fixed in place. They threatened the certainty which had assured moral order.

In his book *The Metaphysical Club* Louis Menand traces the intellectual and emotional milieu which gave rise to the pragmatist thinking of James, Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and John Dewey.¹²⁹ For Menand the key spark that set the movement aflame was the devastation of the American Civil War. The brutal four year conflict left those who witnessed its horrors in a state of disbelief at what fellow Americans – fellow humans – would do to each other in pursuit of an absolute idea. It

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 88

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 29

¹²⁷ R. Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *The New Yorker* May 2 Issue (2011), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.

¹²⁸ Dickstein, "Introduction: Pragmatism Then and Now." p. 5

¹²⁹ L. Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (London: Flamingo, 2002).

spawned a horror at the inhibitions broken down by the devotion to an unyielding dogma. Horror that translated to a distrust of the ideas, beliefs, and assumptions of the preceding era.¹³⁰

As the following chapter will discuss, Obama carried a similar suspicion of abstraction in foreign policy that was rooted largely in a reaction to the Bush administration's approach to the Iraq War. For the early pragmatists, this suspicion of abstraction was to result in a changed perception about ideas. They came to believe that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are "tools... that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves."¹³¹ Formed not individually, but socially, and not developed according to an inner logic of their own, but instead dependent "like germs, on their human carriers and the environment."¹³² The pragmatists believed "that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability."¹³³ For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to recognize the implications of this pragmatist perspective in confronting the notion that directions in American foreign policy could ever be pure distillations of abstract truths plucked down from on high - *manna from heaven*. Instead they have always been made a certain way for specific purposes, through specific contexts. Drafters of foreign policy, nevertheless, have continued to claim the mantle of abstract ideals in driving their decisions.

Menand argues that the key value animating these pragmatists was that of *tolerance*. It necessitated a means of social organisation that would allow for difference, for the room for adaptability, and the constant potential for better ideas to replace old ideas.¹³⁴ Beliefs for these pragmatists "are just bets on the future" and that while people "may believe unreservedly in a certain set of truths, there is always the possibility that some other set of truths might be the case." Ultimately, it is a sense that "we have to act on what we believe; we cannot wait for confirmation from the rest of the universe."¹³⁵ The tolerance of different perspectives and alternative conceptions of the world provides a moral justification for actions that are taken. The warning at the heart of pragmatism is that the alternative to toleration is force. As a result, Menand contends that "pragmatism was designed to make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs." He elaborates:

This sounds unexceptionable, and in many ways it is. But it is important to see that the idea is a compromise. Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey wished to bring ideas and principles and beliefs down to a human level because they wished to

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. x

¹³¹ Ibid. p. xi

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid. p. xi-xii

¹³⁴ Ibid. pp. 439-440

¹³⁵ Ibid. p. 440

*avoid the violence they saw hidden in abstractions. This was one of the lessons the Civil War had taught them. The political system their philosophy was designed to support was democracy. And democracy, as they understood it, isn't just about letting the right people have their say; it's also about letting the wrong people have their say. It is about giving space to minority and dissenting views so that, at the end of the day, the interests of the majority may prevail.*¹³⁶

Despite its fledgling success at the beginning of the century, pragmatism began to splutter as the weight of events-to-come ground it to a halt. The aftermath of World War II and the emergence of the Cold War world offered little incubation for the anti-essentialist worldview provoked by pragmatist thought. An approach which emphasized the contingency of history and the slippery nature of truth found short shrift in a world of rigid moral distinctions. This would become the world of the free and liberal west against the tyrannical Soviet east. The defeat of Nazism and the coming of the Cold War necessitated a certain moral clarity and thus instilled this virtue and its assumptions unquestioned and unfettered. Absolutes became the currency of the day.

By the end of the Cold War, however, a change in thought had occurred. There had been, under the surface, a growing dissatisfaction in the philosophical world with these moral absolutes and the restrictive analytic thinking that accompanied their formulation. It was a dissatisfaction with the foundationalism that had become so dominant in Western thought. With the end of the Cold War, old certainties were breaking down, trusted delineations buckling at the edges, and people were beginning to look around for new modes of understanding the ensuing malaise. This would prove to not only be a crucial backdrop to Obama's education but it would also form the context of a struggle in U.S. foreign policy circles to understand this post-Cold War world. It would be a struggle that would last through to Obama's own presidency.

Primary among those who had been tirelessly laying the groundwork for this coming uncertainty was philosopher Richard Rorty whose work sought to build on what the earlier pragmatists had achieved. Beginning in 1980 with his iconoclastic *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he worked to question the very foundations of philosophy as it had come to be established.¹³⁷ He questioned the very notion of truth itself and even the very possibility of philosophical inquiry finding answers it sought. For Rorty, many of the ideas animating pragmatism stood in firm contrast to what he argued to be a 'positivist' account of truth. Under positivism, he argued, there is a "hope to leave behind [for all

¹³⁶ Ibid. pp. 440-441

¹³⁷ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

future generations] true propositions, propositions which have been shown to be true once and for all.”¹³⁸

He emphasized how the positivist search for universal criterion for agreement are buttressed by the pragmatist conception of these same criterion as “temporary resting-places constructed for specific utilitarian ends.”¹³⁹ The positivism of Platonist philosophy and its search for truth reflected an “urge to escape the vocabulary and practises of one’s own time and find something ahistorical and necessary to cling to.”¹⁴⁰ In response to such a notion, Rorty pulled on the thread that he argued tied Nietzsche, James, Dewey, and Michel Foucault together, and warned that “there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.”¹⁴¹ Indeed, as James put it over half a century earlier, “the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything.”¹⁴²

Rorty was not ploughing a lone furrow – contemporaries such as Richard Bernstein and Hilary Putnam were contending with similar questions, ideas, and conclusions about truth and the underpinnings of absolutist thought. These American philosophers were joined, among others, by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and scientist and intellectual historian Thomas Kuhn, in fomenting an intellectual moment which sought once more to unwind the foundational conceptions which had propped up understandings of the world and society for generations.

Running parallel to, and frequently intersecting with, this reimagined pragmatism was another intellectual movement which found similar discomfort with *truth* as it had been dominantly portrayed. Prominent philosophers such as Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze were pursuing similarly anti-foundationalist modes of enquiry. This group of thinkers, which would broadly constitute the post-structuralist and post-modernist movements, sought to deconstruct all meaning and in doing so highlight the root power at play behind all thought and ideology.

There are difficulties that come with a rejection of fixed truths. Bernstein argues that “much of the pathos of what is called “postmodernism” results from the claim that there are no firm fixed foundations for any of our beliefs.” Falling into the absolutism-relativism binary poses its own problems, whereby “if there are no firm foundations, then presumably there is no escape from an

¹³⁸ *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982). P. xli

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 165

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p, xlii

¹⁴² James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. P. 33

“anything goes” relativism.” Indeed, with its relentless criticism of absolutism, foundationalism, and fundamentalism, Bernstein notes that pragmatism opens itself up to the critique that it stands for a version of Nietzschean relativism that stands for nothing at all.¹⁴³ But he pushes back against this, arguing that pragmatists have rejected this relativism and “extreme scepticism,” and instead they have “advanced an ideal of ‘concrete reasonableness,’” a perspective that holds the belief that “we can distinguish better or worse options, and we should try to support our convictions with the best available evidence and reasons.”¹⁴⁴ While it is important that pragmatists embrace the idea that “we never escape from contingency, uncertainty, and ambiguity,” pragmatism itself offers insight into how this malaise can be avoided. Bernstein posits that “the response to contingency and uncertainty should not be despair, wild relativism, or the flight to new absolutes.” Instead “our task – and it is a difficult never-ending task – is to learn to live with this contingency, to respond as intelligently as we can to the new conflicts and crises that arise in our everyday lives.”¹⁴⁵ For Bernstein, pragmatism allows for thought that is flexible and constantly open to scrutiny and adaptation. He maintains “the pragmatists believed that we can learn to think and act without relying on rigid banisters.”¹⁴⁶ In this vision of pragmatism we can find much that animated Obama’s thinking. This is a connection we can draw even in the infancy of this study, given the themes expressed in the ‘More Perfect’ speech, that speaks to this advocacy of carefully and intelligently responding to the changing contingencies embedded in America’s evolution. To see this carried forth into foreign policy, we might expect to see an approach that was based more on an adjustment to the contingencies of the world than one which claimed to hold certain knowledge of how the world could be shaped acceding to an ideological image.

Chris Hayes, Bart Schultz, Trygve Throntveit, David Milne, Cass Sunstein, and others have written in depth on drawing out such instances of pragmatism as a significant guiding force on Obama’s thought.¹⁴⁷ Kloppenborg is also prominent among this group. He emphasises that his own work is not a matter of “trying to establish a necessary connection between philosophical pragmatism and Obama’s politics,” as “the former does not entail the latter.” But instead he is arguing “from Obama’s writings back to the philosophy of pragmatism in order to show the congruence between

¹⁴³ R. Bernstein, J., “Community in the Pragmatic Tradition,” in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. M. Dickstein (London: Duke University Press, 1998). P. 154

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ C. Hayes, “The Pragmatist,” *The Nation* December 29 Issue (2008), <https://www.thenation.com/article/pragmatist/>; Schultz, “Obama’s Political Philosophy.”; T. Throntveit, “Our President, the Pragmatist: How Obama Resurrected a Political Tradition,” *Footnote* 6 June (2012), <http://footnote.co/our-president-the-pragmatist/>; Milne, “Pragmatism or What?: The Future of US Foreign Policy.”; see also *Worldmaking*; C. R. Sunstein, “The Empiricist Strikes Back,” *New Republic* 10 September (2008), <https://newrepublic.com/article/64019/the-empiricist-strikes-back>.

antifoundationalism, historicism, experimentalism, and democracy in his way of thinking.”¹⁴⁸ If we can not necessarily pin Obama to a specific pragmatist thinker and their specific vision of pragmatism - though Kloppenberg nominates Bernstein as a workable approximation - we can at least place him in the nexus of pragmatist thought.¹⁴⁹ Inhabiting, as he did, a way of thinking notable in its cacophony of ideas that compete, play off against one another, and complement one another to form a patchwork vision of a complex intellectual framework.

In Obama’s speech at the Sojourners conference, we can draw out elements of ideas that swirl in this nexus of pragmatism, antifoundationalism, historicism, experimentalism, and democratic theory. As he addressed the divide between the religious and the secular he emphasized the valuable role that religion plays in society and the spur it can provide for social change. He contended that such movements offered the potential to make secular progressives strange bedfellows of the religious. Progressives “might recognize some overlapping values that both religious and secular people share when it comes to the moral and material direction of our country.”¹⁵⁰ For Obama, “overlapping values brings to mind an idea of shared understandings, and consensus.”¹⁵¹ He argued that thinking in a collective rather than individual sense offered the possibility to engage groups from religious and secular backgrounds to work together “in the larger project of American renewal.” Obama’s emphasis on a communal and shared effort to solve issues speaks to a larger tradition that encompasses notions of pluralism, civic engagement, and the overarching movements of civic republicanism, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy.

In celebrating pluralist democracy, civic virtue, and political participation as overtly as he does, Obama primed his compass towards a North Star of civic republicanism. Kloppenberg defines the civic republican tradition of public interest as “a conception of a shared, common good, emerging through the process of lively debate between champions of competing points of view.”¹⁵² Early on in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama’s second book, he invokes “a tradition that stretched from the days of the country’s founding to the glory of the civil rights movement, a tradition based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart, and that if enough people believe in the truth of that proposition and act on it, then we might not solve every problem, but we can get something meaningful done.”¹⁵³ For Kloppenberg, Obama embraces a mode of thinking that holds the United States as being “designed from the start to be a

¹⁴⁸ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. P. 172

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 133-134

¹⁵⁰ Sojourners, "Obama's Sojourners Speech"; ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p.41

¹⁵³ Obama, *Audacity*. P. 2

democracy in which the people would deliberate together to discover the meaning of justice and advance the common good.”¹⁵⁴ This is a vision of American history that found compelling roots in Gordon Wood’s *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, an exploration of the thought which surrounded the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Emphasising how “the sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution,” Wood places the Founding Fathers in a tradition based upon interests of the collective as opposed to those purely of the individual anomic self.¹⁵⁵

Kloppenbergh emphasises how these ideas of the republican synthesis were ones which Obama was introduced to in Roger Boesche’s political theory class, and he contends that this is “among the most striking facts about Obama’s intellectual formation.” He argues that “whereas members of an earlier generation of Americans had been taught versions of the nation’s history that stressed the importance of individual rights in the founding, Obama from the beginning learned the importance of community, the centrality of obligations, and the shaping influence of civic virtue in American democracy.”¹⁵⁶ It is thus significant that Obama’s conception of American history is one premised on a positive vision of human interaction. It is a conception which he brings forward into his own optimistic visions for how the nation can continue to strive for a future that he believes is entirely in keeping with its founding spirit.

In key respects, Obama’s is a vision of American history which reifies aspects of what a critical eye might view instead as the *mythos* of the founding, a vision which on its face elides crucial uncomfortable realities of the Founders as slaveholders, self-interested businessmen, and propertied elites. Where Kloppenbergh finds Obama’s immersion in such a history as indicative of a notable variance from previous generations, we might also observe a mythologized over-inflation of civic virtue as an animating factor in the nation’s founding. It is an important aspect of Obama’s thought to bear in mind. To the jaded, such credulity could seem misguided. Indeed, given the persistent unwillingness of the Republican Party and its Senate leader Mitch McConnell to engage in reciprocal civic republicanism, we might consign Obama’s immersion in that history as a naïve mistake in the present of American politics.¹⁵⁷ But nevertheless, his continued insistence on this worldview in the face of such opposition is significant. And it might also indicate a willingness on the

¹⁵⁴ Kloppenbergh, *Reading Obama*. P. 43

¹⁵⁵ G. Wood, S., *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). P. 53

¹⁵⁶ Kloppenbergh, *Reading Obama*. pp. 43-44

¹⁵⁷ J. Zengerle, "Get Mitch: How the Embattled Senate Minority Leader Explains America's Political Gridlock," *Politico Magazine* November Issue (2013), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/11/get-mitch-mcconnell-099376>.

international stage to continue with such a hope, even when confronted with foes more violently opposed to Obama's America than the Republican Party.

As discussed above, Louis Menand emphasized how the notion of toleration underpinned pragmatism. As a conscious effort to preclude the violence of abstraction, pragmatism was a mode of thinking designed to facilitate this precious human interaction. Democracy is the system of social organisation which allows for the malleable process of experimentation and re-evaluation of ideas in order to reach an understanding of what is best for society. It also enables the adaptability to solve new problems and disagreements as they arise.

James, in his original writings, emphasized the importance of pluralism to the pragmatic method of inquiry, arguing that "pragmatism...must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side."¹⁵⁸ Pragmatism naturally coheres with a pluralist view which allows for a multiplicity of perspective. This places pragmatism in a firm lock-step with the reification of democracy so central to the American project. Bernstein contends that "an adequate theory of democracy should incorporate the principle of fallibility, the openness of all inquiry and interpretation, the need for the cultivation of critical habits of deliberation," thus making it clear that the traits and goals of pragmatism and democracy form a symbiotic relationship.¹⁵⁹

Bernstein considers the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, Habermas, and Rorty, and teases out "a current that keeps drawing us to the central themes of dialogue, conversation, undistorted communication, communal judgment, and the type of rational wooing that can take place when individuals confront each other as equals and participants."¹⁶⁰ He emphasises a pragmatism embedded in this pluralist democratic process. The embrace of ideas "draw us toward the goal of cultivating the types of dialogical communities in which *phronesis* ["practical wisdom"], judgment, and practical discourse become concretely embodied in our everyday practices."¹⁶¹ For Bernstein the embrace of such pragmatism "is not antithetical to an appreciation of the depth and pervasiveness of conflict...which characterizes our theoretical and practical lives," but crucially, he maintains that:

On the contrary, this vision is a response to the irreducibility of conflict grounded in human plurality. But plurality does not mean that we are limited to being separate individuals with irreducible subjective interests. Rather it means that we

¹⁵⁸ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. p. 72

¹⁵⁹ Bernstein, "Community in the Pragmatic Tradition." P. 147

¹⁶⁰ *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). P. 223

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

*seek to discover some common ground to reconcile differences through debate, conversation, and dialogue.*¹⁶²

A running theme in Obama's intellectual output is an emphasis on the importance of seeking common ground within plurality. Bernstein's argument is an important statement concerning pragmatism's mode of operation and its goals. It is also a crucial representation of how Obama conceived of the American political project. But vitally, for the purposes of this thesis, it also found a home in his foreign policy.

Efforts at reaching a level of reconciliation of difference and common ground became a large part of Obama's foreign policy in its determined focus on diplomacy. This began right from the opening moments of his presidency. "To the Muslim world" Obama proclaimed in his inaugural address, "we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." He noted more generally "to those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent," that they should "know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."¹⁶³

He followed this overture with a trip to Cairo to give a speech heralded as "a new beginning" which he sought between the United States and Muslims worldwide, a beginning "based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition." Instead, he argued "they overlap, and share common principles -- principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings." To achieve progress in this regard, he maintained, "there must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground."¹⁶⁴

The common ground Bernstein expressed as a vital part of pragmatism in its effort "to reconcile differences through debate, conversation, and dialogue" was adopted by Obama not only in his visions of domestic American democracy, but vitally, it was also deemed a constituent part of a foreign policy aimed at overcoming adversarial relationships. Obama spoke in general terms in his inaugural address and in Cairo, but it would be realized in concrete policy through the Iranian nuclear deal, and the "opening" to Cuba, two countries notable in their historical enmity with the United States. Susan Rice, who served as Obama's Ambassador to the UN in the first term writes in her memoir that "in President Obama's view, my job and that of my team was to bridge old divides,

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ M. Phillips, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," news release, 21 January 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

¹⁶⁴ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," news release, June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

find common ground where possible, stand tough when necessary, and forge collective solutions that would help us confront the most intractable global challenges.”¹⁶⁵ The pursuit of common ground would prove a pivotal part of how Obama perceived the most effective ways of pursuing U.S. foreign policy.

Bringing these ideas to bear on the notion of the role of religion in democratic life, Obama argued at the Sojourners conference that, in the search for this common ground:

*Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.*¹⁶⁶

Here Obama reflects ideas reminiscent of one of the thinkers Bernstein contended with in his aforementioned work: Jürgen Habermas.

Habermas sought to advance the notion of “universal pragmatics” in the realm of human communication, the goal of which “is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding.”¹⁶⁷ He argued this aim of reaching an understanding to be fundamental, and as such, he starts from an assumption that “other forms of social action – for example, conflict, competition, strategic action in general – are derivatives of action oriented to reaching understanding.”¹⁶⁸

Habermas holds that “the goal of coming to an understanding is to bring about an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another.”¹⁶⁹ Bernstein characterizes Habermas’ project as seeking “a way of redeeming, reconstructing, and rationally defending the emancipatory aspirations of the Enlightenment – emancipatory aspirations that call for autonomy and concrete freedom embracing all of humanity.”¹⁷⁰ Contra to the philosophy of Rorty (and much to the American’s chagrin), there is

¹⁶⁵ S. Rice, *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019). p. 243

¹⁶⁶ Sojourners, "Obama's Sojourners Speech".

¹⁶⁷ J. Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). P. 1

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 3

¹⁷⁰ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*. P. 181

a universalizing element to Habermas' thought which conceives of rationalizations that underlie 'communicative action' as providing a *telos* and a guiding principle for practice.¹⁷¹ Bernstein argues Habermas' key insight is that under pluralism, with different perspectives rooted in "unique traditions," there is a claim to reason which can provoke mutual dialogue and discourse.¹⁷² He argues "the interpretations that Habermas develops in these interrelated contexts are animated by a unifying 'moral-political intention' the desire to show that there is a *telos* immanent in our communicative action that is oriented to mutual understanding."¹⁷³ There is an indelible societal interaction which is aimed at common understanding.¹⁷⁴

The introduction considered the notion that Obama himself carries a sense of *telos* in his treatment of America and its capacity for perfection. In part, this was characterized by a determination towards diverse interests coming together as one. Obama was exposed to the ideas of Habermas in Boesche's class. While it might not be possible to ascribe direct influence of Habermas on Obama, the presence of certain key ideas expressed in Obama's writings suggests that the broad intellectual tenor which surrounded Habermas' project has permeated, at the very least, into surface level aspects of Obama's thinking.

In his prioritising of a democratic means of creating society, Obama also draws heavily – again, consciously or not - on the ideas of John Dewey, one of America's foremost philosophers, one of the leading pragmatists, and a key figure in theories of social reform and education. In the latter capacity, he was the founder of the University of Chicago's famed Lab School, which Obama's own daughters attended. In his impressive intellectual biography of Dewey, Alan Ryan highlights that Habermas also shared a significant relationship of thought with Dewey, writing "there are many connections between Habermas's ideas about emancipatory forms of social theory and Dewey's conception of philosophy as social criticism" and draws parallels between each thinker's attachment of human communication to democracy.¹⁷⁵ Ryan argues that they share an idea that "only when people can communicate on free and equal terms can they achieve the deep self-understanding that we have hankered after since the Enlightenment. If freedom and equality are absent, what can be said and thus what can be thought will be limited."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 188

¹⁷² Ibid. p. 192

¹⁷³ Ibid. p. 195

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ A. Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (London: W. W. Norton, 1995).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

It is in this sense that Obama can himself be placed firmly in the realm of Deweyan thought.¹⁷⁷ He subscribes to the lionization of democracy as a guiding principle for American society. As the very key to unlock the liberty promised by its foundation. Indeed, we can even see how Obama held a belief that the world would benefit from a democratic turn. The degree to which he did not actively pursue democratization as a matter of course his for foreign policy was a significant departure from his two predecessors. But he nevertheless did hold fast to the continual emphasis - through rhetoric at least - of the promises of democracy for every country of the world, and for its place in conceptions of a better world.¹⁷⁸

The particular significance of Dewey's emphasis on democracy lies in the sense by which it was not to be seen purely as a means to an end – a way of achieving a specific society – but instead it was the end in itself. In *The Public and its Problems* Dewey emphasized that engagement with community and participation with civic association and family life is enriching for “a good citizen” as the “pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord.”¹⁷⁹ He proclaimed that “regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.”¹⁸⁰ It encompasses all the interactions, associations, and commitments held between various interests shared and otherwise. Simply, for Dewey, “the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.”¹⁸¹ Under a Deweyan conception, Bart Schultz argues that the very purpose of American democracy “is not to aggregate consumer preferences on the political side, but to create a forum for deliberation and participation, for listening to one another, talking to one another, and taking action together.”¹⁸²

The resonance with Habermas' and Obama's thought is made clear in Dewey's assertion that “democracy will come into its own for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion.” And vitally, it would reach its fruition “when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.”¹⁸³ This ideal of employing communication between dissected interests is a central aspect of Habermas' communicative action and of Obama's notion of

¹⁷⁷ This connection is explicitly considered and drawn in S. Schulten, "Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey," *Denver University Law Review* 86 (2009). and Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy."

¹⁷⁸ The Obama White House, "Remarks by President Obama at Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Athens, Greece," news release, 16 November, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/11/16/remarks-president-obama-stavros-niarchos-foundation-cultural-center>.

¹⁷⁹ J. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH.: Swallow Press, 1991). p. 148

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p. 149

¹⁸² Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy." P. 146

¹⁸³ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*. p. 184

putting ideas up for argumentation in a deliberative manner. It was the exact argument behind his speech at the Sojourners conference, and would underline overtures such as those made in his inaugural address, in Cairo, Yangon, and to Cuba and Iran.

Ryan places Dewey as falling within what would become the communitarian tradition. A movement with which Obama carries clear connections. Communitarian thinking is animated by the notion that people learn how to live “the moral life” in a community, based on that community’s established moral precepts. It holds that our ideals are learned, shaped, and developed by such a common life.¹⁸⁴ What Ryan termed as Dewey’s “revolt against Kant and utilitarianism” was matched, he argued, by a similar revolt in the latter part of the twentieth century.¹⁸⁵ Communitarianism emerged into the mainstream of political thought primarily through its contention with the thought of John Rawls. Rawls himself had proved a vital influence for liberal politics since his essential *A Theory of Justice* was published.¹⁸⁶ He sought to develop a means for organising society based upon the thought experiment of ‘the original position,’ where a social contract would be drawn up behind ‘the veil of ignorance’ whereby no individual would know their place in society once it was created. Rawls argued that under such conditions, people would reason to establish the fairest society possible, so as to preserve their self-interest. Justice conceived under such conditions was to be a fair agreement, and thus Rawls termed his theory “justice as fairness.”¹⁸⁷ Ryan notes that “this is an individualistic device in many ways; it assumes that our concern for ourselves is more basic and more natural than our concern for others, it represents public life as a system of mutual bargaining, and it adopts a view of rational behaviour modelled on the one we find in classical economics.”¹⁸⁸

The communitarian critique, led initially by Charles Taylor and later Michael Sandel, argued that Rawls failed to account for the commitments to others which constitute so much of human life. He disregarded religious and ethical considerations, cultural and national traditions – communal enterprises - which are so central to a person’s sense of self.¹⁸⁹ In time, Rawls would amend his thinking and historicize his project. As Kloppenber eruditely puts it, “he brought *A Theory of Justice* down from the ‘Archimedean point’ of universality, from the imagined exchanges among disembodied rational actors operating behind the veil of ignorance, and placed him in the particular context of modern American culture. Justice could no longer be conceived in terms of unchanging

¹⁸⁴ Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. P. 358

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁸⁷ Kloppenber, *Reading Obama*. pp. 89-91

¹⁸⁸ Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. P. 359

¹⁸⁹ Kloppenber, *Reading Obama*. p. 99

principles.”¹⁹⁰ Instead, Rawls embraced and emphasized the pluralism underwriting justice produced by “an overlapping consensus.”¹⁹¹ This concept resonated with Deweyan, Habermasian, and what would later be Obamian thought.

Kloppenbergr effectively traces the synthesis which began to develop between Rawlsian liberalism and communitarianism and notes the influence of such ideas on Obama. In defining Obama as a civic republican, Kloppenbergr argues that he is “committed to a revised version of Rawls’s principles of justice as applied to law and politics by many of those with whom he studied, and whose work he read, in college and in law school.”¹⁹²

===

Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* thesis catapulted concerns over how community life was declining in the United States into popular discourse. It argued that bonds of community were breaking, and people were becoming more atomized, lonely in their separation from surrounding networks of support and companionship.¹⁹³ Obama internalized these ideas and expressed them in multiple forums. At the Sojourners conference, he noted how each day people were going about their daily business and were “coming to the realization that something is missing.”

*They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives. They're looking to relieve a chronic loneliness, a feeling supported by a recent study that shows Americans have fewer close friends and confidants than ever before. And so they need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them - that they are not just destined to travel down that long highway towards nothingness.*¹⁹⁴

It was a search for belonging and connection that Obama himself had sought, not only in the religious sense. In contending with his own identity, he wrote in *Dreams From My Father* that his growing understanding of himself as a black American “remained unanchored to place.” He yearned

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 108

¹⁹¹ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹⁹² Kloppenbergr, *Reading Obama*. pp. 101-102

¹⁹³ R. Putnam, D., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹⁹⁴ Sojourners, "Obama's Sojourners Speech".

for a community that would “cut deeper than the common despair that black friends and I shared when reading the latest crime statistics, or the high fives I might exchange on a basketball court. A place where I could put down stakes and test my commitments.”¹⁹⁵

Obama began to learn lessons centring around the importance of community and human connectivity in another hallowed (if informal) institution of education - that of the streets. A short while after graduating from Columbia, he assumed the role of a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago. The thrust of community organising, as expressed by its architect Saul Alinsky – a radical reformer and a native Chicagoan attuned to the city’s rough and tumble machine-politics - is to “give [people] a way to participate in the democratic process, a way to exercise their rights as citizens and strike back at the establishment that oppresses them, instead of giving in to apathy.”¹⁹⁶

Writing in a 1988 edition of *Illinois Issues* (a periodical covering government and public policy in Illinois), Obama gave a precis of the aims and ideas that lay behind community organising. He argued that, “in theory,” it “provides a way to merge various strategies for neighborhood empowerment.”¹⁹⁷ It is aimed at addressing the lack of power communities have to solve problems they face. He suggested that “the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision,” and emphasized the necessity of a “broadly based indigenous leadership” to “knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.”¹⁹⁸ It is a movement based upon bringing people together to realize shared interests. It is far beyond Rawls’ rational individual identifying solely what will benefit them. Instead “it enables people to break their crippling isolation from each other, to reshape their mutual values and expectations and rediscover the possibilities of acting collaboratively” which itself Obama termed “the prerequisites of any successful self-help initiative.”¹⁹⁹ The seeds of pluralism in Obama’s thinking were planted deep, their roots intertwining with those of communitarianism and democratic representation.

The principles that animate community organising were of utmost import to Obama. He made the twin pillars of democracy and community abundantly clear in two speeches which bookended a key dividing line in his life; his farewell address as President, and his first public engagement as a former president. In his farewell address, he expressed the intention of his speech to focus on the state of American democracy. In order to preserve and protect American democracy, he warned that “all of us, regardless of party, should be throwing ourselves into the task of rebuilding our democratic institutions” an act which he argued depends on “accepting the responsibility of citizenship,

¹⁹⁵ Obama, *Dreams*. P. 115

¹⁹⁶ Remnick, *The Bridge*. P. 128

¹⁹⁷ B. Obama, "Why Organize?: Problems and Promise in the Inner City," *Illinois Issues* 1988.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

regardless of which way the pendulum of power happens to be swinging.” He argued that it is the *people* who give the Constitution power and meaning “with our participation, and with the choices that we make and the alliances that we forge.”²⁰⁰ These ideas deemed by Obama to be the crucial last message he needed to give the people before leaving office are ideas so inherent to the Deweyan vision. It was a message of democracy and democratic processes as the all-encompassing philosophic virtue to be pursued for the betterment of society. For the curation of communities who understand their interests in a shared sphere of argumentation and deliberation. The rhetorical flourish of urging those who believe something in society needs fixing to “lace up [their] shoes and do some organizing” was a final nod to his past, but also to the potential it offered for the future.²⁰¹

He would reach into this past again in his first appearance post-presidency. It was at an event at the University of Chicago where Obama chaired a panel with six students from the local area. He gave an opening soliloquy in which he discussed his time as an organizer in the area:

*This community gave me a lot more than I was able to give in return, because this community taught me that ordinary people, when working together, can do extraordinary things. This community taught me that everybody has a story to tell. That is important. This experience taught me that beneath the surface differences of people that there were common hopes and common dreams and common aspirations. Common values. That stitched us together as Americans. And so even though I, after three years, left for law school, the lessons that had been taught to me here as an organizer are ones that stayed with me. And effectively gave me the foundation for my subsequent political career and the themes that I would talk about as a state legislator and as a U.S. Senator and ultimately as president of the United States.*²⁰²

He emphasized the importance of seeking a “common reality” which he argued had gone by the wayside in public discourse. Its renewal would allow for the people “to have a healthy debate and then try to find common ground and actually move solutions forward.”²⁰³

This notion of engaging in public participation, argumentation, deliberation, and the search for agreement of shared interests are a thread that has run consistently through the thought of Barack Obama. He expressed this in his Sojourners conference speech with regards to religious belief and its

²⁰⁰ "President Obama's Farewell Address: Full Video and Text," *The New York Times*, January 10 2017.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² UChicago News, "UChicago Hosts Event with President Obama and Young Leaders," *UChicago News* 24 April (2017), <https://news.uchicago.edu/multimedia/uchicago-hosts-event-president-obama-and-young-leaders>.

²⁰³ Ibid.

relation to pluralism. He noted the difficulties posed by the attempts to bring those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible in to such a deliberative process, but he affirmed that “in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice.” Vitaly, for Obama “politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what’s possible.” He reflected here an essentially pragmatic screed, both in the language of “the art of what’s possible” but also in valorising the coming together of a cross-section of perspectives to arrive at a solution that is attainable. He conceded an important point, however, that “at some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise” and as such “embodies the notion of an absolute truth, an infallible truth that is free of context.”²⁰⁴ It becomes Hunter’s vision of orthodoxy, certain of the fixed moral veracity of an established truth.

Obama himself has reached into the past, to the very founding of the United States to talk about those ideas cohering around the ‘culture wars’ divide. In doing so he staked an argument predicated on a specific reading of the Constitution. As Obama taught for twelve years at the University of Chicago, specialising in constitutional law, we can take his perspective on the matter as being serious and rigorously drawn from a depth of study. It is thus valuable to acknowledge his exposition of the fundamental divide in the legal world that is built around competing conceptions of how the Constitution is to be read, understood, and acted upon. In this divide we can see the legal foundations for cultural conflicts as they are contested today in mainstream American society.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama offered a clear rendering of this divide. He wrote that American society is “arguing about how to argue – the means, in a big, crowded, noisy democracy, of settling our disputes peacefully. We want to get our way, but most of us also recognize the need for consistency, predictability, and coherence. We want the rules governing our democracy to be fair.”²⁰⁵ And thus, when getting into arguments, debate, and disagreements about weighty moral issues, people “appeal to a higher authority – the Founding Fathers and the Constitution’s ratifiers” to give more direction.²⁰⁶ Obama held up the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia as an example of the approach to the Constitution which concludes that “the original understanding must be followed and that if we strictly obey this rule, then democracy is respected.”²⁰⁷ He contrasted Scalia’s position to that of Justice Stephen Breyer, who does not dispute that “the original meaning of constitutional provisions matters” but he and others who follow his conception “insist that sometimes the original understanding can take you only so far – that on the truly hard cases, the

²⁰⁴ Sojourners, "Obama's Sojourners Speech".

²⁰⁵ Obama, *Audacity*. P. 89

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

truly big arguments, we have to take context, history, and the practical outcomes of a decision into account.”²⁰⁸ Obama put this notion forward as taking the view that “the Founding Fathers and the original ratifiers have told us *how* to think but are no longer around to tell us *what* to think” and as such “we are on our own, and have only our own reason and judgment to rely on.”²⁰⁹ Obama conceded that he saw the appeal of Scalia’s perspective, given his own reverence for the accomplishment of the Founding Fathers, indeed he argued that “as we read these documents, they seem so incredibly right that it’s easy to believe they are the result of natural law if not divine inspiration.”²¹⁰ The very material of a fixed understanding of the way the world should be. Ultimately though, Obama sided with Breyer’s view of the Constitution, arguing that “it is not a static but rather a living document, and must be read in the context of an ever-changing world.”²¹¹ It is the language of the culture wars transplanted into the very core of how American society should be organized upon legal principles.

That Obama internalized these debates and ideas was a natural by-product of his time at Harvard Law School. In a sign of Obama’s enmeshment within the ideas that percolated around Cambridge at the time, he served as a research assistant for the legal scholar Laurence Tribe on his paper ‘The Curvature of Constitutional Space: What Lawyers Can Learn from Modern Physics,’ which argued that legal practitioners should be mindful of the impact that interpreting the law has upon society. Indeed, “like all human activity, the law is inevitably embroiled in the dialectical process whereby society is constantly recreating itself.”²¹² Perhaps more significantly, Tribe and Michael Dorf (another scholar in the department), noted in the acknowledgments of their book *On Reading the Constitution* that “Robert Fisher and Barack Obama have influenced our thinking on virtually every subject discussed in these pages.”²¹³ The book expressed the value of approaching the Constitution through a process of interpretation. They argued that “fundamentally, the Constitution is, rather, a text to be interpreted and reinterpreted in an unending search for understanding.”²¹⁴ For Tribe and Dorf, “reading the Constitution does not require an overarching theory of constitutional interpretation.”²¹⁵ They contended that:

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid. p. 90

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² L. H. Tribe, “The Curvature of Constitutional Space: What Lawyers Can Learn from Modern Physics,” *Harvard Law Review* 103, no. 1 (1989).

²¹³ L. Tribe, H., and Dorf, M., C., *On Reading the Constitution* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991).

²¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 32-33

²¹⁵ Ibid. p. 31

Although we cannot give a completely consistent theory of constitutional interpretation, we can at least sketch some acceptable approaches to the enterprise. If the task we have set for ourselves sounds halting and tentative, it is because the questions to which constitutional interpretation are addressed are so basic and so difficult. More often than not, we have no answers, and those we offer are almost never held with certitude. We do not attempt to offer the last word on the Constitution's meaning; when a last word is possible the Constitution will have lost its relevance to an ever-changing society. Less ambitiously, but perhaps more realistically, we hope to contribute to a useful dialogue on reading the Constitution, "a constitutional conversation."²¹⁶

They provide a footnote for this last notion, which states "we are grateful to Robert Fisher and Barack Obama for the metaphor of constitutional interpretation as conversation."²¹⁷ Obama later put forth these arguments in *The Audacity of Hope* as a crucial part of his vision of the Constitution. Obama termed it a "shift in metaphors":

That sees our democracy not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had. According to this conception, the genius of Madison's design is not that it provides us a fixed blueprint for action, the way a draftsman plots a building's construction. It provides us with a framework and with rules, but fidelity to these rules will not guarantee a just society or assure agreement on what's right. It won't tell us whether abortion is good or bad, a decision for a woman to make or a decision for a legislature. Nor will it tell us whether school prayer is better than no prayer at all.²¹⁸

For Obama, the Constitution offers a means by which American society can argue about its future.²¹⁹ Indeed "all of its elaborate machinery – its separation of powers and checks and balances and federalist principles and Bill of Rights – are designed to force us into a conversation, a 'deliberative democracy' in which all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 125

²¹⁸ Obama, *Audacity*. P. 92

²¹⁹ Ibid.

consent.”²²⁰ The notion of testing ideas against external realities is an essential aspect of pragmatism which, in its Jamesian notion of experimentalism, Obama expressed with aplomb.

Crucially for Obama, this conception of the Constitution again emphasises the importance, from the very founding of the nation, of curating a process of deliberation and persuasion. At the Sojourners conference Obama referred to the fundamental notion of religious belief not allowing for compromise. As such, he termed it the “art of the impossible” whereby followers are expected to live by God’s word and edicts without regards to the consequences. For Obama, “to base one’s life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.”²²¹ Here is an explicit rejection from Obama of the notion of absolute truth as a driver for decision making. And this is a rejection which again he based in his reading and understanding of the Founding Fathers and their formulation of the Constitution. He argued that it was “not just absolute power that the Founders sought to prevent. Implicit in its structure, in the very idea of ordered liberty, was a rejection of absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or “ism,” any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single, unalterable course, or drive both majorities and minorities into the cruelties of the Inquisition, the pogrom, the gulag, or the jihad.”²²² Instead, drawing out yet another pragmatic flavour from the pantry of William James, Obama argued that the Founders were “suspicious of abstraction and liked asking questions, which is why at every turn in our early history theory yielded to fact and necessity.”²²³ It is telling that this is the reading which Obama gleaned from the Founding Fathers. He saw the rejection of absolutes as being woven into the fabric of the nation. Woven in to the very means by which it is appropriate to create society absent abstractions. Set entirely on the premise that to reject absolute truth, and to deny the infallibility of any ideology, is to enable a flexibility and openness to change that, in his view, had enabled the American project to thrive.

Obama recognised a ‘fundamental humility’ in this particular reading of the Constitution and the American democratic process. He conceded “the rejection of absolutism implicit in our constitutional structure may sometimes make our politics seem unprincipled” – and such a conception “seems to champion compromise, modesty, and muddling through.” But he contended it is a mistake to assume “that democratic deliberation requires abandonment of our highest ideals, or of a commitment to the common good.”²²⁴ Instead, it is a system that “has encouraged the very

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Sojourners, "Obama's Sojourners Speech".

²²² Obama, *Audacity*. p. 93

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid. p. 94

process of information gathering, analysis, and argument that allows us to make better, if not perfect, choices, not only about the means to our ends but also about the ends themselves.”²²⁵ For shapers of foreign policy, this notion of matching means to ends might resonate in respect to the goals of formulating grand strategy.²²⁶ Obama showed himself as being open to a pragmatist mode of thought that carried implications for how he would approach matters of determining the direction of America’s foreign policy infrastructure. This is a quintessential notion of pragmatic experimentation that once again James would recognise. It also points to Obama carrying a reading of the Constitution that embodies a pragmatic mode of thought. His version of America is one where it seeks to use a process of experimentation and inquiry in order to achieve better results, in order to constantly pursue the process of *perfection*. Obama argued that “whether we are for or against affirmative action, for or against prayer in schools, we must test out our ideals, vision, and values against the realities of a common life, so that over time they may be refined, discarded, or replaced by new ideals, sharper visions, deeper values.”²²⁷

===

Emphasising the importance of democracy in fostering shared understandings, Bernstein wrote that “the strength of the pragmatists is the recognition that both individual liberty and active communal life are essential for a democratic polity.”²²⁸ Again, consciously or not, Obama echoed this mode of pragmatist thinking. The “realities of a common life” are guided by the Constitution which, he summated “envisions a road map by which we marry passion to reason, the ideal of individual freedom to the demands of community.”²²⁹

In a 2007 interview, Obama told Ryan Lizza that he was constantly trying to “balance a hard head with a soft heart.”²³⁰ This ongoing tightrope walk was central to Obama’s worldview. The measured search for a mediation of conflicting ideas permeates so much of his writing and speeches. This chapter has repeatedly emphasized how this process of marrying passion to reason - of balancing a hard head with a soft heart - weighs heavily on Obama, and it is here that we begin to see the outer limits of that struggle, and arrive at the ideological implications of a specific breaking point.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ D. W. Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?," *Foreign Affairs* July/August (2011).

²²⁷ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 94-95

²²⁸ Bernstein, "Community in the Pragmatic Tradition." p. 152

²²⁹ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 95

²³⁰ R. Lizza, "The Agitator: Barack Obama's Unlikely Political Education," *The New Republic* 19 March (2007), <https://newrepublic.com/article/64660/the-agitator>.

In a significant passage in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama wrestled with the stain of slavery and its inherent place within the founding of the nation. He argued that he was “too invested in what this country has become, too committed to its institutions, its beauty, and even its ugliness, to focus entirely on the circumstances of its birth” but he maintained that “neither can I brush aside the magnitude of the injustice done, or erase the ghosts of generations past, or ignore the open wound, the aching spirit, that ails this country still.”²³¹ And it is here that he realized those aspirations to escape contingency, to leave history in his wake. It is where he broke from the sceptical anti-foundational spirit which grounded so much of his thought, and leapt most visibly into the realm of the absolute. In a fascinating passage, he ruminated:

*The best I can do in the face of our history is remind myself that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty. The hard, cold facts remind me that it was unbending idealists like William Lloyd Garrison who first sounded the clarion call for justice; that it was slaves and former slaves, men like Denmark Vesey and Frederick Douglass and women like Harriet Tubman, who recognized power would concede nothing without a fight. It was the wild-eyed prophecies of John Brown, his willingness to spill blood and not just words on behalf of his visions, that helped force the issue of a nation half slave and half free. I'm reminded that deliberation and the constitutional order may sometimes be the luxury of the powerful, and that it has sometimes been the cranks, the zealots, the prophets, the agitators, and the unreasonable – in other words, the absolutists – that have fought for a new order. Knowing this, I can't summarily dismiss those possessed of similar certainty today – the antiabortion activist who pickets my town hall meeting, or the animal rights activist who raids a laboratory – no matter how deeply I disagree with their views. I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty – for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute.*²³²

This last sentence offers perhaps the most telling insight into the complexity and ongoing dialectical nature of his thought. It demonstrates a keen awareness that even the self-conscious wisdom of uncertainty that abounds with fealty to pragmatic deliberative thinking can offer no recourse to the sometimes urgent hope and moral clarity that ascends with absolutism.

²³¹ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 96-97

²³² *Ibid.* p. 97

In this moment of confusion, Obama turned to a true titan of American history for guidance. He wrote “I’m left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation.”²³³ He traced the virtue for which Americans remember him, “the firmness and depth of his convictions – his unyielding opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand.” But Obama saw past this to note that Lincoln’s was a presidency “guided by a practicality that would distress us today.” He chronicled Lincoln’s Civil War efforts in bargaining with the Confederacy to uphold the Union without war, changing generals and strategies throughout the war, and a willingness to “stretch the Constitution to the breaking point in order to see the war through to a successful conclusion.” It is the image of a President – and a national icon - guided not by stringency of ideals, but instead solely by practical considerations. Obama, however, rebuffed this conception, arguing instead his belief that “for Lincoln, it was never a matter of abandoning conviction for the sake of expediency. Rather, it was a matter of maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas – that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side; and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence.”²³⁴ For observers of U.S. foreign policy, they will recognize this dilemma as forming the core of the nation’s efforts in world affairs. The competing impulses between doing more and doing less, imposing its will and standing back disinterested. Obama’s pragmatism in foreign policy will be seen throughout the remainder of this thesis as existing within this dilemma, seeking to manage - just as with William James’ original intention for pragmatism - the ‘interminable’ disputes concerning America’s role in the world.

Obama’s is a prescient rendering of an idea which literary scholar John Burt has encapsulated in his term “tragic pragmatism.” In his ambitious book, *Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism*, Burt offers a detailed insight into the means by which Lincoln navigated the stark political and moral challenges of his time.²³⁵ For Burt, “the exigencies of history unfold new demands” out of concepts to which one is committed (in Lincoln’s case, the promises of the Founding Fathers). While “these demands are imperative and absolute,” Burt argues for the notion of a “tragic pragmatism” in the idea that “we are also required to practice the art of the possible in realizing them, always wagering that our compromises will not somehow compromise them.”²³⁶

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 97-98

²³⁵ J. Burt, *Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

²³⁶ Ibid. Pp. 4-5

For Burt's Lincoln there is a deep sense of tragedy in the recognition of human frailty, in recognizing the limitations which can render human decisions as moral failures. Burt notes that "the irony of history is that it turns on moral wagers whose wisdom cannot be clear when they are made, moral wagers that risk not only one's outcome but also one's moral standing."²³⁷ Indeed he argues that this mind-set allowed Lincoln to view his:

*Most important moral acts as a kind of wager, a kind of leap of faith taken in the face of the absurd. Crucial moral acts like emancipation are made in the face of what might be crippling doubt, in the face of a sense that one's act might be impure as to motives, as to means, and to ends, and might leave one in a world as fallen as the one in which one is already entangled. One does the right as one sees it, knowing that there will be unanticipated consequences, and that one will still have to face those down, and knowing also that that act will leave one still as human, still as fallen, as one ever was.*²³⁸

It is a philosophy of doubt carried while still being cautiously open to the hopeful promises of certainty. Contained within "tragic pragmatism," is the notion of allowing for compromise to achieve specific ends while never compromising the ends themselves. Tragedy lies in the uncertainty with which one can perceive one's actions as serving those ends.

Obama found great value in Lincoln's example. He contended:

*That self-awareness, that humility, led Lincoln to advance his principles through the framework of our democracy, through speeches and debate, through the reasoned arguments that might appeal to the better angels of our nature. It was this same humility that allowed him, once the conversation between North and South broke down and war became inevitable, to resist the temptation to demonize the fathers and sons who did battle on the other side, or to diminish the horror of war, no matter how just it might be.*²³⁹

In Obama's telling, Lincoln was a figure who embraced and embodied the ideals laid forth by the institutional structures of the American project. By keeping true to those ideals, he was able to maintain the deliberative imperative ingrained in the founding documents. It also demonstrated the act of maintaining the ambitions to such an imperative while accepting its limitations.

²³⁷ Ibid. p. 92

²³⁸ Ibid. p. 680

²³⁹ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 98

Obama conceded that “the blood of slaves reminds us that our pragmatism can sometimes be moral cowardice.” There is always a cost for any ideological perspective. For Obama, “Lincoln, and those buried at Gettysburg, remind us that we should pursue our own absolute truths only if we acknowledge that there may be a terrible price to pay.”²⁴⁰ An acknowledgment that the outcome from an action may differ from that which is desired. It can never be pre-ordained. But it does not stop – sometimes, must not stop – one from pursuing such a course.

In *The Long Game*, Derek Chollet, who served in Obama’s administration as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, argues that “the test of leadership is choosing the right time to push more chips on the table.” Under this rubric he sees Obama not as a bluffer, but instead as “a calculating gambler willing to make big bets.”²⁴¹ This speaks to the notion expressed by Burt of tragic pragmatism’s relationship to making “moral wagers,” - that “leap of faith taken in the face of the absurd.” Menand used similar nomenclature, in arguing that pragmatism holds beliefs to be “just bets on the future.”²⁴² The tragic pragmatism passed down from Lincoln to Obama decrees that bets on the future must be made only in tandem with the readiness to accept their failure.

Obama’s reverence for Lincoln is storied. The points of comparison between them are legion: two lawyers, going from Illinois state politics to the White House. Ascending from underprivileged backgrounds in the obscurity of the hinterlands, to the very zenith of power. Obama announced his candidacy for President, just as Lincoln had, in the shadow of the Illinois Old State Capitol.²⁴³ And it was in emulation of his hero’s train ride from Springfield to Washington D.C. that Obama made the same journey 148 years later prior to his inauguration. The front of later editions of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s titanic *Team of Rivals* is adorned with a declaration that it is “the book that inspired Barack Obama,” and quotes him in reviewing it as “a remarkable study in leadership.”²⁴⁴ Sales ploy or not, his appreciation for the tome is clear. After reading the book Obama, then a Senator, rang Goodwin and requested a meeting with her to discuss Lincoln.²⁴⁵ In an interview with Goodwin at the end of his time as president he reflected on his fondness for Lincoln, proclaiming that “there’s no one who I believe has ever captured the soul of America more profoundly than Abraham Lincoln has.”²⁴⁶

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 221

²⁴² Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*. p. 440

²⁴³ A. Nagourney, and Zeleny, J., "Obama Formally Enters Presidential Race," *The New York Times* 11 February Issue (2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/us/politics/11obama.html>.

²⁴⁴ D. K. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

²⁴⁵ "Barack Obama and Doris Kearns Goodwin: The Ultimate Exit Interview," *Vanity Fair* November Issue (2016), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/09/barack-obama-doris-kearns-goodwin-interview>.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

At the opening of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in April 2005, Obama posed the question, how is it, that “a man given to depression and wracked with self-doubt, might come to represent so much of who we are as a people, and so much of what we aspire to be?” He argued for Lincoln as being a vision of self-creation, both of the individual self and of the American nation, representing a “fundamental element of the American character,” representing a belief that “we can constantly remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams.” But for Obama, it was something altogether different that separates Lincoln from the other giants of American history. He highlighted his character, as being “not a perfect man, nor a perfect president.” Indeed “he wasn’t immune to political considerations; his temperament could be indecisive and morose” but importantly, Obama argued that:

Despite these imperfections, despite his fallibility...indeed, perhaps because of a painful self-awareness of his own failings, etched in every crease of his face and reflected in those haunted eyes...because of this essential humanity of his, when it came time to confront the greatest moral challenge this nation has ever faced, Lincoln did not flinch. He did not equivocate or duck or pass the challenge on to future generations. He did not demonize the fathers and sons who did battle on the other side, nor seek to diminish the terrible costs of his war. In the midst of slavery's dark storm and the complexities of governing a house divided, he kept his moral compass pointed firm and true.”²⁴⁷

For Obama, this aspect of Lincoln’s character - “which makes tough choices, and speaks the truth when least convenient, and acts while still admitting doubt” – is something the American character should embrace. Obama and Burt are in concert on this idea, the latter arguing that Lincoln “offers an example of moral depth and subtlety that is hard to find elsewhere in American politics.”²⁴⁸ Indeed, in his ability to “balance a prophetic sense of ethical mission with a tragic sense of the ironies of politics and history” Lincoln “provides a model for moral agency in a complex world in which one must make one’s way among various half-understood alternatives, none of which leaves one’s hands very clean.”²⁴⁹ Here we can make sense of Obama feeling as though he is “left with Lincoln.” The sixteenth president was Obama’s last recourse for an American moral heroism, founded in complexity and depth he deemed unparalleled in the history of the republic.

²⁴⁷ Obama Speeches, "Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Remarks by Senator Barack Obama," Obamaspeeches.com, <http://obamaspeeches.com/012-Abraham-Lincoln-Presidential-Library-and-Museum-Obama-Speech.htm>.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.; Burt, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict*. p. 24-25

²⁴⁹ *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict*. p. 25

Significantly, for the purposes of this thesis, Bart Schultz argues that for Obama “whatever his fondness for admiration of Gandhi and King, it is the rhetoric of Lincoln that matters most, and moreover the rhetoric of Lincoln is the rhetoric of pragmatism.”²⁵⁰ Philosopher Hilary Putnam notes “that one can be both fallibilistic and antiskeptical is perhaps *the* basic insight of American pragmatism.”²⁵¹ In Lincoln’s words, Obama finds the means of understanding how one can act with the humility that accepts doubt, yet which is willing to take action aimed at advancing what one believes to be right. When one must take a wager on a moral absolute, it cannot be shied away from. Yet, it is this recognition of the importance of humility and doubt which ties Obama’s thinking so profoundly to pragmatism’s distrust of absolutism.

It is this Lincolnian tragic pragmatism that we will find most pertinent in foreign policy terms. The pragmatism focused on forging common ground, on deliberation, and on experimentalism remains important, and will be present. But it is the imperative of balancing that “sense of ethical mission” with the “tragic sense of the ironies of politics and history” – in contending with the violence and cruelty of war in foreign policy that *tragic* pragmatism emerges into prominence. Obama discovered that making “one’s way among various half-understood alternatives, none of which leaves one’s hands very clean” is an unavoidable aspect of being President.

===

At the close of his address to the Sojourners conference, Obama reflected on a letter he had received from a member of his electorate. A doctor from Illinois had taken issue with the language on Obama’s campaign website. He felt the language impugned those who held anti-abortion beliefs as being ideologues “driven by perverse desires to inflict suffering on women,” a notion which the doctor protested was not fair-minded. Obama quoted the doctor as writing: “You know that we enter times that are fraught with possibilities for good and for harm, times when we are struggling to make sense of a common polity in the context of plurality, when we are unsure of what grounds we have for making any claims that involve others ... I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words.”²⁵² Obama lingered on the phrase “fair-minded words.” He suggested that it is people such as the doctor who are “looking for a deeper, fuller conversation about religion in this country” who “may not change their positions,” but

²⁵⁰ Schultz, “Obama’s Political Philosophy.” P. 171

²⁵¹ H. Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995). p. 21

²⁵² Sojourners, “Obama’s Sojourners Speech”.

crucially, “they are willing to listen and learn from those who are willing to speak in fair-minded words.”²⁵³ They thus offer the potential for the deliberation and search for consensus that Obama craves so much. “Fair-minded words” is reflective of the notion that, even where there is disagreement, a debate can be had that prioritises discourse starting at the point of acceptance of differing perspectives. From here you might be able to reach a point where you can find common ground. Fair-minded words emphasise the value of dialogue, of creating a space where competing ideas can come together. It is a notion that encompasses Habermas’ search for communicative action. It reaches for Rawls’ “overlapping consensus.” It shares in the communitarian’s curation of shared values, the community organizer’s drive for shared commitments. Above all, it breathes in Dewey’s democratic ideal. Envisaging a society primed toward the navigation of multiplicity, the ends of which are tied up with that very pursuit itself.

The importance of pragmatism in Obama’s thought is evident within all of this. It takes the shape of fomenting a way of thinking which never presumes to have the *one* correct answer, *one* correct vision for the world. Vitally for the purposes of this thesis, even if this notion of “fair-minded words” or indeed of coming together for deliberation and consensus is not necessarily an obvious means by which to conduct many aspects of foreign policy, it is still a mindset that provokes an awareness that other possibilities exist and should not be closed off. There remains emphasis on a constant process to change how things are, a constant awareness of the contingency of choices, and openness to deeply held convictions being challenged.

Crucially, in the case of Obama, this does not preclude the aspiration towards certainties, or rather, the belief in a fundamental universality in justice and progress. But instead, it helps guide this belief and this hope, in a fallibilistic, humble manner. It is in fact the process of turning this strong belief over to process itself. Morris Dickstein helpfully notes that in the milieu of competing philosophical factions, pragmatism “has come to be seen as an American alternative, an escape from the abstraction of theory and the abyss of nihilism. We might describe it as constructive scepticism. If liberal politicians and intellectuals share one thing at the moment, it is the loss of old certainties. Pragmatism today is less an attack on the foundations of knowledge, as it was portrayed by its early critics, than a search for a method when the foundations have already crumbled.”²⁵⁴

It starts from a place that confronts the absence of certainties, but rather than following the trail of deconstruction down to meaningless solipsism, it embraces the possibilities offered to construct something new. The emphasis on the method of pragmatism is crucial for Obama’s search for a

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Dickstein, "Introduction: Pragmatism Then and Now." p. 16

place to stand between the sandy shores of doubt and the hard rocks of certainty. Pragmatists know, all is transitory, all is contingent. All is open to the wind of change, the waves of new realities. But crucially, all the while this also necessitates the acknowledgement that while rocks can erode and be weathered down, sand and grit can also be shaped and compressed over time. They can be formed into something more solid.

This chapter has sought to develop an understanding of pragmatism not as an ideology which dictates the drive to specific outcomes, but instead it is an intellectual framework which shapes its holder's approach to knowledge, truth, and ideology itself. It has become apparent that the means by which Obama understands politics, philosophy, American history, and democracy coheres with pragmatisms of James, Dewey, Rorty, Bernstein and others. But significantly, the profound influence of Lincoln on his thinking looms large. Through Burt's conception especially, it serves as an addendum to his pragmatism. It is a particularly poignant reminder of the 'tragic' element which recognises the very limits even of pragmatism itself. It allows for the cautious acceptance that sometimes the pursuit of an absolute is necessary, but tempers this pursuit with the pragmatist sensibilities of scepticism, fallibility, and contingency.

It is a complicating factor, but his thinking was no less coherent for this consciousness. Instead it serves to reinforce the fitting - albeit imperfect - conception of Obama the pragmatist. This Lincolnian pragmatism ultimately allowed Obama to convey any desire for universals in a pragmatist framework. Pragmatism is thus viewed as a handbrake on the wheels of ideology. This is thus an important indicator of how we should treat the influence of pragmatism on Obama's thought. It is the way of thinking, not the thought itself. This might appear obvious, but it is an important distinction to make.

The remainder of this thesis will examine Obama's approach to specific foreign policy events throughout his presidency. It will focus more readily on key questions of what it means to pursue a foreign policy which embraces a rejection of the absolute, and which accepts contingency despite aspirations for the universal. What does it mean to recognise the need to make difficult choices, and yet to acknowledge the frailties exposed in making such choices? Will pragmatism and foreign policy correspond in the manner suggested throughout this chapter? All these elements reflect foundational aspects of Obama's complex intellectual make-up, and thus to analyse his foreign policy record must consider the presence of such an intellectual architecture in playing at least a nominal role in its formation. In asking these questions, we are implicitly seeking a means by which we can recognise such a diverse stream of ideas as forming any sense of coherency. For now,

pragmatism presents itself - as James initially established it to be all those years ago - as a means of stepping through the mire of conflicting paradigms.

Chapter Two

Not on reason but on passion

In the early hours of 18 December 2011, the last remaining U.S. forces left Iraq. In a convoy of about 110 vehicles they crossed over the border into Kuwait, leaving behind nine years of war, the death of nearly 4500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, all at a cost of close to \$1 trillion.²⁵⁵ There would be no triumphant ceremony greeting their departure, no banner declaring 'mission accomplished.' They slipped out quietly into the dead of the night, in the vain hope that they were also leaving peace behind.

While the exit had been nominally agreed by his predecessor in tandem with his Iraqi counterpart, its full-scale implementation was the fulfillment of a campaign promise made by Obama.²⁵⁶ It was the realization of his deeply held conviction of the importance of removing the U.S. from its failed war in Iraq. Obama had been bequeathed the opportunity for an exit he sorely wanted, and he took it with few doubts. Exiting Iraq could allow for the desired redirection of attention elsewhere, and in particular, to a conflict which had co-existed alongside Iraq for that war's entire duration; the war in Afghanistan.

===

On October 2nd 2002, Illinois State Senator Barack Obama, as a last minute stand-in, addressed an anti-war rally in Chicago's Federal Plaza.²⁵⁷ The Bush administration had identified Saddam Hussein and his Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programme as an existential threat to world order. He thus exemplified the kind of threat that must be pre-emptively confronted in the post-9/11 world. In his speech, Obama decried the nation's apparent headlong rush into war in Iraq. Seven years later,

²⁵⁵ T. Arango, and Schmidt, M., S., "Last Convoy of American Troops Leaves Iraq," *The New York Times* 18 December Issue (2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/19/world/middleeast/last-convoy-of-american-troops-leaves-iraq.html>.; Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones," Watson Institute, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2019/direct-war-death-toll-2001-801000>.

²⁵⁶ The George W. Bush White House, "President Bush and Iraq Prime Minister Maliki Sign the Strategic Framework Agreement and Security Agreement," news release, December 14, 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/12/20081214-2.html?fbclid=IwAR130GPH8SI0r164fIGximXBGCSe3qII-zM1q8SKKVM-K7aSiiEliq100NU>.

²⁵⁷ Milne, *Worldmaking*. p. 457; NPR, "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War," *NPR* 20 January (2009), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469>.

Hussein was gone but the U.S. remained in Iraq, and Obama was now Commander-in-Chief charged with presiding over a war he had virulently opposed. But he was also charged with presiding over the war which he had argued Iraq detracted from. The 2001 offensive in Afghanistan was itself the direct response to the events of 9/11. The ruling Taliban regime had offered sanctuary to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda as it planned its attack, and *Operation Enduring Freedom* was deemed the appropriate recourse to eliminate the conditions for such a plot to be hatched again.²⁵⁸

For his part, from that 2002 address onwards, Obama continually expressed a belief in the war in Afghanistan as being important for the cause of American security. It was a war of necessity. The war in Iraq, on the other hand, was based on a flight of fancy, bearing no relation to the interests of America. This was a war of choice. This distinction between wars finding a basis in either choice or necessity was most prominently articulated by Richard Haass, but it was a notion that found its way into the lexicon of discussions concerning the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.²⁵⁹

This chapter will examine this dynamic in Obama's conceptualization of the wars. In tracing these alternate visions we can establish how Obama conceived of American power itself and what its role in the world should be. In considering the ways in which Obama differentiated between the wars, we can trace an ideological architecture which delineates between the abstract and the material in making foreign policy choices.

The chapter begins by tracing the mindset in U.S. foreign policy which led to the Iraq war, and which ultimately enabled Obama's ascendance. There will then be an examination of perhaps Obama's most telling - though frequently overlooked - statement on foreign policy, a chapter from *The Audacity of Hope*, which offers insights into his broad perspectives on foreign policy held prior to his election. His approach to the Afghanistan policy review process will then be discussed. The attempts he made to chart a course between two opposing policy options will be evaluated alongside the question of how he ultimately made a choice which appeared to be against his instincts pertaining to American overseas engagement. The chapter will emphasise the importance of Obama's purposeful delineation of necessity and choice in employing American power. Obama's determining of *necessary* shaped his approach to the world and his perspective on war, peace, and America in the world.

²⁵⁸ A. O'Connell, B., "Moving Mountains: Cultural Friction in the Afghanistan War," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. A. O'Connell, B. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017). pp. 1-2

²⁵⁹ R. N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*, First Paperback Edition ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010). pp. xxi-xxiv

Obama's 2002 speech outlined his opposition to the Iraq war in nuanced and defined terms. Although speaking at an anti-war rally, he went to great lengths to emphasize that he himself was no pacifist. He maintained that he was "not opposed to all wars" but instead, he was opposed to a "dumb war," a "rash war." He termed this particular war sought by the Bush administration as "a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics."²⁶⁰ He later wrote in *The Audacity of Hope* that "the administration's rationales for war were flimsy and ideologically driven."²⁶¹ This statement and his general opposition to the Iraq War portrayed a crucial aspect of Obama's thinking on foreign policy, war, and peace. While recognizing the abhorrent nature of Hussein's regime, this for him was not itself enough to necessitate action. Instead, Obama emphasized how "Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States or to his neighbours, that the Iraqi military is a fraction of its former strength, 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."²⁶²

In his speech Obama offered a far-sighted warning of the potential disasters war in Iraq could unleash.²⁶³ That Obama proved prescient was a tragedy for Iraq, the wider Middle East, and the United States. Yet it would prove beneficial for Obama as he positioned himself, against Hillary Clinton and John Edwards in the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primary; a dissenting voice against the foreign policy failings of a generation of political figures. Obama rode the wave of opposition in painting Senator Clinton's vote for the war as a sign of poor judgment.²⁶⁴

The push to war was, Obama argued, "the cynical attempt by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and other armchair, weekend warriors in this administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and hardships borne."²⁶⁵ Obama's focus on Perle and Wolfowitz is significant. It reflected a broad frustration at members of the Bush team, but also betrayed a deeper conviction against the philosophy which animated their calls for war. Much has been written on the role of neoconservatism in the younger Bush's foreign policy output. That ground does not require covering here in close detail, but it is useful to recognize the degree to

²⁶⁰ NPR, "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War".

²⁶¹ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 294

²⁶² NPR, "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War".

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ R Simon, "Obama Beats Hillary over Head with Iraq," *Politico* 31 January (2008), <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/01/obama-beats-hillary-over-head-with-iraq-008248>.

²⁶⁵ NPR, "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War".

which Obama's enmity for the ideological assumptions of neoconservatism illuminate important aspects of his own worldview.

Neoconservatism is broadly an ideological movement with roots in an anti-Soviet left which transitioned rightward as it began to emphasize a strong sense of duty to advance a core of universal morals. The Iraq War has taken its place at the zenith of the neoconservative movement given the rhetoric of regime change and fostering of liberal democracy which drove it. Yet, it was a culmination of a process which had taken place over the course of a turbulent decade in the aftermath of the Cold War. The post-Cold War world became a landscape ripe for those determined to shape it under their terms of what America's role and place in the world should be.

The uncertainty led to varied attempts at defining what the new order would look like. Columnist Charles Krauthammer identified a 'Unipolar moment,' whereby America now stood alone as a superpower with the world laid out before it – to be shaped in ways previously untold.²⁶⁶ Robert Kaplan wrote of "the coming anarchy," a world torn asunder by overpopulation.²⁶⁷ Samuel Huntington famously wrote of "the clash of civilizations" where the core assumptions across societies would rupture based on civilizational differences.²⁶⁸ Huntington however was writing in response to perhaps the most significant of these post-Cold War hypotheses. Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History' hypothesis advanced a scintillating antidote to the uncertainty of the era.²⁶⁹ Finding roots in the dialectical philosophy of Hegel, and a particular reading thereof by French-Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève, Fukuyama embraced the notion that actualization of the principles of the French Revolution had heralded the achievement of an idealized end state, where the contradictions of society had been resolved.²⁷⁰ An achievement of absolute self-consciousness would be an *end of history*.²⁷¹ As such, Fukuyama advanced a notion that liberal democracy was the ultimate and triumphant form of human societal organisation, and the conclusion of the Cold War in favour of the United States served to highlight this.²⁷²

Fukuyama was part of the neoconservative movement which found particular cause in stepping into the breach and advancing these new certainties. The development of neoconservatism fits neatly in to the same philosophical tectonics underscoring that intellectual maelstrom behind the culture

²⁶⁶ C. Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990).

²⁶⁷ R. D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic* February 1994 Issue (1994), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>.

²⁶⁸ S. Huntington, P., "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs*, no. Summer 1993 Issue (1993).

²⁶⁹ F. Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest* No. 16, no. Summer 1989 (1989).

²⁷⁰ L. Menand, "Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History," *The New Yorker* September 3 Issue (2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>.

²⁷¹ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992). pp. 59-68; "The End of History?." pp. 4-5

²⁷² "The End of History?."

wars, and which pitted opposing conceptions of truth, meaning, and certainty against one another.²⁷³ Varied in its traditions, historian Justin Vaïsse suggests that Neoconservatism resembles more a “tendency” or “persuasion” that forms part of an intellectual outlook, or school of thought.²⁷⁴ He suggests the movement developed through three distinct ages, culminating its 1990s manifestation – the “neocons” - that broadly remains intact today.²⁷⁵ This latest age of neoconservatives would codify their ideology into specific foreign policy prescriptions. Vaïsse details that:

*They attached great importance to military superiority and to the democratic principle: America must be strong and ready to act in order to shape the world according to its political and security interests, which sometimes include help in spreading democracy. In their view, multinational organizations such as the United Nations possess neither moral nor democratic legitimacy, nor do they have the strength necessary to ensure world order and defend freedom. Only America can and must meet these challenges.*²⁷⁶

The prime mover in this respect was think tank the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) whose statement of principles, published in June 1997, outlined its aims, among other things, to increase defense spending, to challenge regimes hostile to U.S. interests and values, to “promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad,” and crucially, to “accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.” They termed this “a Reaganite policy of military strength of moral clarity” and declared it “necessary if the United States is to build on the successes of this past century and to ensure our security and our greatness in the next.”²⁷⁷ Signatories to the statement of principles was not restricted to intellectuals such as Fukuyama, but it also boasted key figures of what became the Bush administration, and ultimately, key architects of the Iraq War such as Eliot Cohen, Scooter Libby, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and the focus of Obama’s criticism, Paul Wolfowitz.²⁷⁸ It was their vision of neoconservatism that Obama set himself so firmly against.

²⁷³ J. Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, trans. A. Goldhammer (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010). pp. 6-8

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 4

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 6-13

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 12

²⁷⁷ Project For The New American Century, "Statement of Principles," <https://web.archive.org/web/20050205041635/http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Vaïsse suggests that “one can see neoconservatism as an avatar of American messianism, as the expression of an underlying nationalism that has been present since the country was born, a reincarnation of Wilsonianism in a new, more martial form.”²⁷⁹ Neoconservatism, he contends “is fundamentally a manifestation of patriotism or even nationalism.”²⁸⁰ In the sense that - even as a fragmented and varied movement – neoconservatism found at its core an unyielding sense of American nationalism, it fit squarely in to the orthodox aspect of James Davison Hunter’s culture wars dichotomy. It continually reinvented itself as a means of re-affirming the need to defend and maintain orthodoxies: the moral character, the values of humanity, and the sense of national greatness that it found in America.²⁸¹ It is important to recognize this as the *ideological* worldview it was. It was primed on a “blind faith” in the truth of its convictions.²⁸²

Obama’s opposition to the ideological nature of the Iraq War is important. Undergirding his consternation at “a war based not on reason but on passion” lay a web of philosophical influences sketched in the preceding chapter. Philosophical pragmatism and its related impulses reflected an animosity to abstractions, an aversion to basing decisions upon an imposition of ideas into reality with which they do not fit.

Russell Burgos traces the means by which neoconservatives and regime change hawks worked through the 1990s to change conventional thinking with regards to policy in Iraq.²⁸³ Burgos argues that “the neoconservative’s real power derived from their ability to redefine what Iraq meant for U.S. security.”²⁸⁴ He places his argument in the context of the concept of “Ideapolitik,” defined as “political competition to define the substantive meaning of events and those policy responses appropriate for dealing with them.”²⁸⁵ He discusses a notion that policy making is a “struggle over alternate realities” in which “rival policy entrepreneurs compete to define the policy narrative – to impart social meaning to facts.”²⁸⁶ This comports significantly with William James’ perceptions of *truth* and how it is constructed. Burgos notes that the epistemic communities which seek to impart this social meaning comprised, in the case of Iraq, “a loosely allied group of defense intellectuals in Washington D.C., think tanks, and hawkish journalists at national newspapers.”²⁸⁷ Crucially “producing new policy ideas is relatively easy” for groups such as these, as “they do not face the

²⁷⁹ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*. p. 278

²⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 278

²⁸¹ Ibid. p. 278-279

²⁸² Ibid. p. 13

²⁸³ R. Burgos, A., "Origins of Regime Change: "Ideapolitik" on the Long Road to Baghdad, 1993-2000," *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008).

²⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 226

²⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 227

²⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 232

²⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 233

same constraints that politicians do and so risk little by floating proposals that may fail. Successful ideas, however, can prove highly influential when they reshape elites' understandings of what a problem means and how it can be solved."²⁸⁸ In other words, theirs are ideas which are not tested by reality, their ideas remain ideological in the sense that they are not curated to respond to the demands of real-world necessity.

Those in favour of ousting Saddam Hussein ultimately succeeded in changing the discourse which surrounded the issue of regime change in Iraq. They sought to degrade the notion that the "containment" policy as pursued by President Bill Clinton was a viable approach to Hussein. Burgos argues that:

*Given that regime change was the default understanding of appropriate U.S. strategy for Iraq, that it had supporters across the political spectrum, and that Saddam Hussein was presumed to have an active unconventional weapons program, it is unsurprising that the Bush administration undertook action to topple the Ba'athist regime. Saddam Hussein's ouster was, after all, a given in elite foreign policy discourse by 2001.*²⁸⁹

This moment was, in essence, the embodiment of a D.C. Beltway establishment reinforcing its own wisdom by steadily converging on a stream of ever-narrowing perspectives. Obama and his administration later developed consternation at this self-reinforcing echo-chamber. They perceived a foreign policy establishment relieved from its senses of reality when making policy. Burgos contends that "the new strategic narrative" - as pushed by the likes Perle, Wolfowitz, and PNAC - "blended a rejection of realism with an uncritical promotion of American exceptionalism and an abiding faith in the utility of military force, leading inexorably to the conclusion that America was ordained to liberate Iraq."²⁹⁰

In his book *Daydream Believers* journalist Fred Kaplan also traces the development of a foreign policy mindset which assumed a supreme confidence in U.S. capabilities to effect change around the world and to live up to its post-Cold War role as sole superpower, possessing the ability to do "pretty much as they pleased" and an "inclination to devise policies based on the premise of omnipotence."²⁹¹ This confidence was accompanied by developments in weapons capabilities and strategies – the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) – which promised enhanced missile precision,

²⁸⁸ Ibid. pp. 233-234

²⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 254

²⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 239

²⁹¹ F. Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008). p. 1-2

and the ability for rapid deployment of force which would render opposition minimal and the potential for America to defeat enemies and shape the world in its favour, limitless.²⁹²

Burgos notes that “the comparative ease with which the Taliban regime was toppled likely validated the idea that the so-called ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ and military preeminence meant that the use of force was less costly than it had been in the past.”²⁹³ This was a belief he argues that “would be consistent with neoconservatives’ strategic vision,” that which was clearly outlined in PNAC’s ‘Statement of Principles.’²⁹⁴ Significantly, Stephen Wertheim, writing more specifically on the rise of liberal interventionism through the 1990s, demonstrates how that emerging movement worked in tandem with those attitudes “consistent with neoconservatives’ strategic vision,” to further shape attitudes to American power in Washington:

*Humanitarian interventionism nevertheless facilitated the war, mainly through the assumptions it primed politicians and the public to hold. Since the 1990s, humanitarian interventionists assumed U.S. military force could reliably transform societies in those societies’ own interests. The world they depicted was riddled with enemies of humanity; it needed more U.S. intervention, not less; and interventions would succeed if willed, postconflict conditions posing no obstacle to a mission’s fulfilment or its morality. It is impossible to know how far these assumptions permitted the Iraq War to go forward, but they may have hollowed out what strong dissent would have otherwise existed. Through their prism, the Iraq War looked, if not virtuous, then at least not worth protesting strenuously.*²⁹⁵

This mindset revealed in its certainty of American greatness and the timeless nature of its absolute conception of morality. It carried hostility to contingency. It held truth to be permanent and crucially, to have been revealed to, or discovered untouched, by those shapers of U.S. foreign policy. Obama was in many respects pushing against the tide at this point in U.S. history. His calls to “contain” Hussein in his 2002 speech were already predated by the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act, which formally declared U.S. policy in Iraq to be premised upon the goal of regime change.²⁹⁶ Neoconservatism, liberal internationalism, and U.S. military pre-eminence had become a dominant part of the assumptions which underwrote the foreign policy landscape.

²⁹² Ibid. pp 1-50

²⁹³ Burgos, "Origins of Regime Change: "Ideapolitik" on the Long Road to Baghdad, 1993-2000." P. 254

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ S. Wertheim, "A Solution from Hell: The United States and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism, 1991-2003," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, no. 3-4 (2010). p. 165

²⁹⁶ Burgos, "Origins of Regime Change: "Ideapolitik" on the Long Road to Baghdad, 1993-2000." p. 251

The decision to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein, with the benefit of hindsight, was unwise – to put it lightly. But Burgos ably demonstrates how the ideas which fueled the Iraq War had become so ingrained in conventional Washington thinking, that it appeared an almost logical step to make. It became a *reasonable* course of action. In the Senate, the vote to authorize the use of military force passed 77 to 23, with high profile Democratic Party figures such as Max Baucus, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Tom Daschle, John Edwards, and John Kerry voting in favour.²⁹⁷ This ultimately allowed Obama’s clear-headed disavowal of the Iraq War – an otherwise ordinary rejection of sub-optimal policy – to appear both wise and brave. The bar was set extremely low, but Obama was among the few who cleared it. The rejection of this myopia over the U.S.’s use of force would instead speak to a key element of his foreign policy outlook.

The prospect of being able to advance universalized conceptions of the good in Iraq had proven tantalizing to the architects of the war. The expected results, however, remained out of reach. Wertheim writes that “over the past decade the norm of humanitarian intervention briefly guided by dreams of U.S. military invulnerability, advanced beyond the ability to undertake the action it prescribed.”²⁹⁸ Kaplan emphasized this point too in quoting the Bush Administration’s 2006 NSS as declaring “we seek to shape the world, not merely be shaped by it; to influence events for the better instead of being at their mercy.”²⁹⁹ But Kaplan scathingly responded:

To a degree this statement was a truism, a defining feature of a global power. But pressed too far, as Bush and his top aides tended to do, it verged on not merely hubris but fantasy, a mistaken notion that the end of the Cold War left America in control of the world – when, in fact, it left much of the world beyond anyone’s control. And when America’s leaders acted as if things were otherwise, as they often did in the first years of the twenty-first century, they only trumpeted their reduced powers – and as result, they weakened their nation still further.³⁰⁰

===

²⁹⁷ The Washington Post, "Senate Roll Call: Iraq Resolution," *The Washington Post* 11 October (2002), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/senaterollcall_iraq101002.htm.

²⁹⁸ Wertheim, "A Solution from Hell: The United States and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism, 1991-2003." p. 167

²⁹⁹ Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power*. P. 188

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

On the campaign trail in 2007, Obama declared “I am running to do more than end a war in Iraq – I am running to change the mindset that got us into war.”³⁰¹ This was the mindset traced by Burgos, Wertheim, and Kaplan, which Obama believed had taken the country off-course in foreign policy. It was, under his conception, “a conventional way of thinking about foreign policy that values time spent in Washington over timely judgments; posturing over pragmatism; and fear of looking weak over the conviction to get things right.”³⁰² At its core, it was a mindset that gave license for the U.S. to make war for reasons aside from national security interest. It is in this context that Obama’s repeated emphasis on drawing a line for action that denoted “national security interest” becomes noteworthy.

The violence in abstractions painted by Menand as a touchpaper for pragmatism came to be a core unconscious tenet of the ‘conventional’ thinking of Washington that Obama railed against.³⁰³ This was the conventional thinking which carried a vision of imposing a fixed notion of truth and reality on to the world as it was, and of imposing pre-conceived ideals rather than shaping the ideal from the reality on the ground.

In positioning himself against the Iraq War, Obama was disavowing a set of assumptions which underwrote U.S. foreign policy. In 2016 Ben Rhodes - Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications - ruffled feathers when he referred to the D.C. foreign policy community as “the blob,” as an entity which would uncritically parrot a tired set of perspectives bound firmly within a limited perimeter.³⁰⁴ Rhodes is an important figure in the study of Obama. He has become notorious both inside and outside the foreign policy spheres, both in admiration and derision of his possession of a so-called “mind-meld” with Obama: an apparent ability to portray, with uncanny accuracy, the thought process of his boss.³⁰⁵ He was a lightning rod for criticism both from Republican opposition but also from those in the so-called “blob.” He was dismissed in these circles as a naïf and a know-nothing, lacking the requisite expertise and experience to critique them as he did.³⁰⁶ But what makes Rhodes crucial as it pertains to Obama’s thinking, was the foreign policy

³⁰¹ The American Presidency Project, "Press Release - Obama Discusses New Judgment We Need to Change Our Foreign Policy at Forum in Des Moines," *The American Presidency Project*, 18 December (2007), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=93299>.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*. p. 440

³⁰⁴ D. Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *The New York Times Magazine* 5 May (2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>.

³⁰⁵ B. Rhodes, *The World as It Is: Inside the Obama White House* (London: The Bodley Head, 2018). p. 47; Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru".

³⁰⁶ T. Ricks, E., "A Stunning Profile of Ben Rhodes, the Asshole Who Is the President's Foreign Policy Guru," *Foreign Policy* (2016), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/06/a-stunning-profile-of-ben-rhodes-the-asshole-who-is-the-presidents-foreign-policy-guru/>; M. Boot, "A President Who Learned Nothing," *Commentary* 6

experience that he *did* bring with him to the White House. Though he lacked academic expertise or governmental experience, prior to joining the Obama campaign in 2007 he worked as a special assistant for Lee Hamilton, former congressman from Indiana, as he co-chaired the Iraq Study Group.³⁰⁷ This followed on from a similar role for the 9/11 commission. In both instances he helped draft the findings of the studies into a report.³⁰⁸ Rhodes' experience – meagre though it might appear to foreign policy heavyweights – was primed at understanding how it was that the U.S. had made its biggest foreign policy mistake of a generation.

This helped shape a worldview which was fiercely opposed to modes of thinking which offered the risk of replicating the mistakes of Iraq. It also fostered in Rhodes a general perspective of regret at the apparent hubris of U.S. foreign policy. Late in his presidency Obama gave a revealing interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* which – as though with the gloves off after years of careful niceties – focused heavily on rejecting establishment thinking.³⁰⁹

Obama meditated on what was perceived to be the 'controversial' nature of his foreign policy. "Where am I controversial? When it comes to the use of military power. That is the source of controversy." He proceeded to discuss his perspective on conventional U.S. foreign policy wisdom:

*There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions.*³¹⁰

Obama, continuing on the theme of a 'playbook,' opined that "in the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply."³¹¹ The playbook contains a set of pre-prescribed options for action, ready to be rolled out as a solution to foreign policy issues as they arise. It is a sense of having all the correct answers before a question has been posed.

Kloppenbergh emphasises how pragmatism "challenges the claims of absolutists – whether their dogmas are rooted in science or religion – and instead embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the

May (2016), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/a-president-that-learned-nothing-ben-rhodes-obama/>; E. Lake, "Obama's Foreign Policy Guru Is the 'Blob' He Hates," *Bloomberg* 6 May (2016), <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-05-06/obama-s-foreign-policy-guru-is-the-blob-he-hates>.

³⁰⁷ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 4

³⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 7

³⁰⁹ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentalism.”³¹² With Obama demonstrating an approximation of this mode of thought - for instance in his treatment of the Constitution as offering a framework for citizens to “engage in the process of testing their ideas against an external reality” - we can see the roots of thinking which precludes absolutism and the uncritical mindset which established the infallibility of a set of ideas.³¹³ For Obama’s warnings in *The Audacity of Hope* of “any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single unalterable course” read: the playbook, neoconservatism, liberal interventionism, and their collective march to war in Iraq.³¹⁴

In carrying this disdain for the U.S. foreign policy establishment Obama went some distance - at least in his own mind - to exemplify James’s looking away from “first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities” as prescribed by that establishment and to turn indeed towards “last things, fruits, consequences, and facts.”³¹⁵ Obama’s foreign policy was thus in many senses aimed at a recalibration of American power, and an effort to focus it to what he deemed its appropriate level and direction. Ben Rhodes noted in 2011 that in terms of Obama’s foreign policy outlook to that point “if you were to boil it all down to a bumper sticker” it would say “wind down these two wars, re-establish American standing and leadership in the world, and focus on a broader set of priorities, from Asia and the global economy to a nuclear-nonproliferation regime.”³¹⁶

This logic animated Obama in important ways long before his presidency. His speech in 2002 offered an early glimpse of his specific conceptualization of America’s role in the world. He expressed it not merely through his opposition to the Iraq War but crucially also in his framing of it as a war of choice. He also went to great lengths to establish its counterpart: a war of necessity in Afghanistan.³¹⁷

For Obama it was clear. There existed a set of scenarios which enabled a strong case for war. For him, the necessity of Afghanistan lay in both its nature as a response to a direct attack on U.S. soil, but also crucially as a measure to protect national security – the prevention of such an attack happening again.³¹⁸ He spelled this logic out time and again both prior to and throughout his presidency.

³¹² Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. xxxiv

³¹³ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 92

³¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 93

³¹⁵ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. p. 29

³¹⁶ Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

³¹⁷ M. Reston, "Obama Tells Veterans Afghanistan Is a 'War of Necessity'," *Los Angeles Times* 18 August Issue (2009), <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/aug/18/nation/na-obama-vfw18>.

³¹⁸ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention," news release, 17 August, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-veterans-foreign-wars-convention>.

An important and foundational statement on foreign policy from Obama can be found in *The Audacity of Hope*. Obama offered a glimpse of the foreign policy president to come in the chapter entitled 'The World Beyond Our Borders.' He wrote a potted history of U.S. foreign policy, heralding, in particular, the post-war order constructed by President Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, George Marshall, and George Kennan. Significantly, his is a reading of an architecture that pursued neither a unilateralist nor accommodationist (to the Soviet Union) path but was instead one that "married Wilson's idealism to hardheaded realism, an acceptance of America's powers with a humility regarding America's ability to control events around the world."³¹⁹

While one can question this characterization of humility in America's post-war outlook, it is worthwhile noting the traits which Obama identified as positive aspects of U.S. foreign policy history. His interpretation of America assuming a balanced role in world affairs is indicative of a means by which he translated his instinct to favour conciliation and consensus between multiple perspectives into his reading of American foreign policy history.

He saw the establishment of the liberal international order and its eventual triumph after the Cold War as a "remarkable achievement." In the following sentence though, he noted that "like any system built by man, it had its flaws and contradictions," indeed it could "fall victim to the distortions of politics, the sins of hubris, the corrupting effects of fear."³²⁰ He thus argued that the U.S. foreign policy apparatus itself came to view too much of the world and its problems through the Cold War lens, which not only led America away from core interests, but also led to the distortion of America's "professed commitment to freedom and democracy."³²¹ This was an era of foreign policy which Obama argued would also bring the increasing prominence of a military lens when viewing problems around the world, displacing efforts at curating a diplomatic one.³²² For Obama "the postwar system over time suffered from too much politics and not enough deliberation and domestic consensus building." This undermined an expectation for officials tasked with formulating policy to do so "based on facts and sound judgment, not ideology or electioneering."³²³

Obama argued that this was a consensus that had extended to the public at large, with the cultivation of public trust in the government and reciprocal faith that the American people "could be trusted with the facts that went into decisions that spent their tax dollars or sent their sons to war."³²⁴ This allowed the government to execute large programmes such as the Marshall Plan, which

³¹⁹ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 284

³²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 285-286

³²¹ *Ibid.* 286

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.* p.287

underwrote the U.S. dominance of the international system. But furthermore, it was a mode of making policy that built and retained consensus and support commensurate with creating sustainability in efforts abroad.

He broadly painted a vision of foreign policy that drips with Deweyan democracy, Rawlsian consensus, and Jamesian fact-based decision making. He may have opined for a bygone golden era that never actually existed, but that his interpretation of U.S. foreign policy history was in keeping with his intellectual moorings, is worthy of note, and it further underlines the strength of his reaction to the Iraq War. Having set the Cold War up as an ideological folly, he emphasized parallels with the Vietnam War. “Perhaps the biggest casualty [of the war in Vietnam] was the bond of trust between the American people and their government – and between Americans themselves.”³²⁵ It became a millstone around the neck of a tired and war-weary nation, and as the human costs became ever more apparent, Obama noted that “Americans began to realize that the best and the brightest didn’t always know what they were doing – and didn’t always tell the truth.”³²⁶ It is through this notion of a breach of trust and ideas gone astray that Obama treated the Iraq War.

He wrote that, in the aftermath of 9/11, “I waited with anticipation for what I assumed would follow: the enunciation of a U.S. foreign policy for the twenty-first century, one that would not only adapt our military planning, intelligence operations, and homeland defenses to the threat of terrorist networks but build a new international consensus around the challenges of transnational threats.”³²⁷ But in the Bush administration’s response to perceived provocation from Iraq he noted that “what I sensed...was that the threat Saddam posed was not imminent, the administration’s rationales for war were flimsy and ideologically driven, and the war in Afghanistan was far from complete. And I was certain that by choosing precipitous, unilateral military action over the hard slog of diplomacy, coercive inspections, and smart sanctions, America was missing an opportunity to build a broad base of support for its policies.”³²⁸ With this critique he tarred the Iraq War decision and its accompanying thinking with the broad brush of being representative of that which corroded his hallowed post-war order.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, however, Obama emphasized another significant element of his foreign policy outlook. He wrote:

*It might be preferable to have the support of our allies in...military campaigns,
but our immediate safety can’t be held hostage to the desire for international*

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid. p.292

³²⁸ Ibid. p.294

*consensus; if we have to go it alone, then the American people stand ready to pay any price and bear any burden to protect our country.*³²⁹

Obama appeared to ring-fence ideas of national security and self-defence, whereby under threat to the U.S. the rules are different and his role as Commander-in-Chief supersedes any idealist commitment. There is nothing surprising in this notion. Could we expect any world leader to act differently? But that Obama time and again re-iterated it as a concept is notable. Its significance speaks to a broader perspective he carried throughout his presidency; of the necessity for the recalibration of American power, and the reconfiguration of U.S. foreign policy away from distractions which carried no bearing for U.S. interests. Attention would instead be moved towards those which did. Under this guise, necessity lay in directing U.S. attention to those parts of the world, and aspects of world affairs which would be of benefit to a nation confronting emerging challenges and shifting rivalries and alliances. It was a concept which Marc Lynch helpfully termed “rightsizing.”³³⁰ For Obama, this meant a recalibration of assessing how to intervene militarily and for what purpose, ultimately renewing the focus of foreign policy to the more modest aims of maintaining U.S. security. This is a notion tied up in Obama’s more holistic skepticism towards ideology as a basis for decision-making. The correction of U.S. goals in accordance with the assessment of risk is something Obama came to emphasize in a more nuanced manner in the National Security Strategy of 2015. He stated in his introduction that on all issues in international affairs. “America leads from a position of strength” but he was swift to qualify:

*This does not mean we can or should attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world. As powerful as we are and will remain, our resources and influence are not infinite. And in a complex world, many of the security problems we face do not lend themselves to quick and easy fixes. The United States will always defend our interests and uphold our commitments to allies and partners. But, we have to make hard choices among many competing priorities, and we must always resist the over-reach that comes when we make decisions based upon fear.*³³¹

The contrast with NSS 2006 could not be starker. This emphasis on interests and competing priorities lends credence to the notion that Obama’s foreign policy can be ably characterised as being realist in nature. The case has been made by numerous scholars and observers of foreign policy, such as Fred

³²⁹ Ibid. p. 308

³³⁰ M. Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role," *Foreign Affairs* September/October (2015).

³³¹ The Obama White House, "National Security Strategy 2015," (2015).

Kaplan, Zaki Laïdi, and arch-realist Stephen Walt, who was even prompted at one point to ask “is Barack Obama more of a realist than I am?”³³²

Further kindling for that particular fire is provided by the fact that Obama himself consistently spoke so glowingly of the foreign policy of G.H.W. Bush and his national security advisor Brent Scowcroft.³³³ There are clear and distinct parallels to be drawn, with the strong non-ideological current that runs through realism finding a similar home in Obama’s thought. He used that same non-ideological current to shield himself from the designation of any theoretical standpoint. Ryan Lizza suggested in a 2011 article that “despite the realist tilt, Obama has argued from the start that he was anti-ideological, that he defied traditional categories and ideologies.”³³⁴

In terms of ascribing ideological perspective, it is important to recognize that Obama himself steadily worked to distance himself from such a signifier, indeed in part through questioning the very utility of such signifiers in the first instance. He spoke pointedly of a need to move beyond the realism-idealism binary which pervades much foreign policy thinking.³³⁵ That Obama himself chose to avoid the label of a realist provides some insight into his perspective on its utility in describing his thinking. Lizza noted that “Obama’s aides often insist that he is an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works.” It was one of those aides who spoke of Obama the “consequentialist.”³³⁶

In many respects Obama distinguished himself through his evaluation of what constituted a distinct threat to the security and interests of the United States. This was the “controversy” he addressed in the Goldberg interview. It was this logic which resulted in much ire on the part of foreign policy commentators. He was frequently chastised as being feckless and unwilling to take the necessary actions to preserve American dominance in the international sphere. For such critics, Obama’s reaction (or lack thereof) to crises in Syria and Crimea, apparent Russian intransigence, increasing Chinese revanchism in the South China Sea, North Korean missile tests, and the chaos inflicted by ISIS in Iraq, betrayed an abdication of U.S. responsibility on the world stage.³³⁷

³³² F. Kaplan, “The Realist: Barack Obama’s a Cold Warrior Indeed.,” *Politico Magazine* March/April (2014), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/barack-obama-realist-foreign-policy-103861#.UxU1gONdWvh>.; Z. Laïdi, *Limited Achievements: Obama’s Foreign Policy*, trans. C. Avery, Series in International Relations and Political Economy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). p. 60; S. Walt, M, “Is Barack Obama More of a Realist Than I Am?,” *Foreign Policy* (2014), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/19/is-barack-obama-more-of-a-realist-than-i-am/>.

³³³ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”.; J. Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (London: Penguin, 2012).

³³⁴ Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy”.

³³⁵ Vox, “Obama: The Vox Conversation - Part Two: Foreign Policy,” <https://www.vox.com/a/barack-obama-interview-vox-conversation/obama-foreign-policy-transcript>.; Brooks, “Obama, Gospel and Verse”.

³³⁶ Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy”.

³³⁷ Stephens, *America in Retreat*. p. 228

Robert Kagan impugned Obama's approach and a changing mood in U.S. perspectives on world affairs as a "search for normalcy." But he warned that "superpowers don't get to retire."³³⁸ Robert Singh emphasized a change in foreign affairs approach, contrasting Obama's limited horizons with those of his presidential predecessors since Franklin Roosevelt, where the United States "followed foreign policies of global scope whose core feature was the ability and willingness to employ force to defend vital national interests."³³⁹ Instead, emphasizing Obama's inadequacy in projecting U.S. power, he argued the administration's "core national security impetus became manifest: an unwillingness to employ America's military might where, when and how it really mattered."³⁴⁰

More than this, Singh characterized Obama's as an approach defined by limits whereby he had been unwilling to "impose discipline" upon international relations. He argues, "in a defeatist fashion, Obama's defining down of U.S. foreign policy through negatives has been audacious." Singh argues Obama abandoned the ambition which underwrote U.S. grand strategy, and instead "made clear everything America will not do." This meant that under Obama, "overwhelmed by limits, both self-imposed and real," America appeared "unconscious of possibilities" and damningly, it equivocated as to what it stood for, turning instead to retrenchment, retreat, and accommodation abroad.³⁴¹

Singh effectively captured the broad strains of criticism levelled at Obama's foreign policy, in highlighting the means by which his approach "defined down" expectations for an American presence in world affairs. Unwillingness to project American power in necessary places and necessary fights served only to undermine both the world order and American interests within it. Taken together, these criticisms of Obama's foreign policy reflect an interpretation of a foreign policy that tempers America's role as the world leader.

But in important respects, the definition of "necessary" acts as something of an ink-blot test for how observers might react to Obama's foreign policy. Where Singh talks of Obama's "defining down of U.S. foreign policy through negatives" as being "audacious," from Obama's perspective, this was the only recourse available to initiate the needed recalibration of U.S. forces to a level which more appropriately served the interests of the nation. He declared in 2014 that "ultimately, global leadership requires us to see the world as it is, with all its danger and uncertainty. We have to be

³³⁸ R. Kagan, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire: What Our Tired Country Still Owes the World," *The New Republic* 26 May (2014), <https://newrepublic.com/article/117859/allure-normalcy-what-america-still-owes-world>.

³³⁹ Singh, *After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order*. p. 12

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid. p. 3

prepared for the worst, prepared for every contingency.”³⁴² This sentiment clearly resonated. It would be echoed in the title of Ben Rhodes’ memoir of his time in the White House.³⁴³

The forces agreement signed by Bush in the dying embers of his presidency allowed Obama to keep his campaign promise of leaving Iraq. The early-hour border crossing in December 2011 was thus the end to the war of choice. Afghanistan, the war of necessity however, would consume more energy and prove more intractable.

===

In the early days of the administration Obama ordered a policy review process, to be led by former CIA operative Bruce Riedel, in order to establish an appropriate course of action in Afghanistan.³⁴⁴ The resulting report advocated dedicating more attention to Pakistan and the safe havens within its borders where al Qaeda figures hid. The Riedel report established the goal “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan,” and resulted in Obama ordering 4000 more troops to the country to train Afghan security forces.³⁴⁵ This was on the heels of approving deployment of a further 17,000 from a request held over from the Bush administration.³⁴⁶ By increasing American troop presence in Afghanistan from 38,000 to 59,000 in a short time period after assuming the presidency, he was demonstrating in practice what he had preached about re-allocating resources to Afghanistan. The Riedel report, however, ultimately failed in setting a satisfactory course for the supposedly necessary war.³⁴⁷

In staking the need for a second, more in depth strategy review, Obama suggested that recently appointed commander Stanley McChrystal’s assessment of the war “clarified a gap in what had come out of the Riedel report.”³⁴⁸ There was a need to address ambiguities, chief among them being what was to be done with the Taliban. Was the goal to defeat or merely disrupt? McChrystal’s assessment offered a stark warning that without more forces, the war would “likely end in failure” in

³⁴² The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," news release, May 28 2014, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

³⁴³ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*.

³⁴⁴ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 123

³⁴⁵ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," news release, March 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

³⁴⁶ Mann, *The Obamians*. pp 124-125

³⁴⁷ B. Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010). P. 3

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 183

the next twelve months.³⁴⁹ It was a direct challenge to the Commander-in-Chief who had campaigned on the *necessity* of the war to do what was needed to avoid an ignominious defeat. Obama for his part, while being dismayed and angered at the feeling of being 'boxed in' by the military, initiated the new process of strategic review.³⁵⁰ Obama was keen on establishing what the purpose of any U.S. presence in Afghanistan was, and he wanted a policy the whole government could rally around. He told journalist Bob Woodward "what became clear to me was, we've got to get everybody in a room and make sure that everybody is singing from the same hymnal."³⁵¹ Obama's reification of consensus it seemed would extend unabated into Afghanistan decision-making.

Woodward's *Obama's Wars* offers a widely sourced insider account of the Afghanistan review process, and it notes how Obama opened the first meeting by proclaiming "We need to come to this with a spirit of challenging our assumptions. I'm a big believer in continually updating our analysis and relying on a constant feedback loop."³⁵² His approach to the strategic review meetings was one that sought out a range of perspectives before then summarizing participant's positions and finding areas of overlap. Seeking to establish where everyone stood.³⁵³ This was a mode of operating which reflected the deliberative approach which observers have noted characterized Obama through multiple avenues in his life. Accounts from students he taught from his time as a teacher of constitutional law at the University of Chicago paint a picture of Obama conducting his classes in a manner which would provoke and challenge assumptions, but also importantly, they recall that "he did not belittle students; instead he drew them out, restating and polishing halting answers."³⁵⁴ He displayed a constant visage of evenhandedness, facilitating students to tease out arguments and debates from the subjects at hand.

Prior to this, his ascension to become the first black president of the esteemed *Harvard Law Review* was ascribed, in part - by those who participated in the election - to have been founded upon his ability to listen to people from different perspectives.³⁵⁵ For his part, a 28 year old Obama, upon being elected, said he would "concentrate on making the review a 'forum for debate,' bringing in new writers and pushing for livelier, more accessible writing."³⁵⁶ He later emphasized "if I'm talking

³⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 161

³⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 159, 161, 197

³⁵¹ Ibid. p. 184

³⁵² Ibid. p. 162

³⁵³ Ibid.; Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 72

³⁵⁴ J. Kantor, "Teaching Law, Testing Ideas, Obama Stood Slightly Apart," *The New York Times* 30 July Issue (2008), <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/us/politics/30law.html>.

³⁵⁵ Kloppenber, *Reading Obama*. p. 41

³⁵⁶ F. Butterfield, "First Black Elected to Head Harvard's Law Review," *The New York Times* 6 February Issue (1990), <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/06/us/first-black-elected-to-head-harvard-s-law-review.html>.

to a white conservative who wants to dismantle the welfare state, he has the respect to listen to me and I to him. That's the biggest value of the *Harvard Law Review*. Ideas get fleshed out and there is no party line to follow."³⁵⁷ Obama the Commander-in-Chief carried a resemblance to the professorial Obama leading a seminar, prodding and poking at arguments, and to Obama the law journal editor, seeking to expand the range of the arguments being put forward.

The core of the debate at hand rested on competing notions of what America was seeking to achieve in Afghanistan, and as such how many more troops it ought to commit in order to achieve whatever ends were established as desirable. A key element of this was the notion of whether a U.S. presence in Afghanistan ought to be aimed at reshaping its society or whether it should have more limited goals. It thus hinged on the extent to which the goal should be defeating or merely disrupting the insurgent Taliban, and whether the defeat of al Qaeda could be detached from a similar defeat of the Taliban.³⁵⁸ To defeat the Taliban would be to establish a goal of reshaping Afghan society and polity in an all-encompassing manner. It would constitute a nation-building enterprise.

The debate circled around the utility of counterinsurgency as a strategy which could bring stability to the country and to help bring about political change. This debate would shed important light into how Obama wrestled with the implications of either adopting or rejecting such a strategy, and whether he would accede to the notion that the U.S. could reshape a foreign land. Counterinsurgency acted as something of a stand-in for how America perceives its role in the world. Could the U.S. maintain an involvement in the internal affairs of problem spots the world over?

Counterinsurgency (abbreviated to COIN) is a strategy which, as its name implies, focuses on countering insurgent fighting forces, but does so through prioritizing relations with the population of the country at war. As Fred Kaplan notes, counterinsurgency in Afghanistan meant taking on the assumption that "the best way to keep al Qaeda at bay is to dry up its support by earning the trust of the civilian population, building roads, creating jobs, and striking power-sharing deals with tribal elders."³⁵⁹

By embedding U.S. forces in communities and adapting to its cultural habits, the theory goes that the U.S. can win over hearts and minds, and thus degrade the opportunities for insurgent forces to recruit, hide within, and gain support from local populations.³⁶⁰ Skeptics argue it to be a troop, resource, and time intensive approach which is extremely difficult to execute effectively. In

³⁵⁷ T. Drummond, "Barack Obama's Law Personality," *Los Angeles Times* 19 March (1990), <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/thedailymirror/2008/09/barack-obama-ha.html>.

³⁵⁸ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 135

³⁵⁹ F. Kaplan, "Ct or Coin?," *Slate* 24 March (2009), <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/03/obama-must-choose-this-week-between-two-radically-different-afghanistan-policies.html>.

³⁶⁰ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 121

Afghanistan, the case for COIN was further weakened by the cultural, political, and governmental difficulties of a complex country which had resolutely resisted outside interference in its affairs for centuries.³⁶¹ The case was made however, to have any chance of defeating the Taliban and effectively reforming Afghan society, full-scale counterinsurgency would be required.³⁶²

Counterinsurgency is a military strategy which carries with it many ideological assumptions. It taps into some of the same assumptions which led to the Iraq War, in embracing notions of America's ability to shape world affairs, militarism, and a mindset which universalized western liberalism.³⁶³ It was a vision of ideology dictating modes of foreign intervention and, as such, to fully embrace COIN would be to signal a continuation of this way of thinking. But furthermore, under Haass's conception, taking steps to extend the war effort into modes of transforming Afghani society, would signal a shift from fighting the war of necessity Obama sought to paint it as, towards a war of choice he nominally decried.³⁶⁴

For Afghanistan the strategy had high-profile advocates in the form of much of the military brass, and crucially among them were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, McChrystal, and the architect of the concept as it existed in its modern form, CENTCOM (United States Central Command) commander General David Petraeus.³⁶⁵ The military parlayed its belief in COIN as a strategy in Afghanistan into high number troop requests. Full-scale COIN would require 80,000 troops and a commitment of ten years or more. In the strategic review, though, they argued for 40,000 as the number of troops which "provided the best opportunity to protect the population."³⁶⁶ The key opponent of the pursuit of such a course was Vice President Joe Biden, who viewed the governmental and cultural challenges posed by Afghanistan as prohibitive. He favoured instead a strategy of 'Counterterrorism Plus,' an approach that did not increase troop levels, but accelerated counterterrorism offensives, focusing attention solely on taking out al Qaeda operatives.³⁶⁷ Biden was joined notably in this perspective by counterterrorism chief John Brennan.³⁶⁸

The review process led to a broad recognition of the infeasibility and undesirability of carrying a goal of defeating the Taliban. Yet crucially, Obama stated "I'm not of the view that we can simply leave.

³⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 121-123; Kaplan, "Ct or Coin?".

³⁶² Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. pp. 183-186

³⁶³ A. MacLean, "Liberalism Does Its Thing," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. A. O'Connell, B. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

³⁶⁴ Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*. pp. xxi-xxii

³⁶⁵ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 273

³⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 101-102

³⁶⁸ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 77-78

To the extent that we define counterinsurgency as population security as opposed to a high Taliban body count, that I can embrace and I think it's sound. We need to determine how broad or narrow the scope of that objective is though."³⁶⁹ He seemed to be grappling with defining counterinsurgency in a more particular manner, one which moved away from the military defeat of the Taliban. Yet he also posed questions about the sustainability of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan – a presence perpetuated by any COIN policy – questioning “we can clear, hold and build, but how can we transfer?...We've put a lot of lives and money in Afghanistan, I don't want to be going to [U.S. military hospitals] Walter Reed and Bethesda eight years from now.”³⁷⁰ In terms of the military's preferred options, 40,000 troops and its cost for ten years of \$889 billion – Obama proclaimed “this is not what I'm looking for. I'm not doing 10 years. I'm not doing a long-term nation-building effort. I'm not spending a trillion dollars. I've been pressing you guys on this.”³⁷¹ Simply put, such an approach was “not in the national interest.”³⁷² For Obama, the cost of doing what was needed to achieve the beginnings of a desirable and functional Afghan political system was too high.

He stated that “actually, in 18 to 24 months, we need to think about how we can begin thinning out our presence and reducing our troops. This cannot be an open-ended commitment.”³⁷³ He wanted something akin to Bush's surge in Iraq. He emphasized the point by arguing “I'm not going to make a commitment that leaves my successor with more troops than I inherited in Afghanistan.”³⁷⁴ The goal of extricating the U.S. from Afghanistan sooner rather than later was made abundantly clear. But there remained a sense that Obama held the imperative of taking action to alter the situation in Afghanistan, belying the impulse to remove American troops from harm's way. Obama was wrestling with an issue on which he had held a consistent position of opposing the Iraq War through the prism of supporting the war in Afghanistan. Now he held the reins, he had to navigate to a strategy which fulfilled the demands of necessity, but also fulfilled an overriding intention to extricate the U.S. from an ever lengthening war. This was a contradiction which ultimately Obama could never solve satisfactorily.

At one point in the policy review meetings, Obama explicitly noted his desire to mediate between Biden and Petraeus' opposing perspectives, stating “let's see if we can reconcile Joe's concerns with Dave's concerns.”³⁷⁵ It was a useful window into Obama's review process – a concerted effort to bring opposing perspectives together in debate. He was trying to find a middle ground between two

³⁶⁹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. p. 228

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 229

³⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 251

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 278

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 279

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 270

intractable positions. We return once more to James' original founding of pragmatism where under "the present dilemma in philosophy," he argued "the world is indubitably one way if you look at it in one way, but as indubitably is it many, if you look at it another."³⁷⁶ As a solution, James offered "the oddly named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand."³⁷⁷ The question remained for Obama, how could you mediate between doing more and doing less?

Ultimately Obama approved a plan which committed 30,000 new troops into Afghanistan. It was to be a surge of forces, but crucially would be announced alongside an announcement of a withdrawal to begin after 18 months.³⁷⁸ Journalist James Mann argues "Obama had rendered a lawyerly solution, a compromise that gave McChrystal and the Pentagon most of the additional troops they sought, but seemingly for a limited time period."³⁷⁹ Mann notes that "as envisioned by the Obama administration... the war in Afghanistan was to be limited in scope and duration. These new ideas were in some tension with the military doctrine of counterinsurgency, which required time, patience and lots of troops."³⁸⁰ There was a fundamental disconnect, where Obama had over time, in Mann's reckoning "began to back away from the full implications of a counterinsurgency strategy."³⁸¹

Rhodes recalls in his memoir "we would announce it as a temporary surge – in eighteen months, the troops would start to draw down."³⁸² It was a strategy seeking to "secure Afghanistan's major population centers, then shift to training and counterterrorism – essentially endorsing the Petraeus-McChrystal approach for two years, and then shifting to the Biden-Brennan approach sooner than the military wanted."³⁸³ It is hard to tell if this was intended to be a transitional approach at the time, or if Rhodes is retro-fitting a rationalization on to the policy. But it is an indication of policy which seeks to straddle a divide, and go between two opposing approaches.

COIN had been consistently pushed by the military, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, but Deputy National Security Advisor (later National Security Advisor) Tom Donilon reiterated that the cost of this approach was not in the national interest.³⁸⁴ He believed "the key difference between what had been proposed and what the strategy would ultimately be...was that it would not be a full-scale counterinsurgency."³⁸⁵ There was an apparent cognizance that COIN had been a thorny presence in the debates, but ultimately for Obama, the strategy could never be

³⁷⁶ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. pp. 7-23

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 20

³⁷⁸ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 138

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 137

³⁸² Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 78

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. p. 297

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

full-scale COIN. That was an ideological commitment that was beyond the pale and beyond the necessary. Indeed, at one point in the review process, Obama asserted “we’re not trying to achieve a perfect nation-state here. We don’t have the resources to do that.”³⁸⁶

In the speech announcing the policy review decision, Obama went to lengths to emphasize exactly why the U.S. was in Afghanistan in the first place. “We did not ask for this fight,” but 9/11 had compelled the U.S. and its allies to take action. There was an imperative that necessitated a presence in Afghanistan. Even in this venue of announcing Afghanistan policy, he would return once more to the notion of Iraq detracting from efforts in Afghanistan, noting that as the situation had deteriorated, all the while “troop levels in Afghanistan remained a fraction of what they were in Iraq.”³⁸⁷

He emphasized once more the significance of the war in Afghanistan. “I see firsthand the terrible wages of war. If I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every single one of our troops home tomorrow.” But “I make this decision because I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda. It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11, and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger; no hypothetical threat.”³⁸⁸

In justifying the pre-emptive timeline for exit, he rejected a course that would commit the U.S. to “a nation-building project of up to a decade” that “sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to secure our interests.” He emphasized:

*As President, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests. And I must weigh all of the challenges that our nation faces. I don’t have the luxury of committing to just one. Indeed, I’m mindful of the words of President Eisenhower, who – in discussing our national security – said, “Each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs.”*³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 271

³⁸⁷ The Obama White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” news release, December 01 2009, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

Woodward reflected on Obama's thinking that "he had to get himself and the country out of the box. War could not suck the oxygen out of everything else." Obama had campaigned as something of an anti-Bush, but Donilon thought at the time of the Afghanistan policy decision "that Obama had perhaps underestimated the extent to which he had inherited George W Bush's presidency – the apparatus, personnel and mind-set of war making."³⁹⁰ The war footing remained on course in ways that disappointed Obama's supporters. Even some of those involved in the process were surprised by the outcome. Doug Lute, the Deputy National Security Adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan said "I don't think the review adds up to the decision," and suggested that Obama had treated the military as another political constituency that had to be accommodated.³⁹¹

The review process had, as far as Lute and other observers were concerned, seemed to be moving away from a large-scale military solution, as Obama emphasized time and again the need to avoid costly commitments of indeterminate duration. Obama's decision however still involved a significant deployment of troops. The question of whether Obama ever got "out of the box" in Afghanistan is thus a pertinent one. Whether the strategy curated out of the review process would be satisfying to Obama was a lingering question. Rhodes writes of Obama:

*I'd seen him try to slow the momentum that was leading inexorably to more troops, more war; I'd watched as that process became, essentially, a negotiation between the far-reaching recommendations of his advisors and his own sense of realism. At the same time, the economy was teetering on a ledge between depression and slow recovery, and an overhaul of American healthcare was creeping through Congress. The American public was exhausted by nearly a decade of war. In a way, we'd failed him by making him spend so much time on this review. He'd reshaped what had come to him and turned it into something that he felt was necessary, something worthy of sacrifice, something with limits. But I could still sense the unease at sending young people to die.*³⁹²

Despite arriving at 30,000 troops, Obama reflected on how he would politically have been better off rejecting that request and telling the military "the American people are sick of this war, and we're going to put in 10,000 trainers because that's how we're going to get out of there."³⁹³ In making the decision there appeared to be an amount of wistfulness on the part of the president, as though he was fighting an instinct that preferred the quicker, easier exit. This raises urgent questions as to how

³⁹⁰ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. p. 281

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 79

³⁹³ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. p. 304

Obama could commit so many lives to danger if he was so unsure and unconvinced of the merits of the plan. How did he convince himself to go against his instincts?

The paramount importance of deliberation to his approach to foreign policy was a vital part of this. It made blurry the lines between clear visions of action. That was by design. Obama's thoroughgoing process was not to the tastes of all observers. Through undertaking a systematic review that sought out perspectives from all sides, it was also not a process of expedience. Former UN Ambassador John Bolton argued that in undertaking such a process Obama was "dithering," and, whatever the decision he would reach on Afghanistan, "his credibility and leadership" were "badly wounded by his continuing public display of indecisiveness."³⁹⁴ Former Vice President Dick Cheney, meanwhile, suggested that "the White House must stop dithering while America's armed forces are in danger" instead it was time for Obama "to do what it takes to win a war he has repeatedly and rightly called a war of necessity."³⁹⁵ Obama's affirmation of the necessity of the war might have entailed a more efficient process. But deliberation was a pivotal part of his process. What, to his critics, was "dithering" as a means of avoiding responsibility, was under Obama's conception an act of thoroughness, to ensure all angles of the policy were considered. Yet in this instance it was also a crucial factor in leading him away from his instincts, towards a solution that he thought could appease and marry opposing perspectives.

Despite a stated antipathy to blind travel down the path of war, despite a rejection of ideological commitments of war, despite a rejection of COIN for those reasons, despite options for a more restrained counterterrorist initiative on the table, Obama still reached the commitment of 30,000 more troops and a surge which resembled significant elements of COIN. How did he end up doing something he was nominally so set against? How could he justify taking a decision which would put lives on the line, and yet is one which he was not one hundred per cent behind? No matter how his instincts shied away from drawing the U.S. further in to conflict, his continued assertion of the necessity of the war in Afghanistan would serve only to hook him in.

We are returned once more to the crucial sense of the necessary war, differentiated from the war in Iraq. In his 2002 speech he noted that "after September 11, after witnessing the carnage and destruction, the dust and the tears, I supported this administration's pledge to hunt down and root

³⁹⁴ J. R. Bolton, "Ditherer in Chief," *Los Angeles Times* 18 October (2009), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-oct-18-oe-bolton18-story.html>.

³⁹⁵ CBS News, "Cheney: Stop 'Dithering' over Afghanistan," *CBS News* 21 October (2009), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cheney-stop-dithering-over-afghanistan/>.

out those who would slaughter innocents in the name of intolerance, and I would willingly take up arms myself to prevent such tragedy from happening again.”³⁹⁶

While this taking up of arms was now vicarious by dint of being the Commander-in-Chief, Obama’s approach to Afghanistan continued to recognise the need for such sacrifice. In 2002 he talked, in contrast to Iraq, of battles which were worthy of fighting. He said “the consequences of war are dire, the sacrifices immeasurable. We may have occasion in our lifetime to once again rise up in defense of our freedom, and pay the wages of war. But we ought not – we will not – travel down that hellish path blindly. Nor should we allow those who would march off and pay the ultimate sacrifice, who would prove the full measure of devotion with their blood, to make such an awful sacrifice in vain.”³⁹⁷

It is important to acknowledge again the debt Obama owes to Abraham Lincoln. As discussed in the previous chapter, where he is left dismayed by the contradictions in his own thought, he turns to Lincoln whose lessons remind him “that we should pursue our own absolute truths only if we acknowledge that there may be a terrible price to pay.”³⁹⁸ For Obama, to fight a war, you must be fully conscious of what you are asking people to sacrifice and what that sacrifice is for.

Trevor McCrisken argues that the rhetoric of sacrifice was a major component of Obama’s public discussion of the war in Afghanistan. He notes that Obama “built a sustained campaign to emphasize the need for sacrifice in the face of what continue to be perceived as grave threats to U.S. security.”³⁹⁹ Indeed “Obama understands that the U.S. public would not accept continued sacrifice in pursuit of building a sustainable and strong Afghan society, but they would continue to give fundamental support to an effort that reinforced U.S. security and therefore served U.S. interests.”⁴⁰⁰ Privately, Obama argued that if he was not convinced the action was necessary: “another night in Dover [Delaware]” to observe the war-dead being repatriated “would be enough for me just so say to hell with this, and let’s get out of there.”⁴⁰¹ His deep conviction of the necessity of the war remained evidently steadfast, but he was vividly aware of the costs of this particular endeavor.

In the drawing of comparisons between Afghanistan and Vietnam, McCrisken notes that 9/11 provided a moral imperative that Vietnam lacked. There remained an urge to take the fight to al

³⁹⁶ NPR, "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War".

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 98

³⁹⁹ T. McCrisken, "Justifying Sacrifice: Barack Obama and the Selling and Ending of the War in Afghanistan," *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012). P. 994

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 999

⁴⁰¹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. p. 305

Qaeda and its leadership, and there remained a desire to exact justice upon Osama bin Laden.⁴⁰² These were far removed from the abstract aims of Iraqi liberation and from the increasingly distant Cold War logic that underwrote Vietnam. This notion also not only mirrors Obama's rhetoric of gladly taking up arms for the worthy cause of defending America, but also reaches back to deeper roots in Obama's thinking, roots which held a particular and unbent determination to place appropriate perception of threat, risk, and national interests not in the abstraction of ideology, but instead in a fact-based evaluation of reality.

Whilst being sympathetic in his interpretation of Obama's philosophical and intellectual savvy, in *Reading Obama* James Kloppenberg questioned whether Obama's decision to send additional troops into a failing war offered a representation of the pragmatist thinker he had so thoroughly laid out. He noted "Obama seems convinced that the United States can control the threat of terrorism only by transforming a nation that for centuries has consisted of a loose confederations of largely autonomous and often cantankerous clans into a united, stable, law-abiding constitutional democracy. He has not always been so sure of America's power to perform such alchemy."⁴⁰³ For Kloppenberg, the temptations for pursuance of such an ambitious nation-building course offered a test of "whether Obama's stated commitment to the critical assessment of results – and the resolution to change course when necessary rather than follow dogma blindly – extends from the domain of domestic politics to that of foreign affairs."⁴⁰⁴

Kloppenberg's concerns might have been assuaged by Woodward's report of Obama professing that "I'm not signing on to a failure. If what I proposed is not working, I'm not going to be like these other presidents and stick to it based upon my ego or my politics – my political security."⁴⁰⁵ This is a crucial statement of - at least in Obama's mind - a willingness to change course based on results. Placing results above all other concerns speaks once more to the experimentalism which is so at home in Jamesian pragmatism.

Interestingly, Obama doubled down on the timeline he had projected – "in 2011 we will not be having a conversation of how to do more."⁴⁰⁶ It was as though he was giving himself one opportunity to get it right in Afghanistan, but if it did not come off he would not set about chasing favourable results. A one-time thing. This attitude speaks to the notion of not trying the same thing time and again; instead being comfortable with failure, and willing to alter course in the event of failure.

⁴⁰² McCrisken, "Justifying Sacrifice: Barack Obama and the Selling and Ending of the War in Afghanistan." p.1001

⁴⁰³ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. 236

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 237

⁴⁰⁵ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. p. 324

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 325

In Goldberg's lengthy piece on Obama's foreign policy he refers to Derek Chollet's notion of Obama as a gambler. As the previous chapter noted, gambling nomenclature is prevalent not only in such discussions of Obama, but also in conceptualizations of pragmatism. The tragic pragmatism passed down from Lincoln to Obama holds that bets on the future must be made only in tandem with the readiness to accept their failure. The metaphor and rhetoric of 'gambling,' if applied to Obama attains a pertinence that offers fascinating analytical value. And importantly, it offers intriguing possibilities in offering explanation for how he was able to justify his apparently dissonant approach to Afghanistan policy.

The metaphor offers a route directly in to the ideas that animate pragmatism and how they can lead in to foreign policy decision-making. The very act of 'gambling' relies on a sense of understanding that there is an element of chance to the decision being made. By its very nature it lacks certainty. It is an act which relies on a series of contingencies to alter the results as they arise. The notion of gambling in foreign policy does not mean that you take a decision completely at random. Bets are still informed by a level of understanding of the factors which are likely to influence an outcome either way. But they are still made with the knowledge – and vitally - the *acceptance*, that there will be a level of variance in the outcome that means you can never be assured of a specific result. Taking calculated bets on the future, with the hope that your decisions are weighted towards favourable outcomes, but nevertheless being cognizant that the very nature of gambling precludes those favourable outcomes from being guaranteed. This was a key essence of Obama's foreign policy.

In Afghanistan, Obama appeared to reflect this approach of taking a "moral wager." The logic of necessity was indisputably a crucial driver. It was the necessary cause which justified the sacrifice of war. Yet, that he harboured doubts and an instinct to reduce U.S. commitment was also apparent. This is what pushed him to chart an unlikely course between the overwhelming commitment he resisted and the escape he craved. Just as Obama turned to Lincoln when explaining the intractability of some of his firm beliefs, and the realities of compromise, we can do the same with his decision-making in Afghanistan.⁴⁰⁷

The tragic pragmatism of Lincoln in many respects undergirded Obama's conflicted decision making. If we are looking for an explanation of why or how Obama was accepting of the logic of the surge, we can draw a line to his perspective that highlighted the necessity of the war – a perspective which views foreign policy itself through a prism of what does and does not constitute a core national security threat. Locating the necessity in that security interest allowed him to justify the 'moral

⁴⁰⁷ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 97

wager,' to push forward with an approach which ran counter to much of what he believed in, and yet which offered the chance to provide a solution to a cause he firmly *did* believe in. In speeches given about the war in Afghanistan, he repeatedly referred to "the wages of war."⁴⁰⁸ He was, again, keenly aware of the costs of his choice, his 'moral wager' would state that those wages of war were worth paying if the outcome were right. If the outcome were wrong, that would be the wager not paying off.

===

In a June 2011 speech announcing the beginning of the process of drawing down forces in Afghanistan, Obama argued that such a drawdown was starting "from a position of strength," that al Qaeda was "under more pressure than at any time since 9/11," and he emphasized U.S. success in killing Osama bin Laden – "a victory for all who have served since 9/11."⁴⁰⁹ While recognizing that al Qaeda remained dangerous, he maintained that the U.S. had put it "on the path to defeat." The Taliban, meanwhile, had suffered "serious losses," and "along with our surge, our allies also increased their commitments, which helped stabilize more of the country. Afghan security forces have grown by over 100,000 troops, and in some provinces and municipalities we've already begun to transition responsibility for security to the Afghan people."⁴¹⁰

Whatever financial cost was carried in sustaining the Afghan security force, it was not acknowledged. The only costs Obama openly discussed were those of the lives of U.S. service personnel already lost.⁴¹¹ They were sacrifices the American people could accept to an extent. But the exhaustion after a decade of war was real, and as such, he emphasized that America could "take comfort in knowing that the tide of war is receding."⁴¹² This meant that "fewer of our sons and daughters are serving in harm's way."⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁸ NPR, "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War".; The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan." ; "West Point Speech 2014."

⁴⁰⁹ "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," news release, 22 June, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 79

⁴¹³ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan."

Obama's overall picture in his address painted some semblance of success, and thus apparently provided the suitable conditions to precipitate the desired exit. Yet, the degree to which such success was achieved can be readily disputed. In December 2015, the Taliban held more territory than in any year since 2001, al Qaeda meanwhile remained undefeated. Even without its leader, it metastasized into various groups in an increasing number of locations worldwide.⁴¹⁴ Aaron O'Connell - who served in Afghanistan as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps reserve and later as director of defense policy and strategy on Obama's NSC - writes in his edited volume of essays *Our Latest Longest War* that despite Obama's revision of his predecessor's goals downward, his vow to defeat al Qaeda and effect a "responsible transition" in order for Afghans to secure and govern the country had not been achieved by December 2015. "Therefore" he argues "any reasoned analysis of Operation Enduring Freedom must conclude that, thus far, America's longest war has been an extremely costly half success at best, or at worst, a failure."⁴¹⁵ He argues that "at the outset, American leaders suffered not from ignorance but from informed hubris."⁴¹⁶ The intentions which undergirded the war effort in Afghanistan were always primed upon assumptions which did not match the reality on the ground. As such "the war has been less than fully successful, and an inability to turn lofty ideals into practical outcomes is a principal reason why."⁴¹⁷

The "informed hubris" was such that it embraced that very same worldview which relied upon universalist values and moral clarity of an enlightenment west.⁴¹⁸ O'Connell notes that "this enlightenment vision drove tactics, operations, and strategy in the Afghanistan War under both Democratic and Republican administrations." And as such "it justified end states that would have been ambitious under any circumstances, but that became entirely untenable when the Bush administration refused to commit the necessary resources and then began a costly and unnecessary war in Iraq."⁴¹⁹ Crucially, he maintains that Obama "partially abandoned his predecessor's transformative vision, but by then, the same progressive assumptions were already baked into the military's counterinsurgency doctrine."⁴²⁰ He could not get out of the box. Indeed, it was ultimately Obama who must hold accountability for bringing the shift to counterinsurgency.⁴²¹

O'Connell argues furthermore:

⁴¹⁴ O'Connell, "Our Latest Longest War." p. 300; Z. Beauchamp, "16 Years after 9/11, Al-Qaeda Is Back," *Vox* 11 September (2017), <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/11/16288824/al-qaeda-isis-911?fbclid=IwAR3AyljHmTwnNEU5On6IntBuBw0KJuZsr1Huu-7A9KSoZDizaUhU6hUd1f0>.

⁴¹⁵ O'Connell, "Our Latest Longest War." p. 306

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 307

⁴¹⁷ "Moving Mountains: Cultural Friction in the Afghanistan War." p. 4

⁴¹⁸ A. MacLean, "Liberalism Does Its Thing," *ibid.* pp. 213 - 243

⁴¹⁹ A. O'Connell, B., "Our Latest Longest War," *ibid.* p. 308

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ *Ibid.* p. 313-314

The United States neither forgot Vietnam nor refought it nor ignored it. The United States just never escaped the prison of its culture or quit the habits of mind that have been operative in American society long before either war began. The United States was committed to American exceptionalism and to a benevolent vision of how Afghans would understand its presence in their lands. It took culture's stories – narratives that link freedom with elections and dignity to prosperity – to be nonnegotiable and universally accepted. September 11 brought the U.S. military into Afghanistan, but the power of these narratives kept it there, turning the hunt for al Qaeda into a grand strategy of transformation that overpromised and underdelivered.⁴²²

O'Connell's portrayal of the U.S. foreign policy mindset finds symmetry with the universalist assumptions of Hunter's orthodoxy.

We are confronted with the pressing question of whether, in seeking a policy review process which mediated between opposing perspectives, Obama came to put too much stock in the existing infrastructure of war. It allowed for a process which meant always having to move down from a permanent war footing. Obama became trapped by the war of necessity, and by his overt willingness to guide a policy review process which was informed by, and accepting of, military logic. This was a logic which persisted from the particular brand of post-Cold War exceptionalist America which had become the dominant force in the U.S. foreign policy machinery. The blob which Obama had sought to confront and to reign in appeared, at least in the case of Afghanistan, to have worn him down.

Though he carried a clear sense that the war in Afghanistan retained necessity, by his own logic of searching for success in a one-time effort at turning the tide, it seems viable to argue that given the continued difficulty encountered in Afghanistan and the perennial sense of "the forever war," his moral wager did not pay out.

===

In 2014, Obama spoke at the West Point commencement ceremony, in what was heralded as a marquee speech, primed at laying out a bold vision of U.S. foreign policy for the remainder of his

⁴²² Ibid. p. 317

term. He sketched out why “the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation.”⁴²³ That has been true for the century passed and it will be true for the century to come.” But he noted that the world was changing, and even where U.S. interests lay in “a world of greater freedom and tolerance,” “to say that we have an interest in pursuing peace and freedom beyond our borders is not to say that every problem has a military solution.” Indeed “since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences – without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required.”⁴²⁴

He emphasized again how U.S. security “demanded those deployments” he ordered in the Afghanistan policy review, but maintained “I am haunted by those deaths [that ensued from the deployment]. I am haunted by those wounds. And I would betray my duty to you and to the country we love if I ever sent you into harm’s way simply because I saw a problem somewhere in the world that needed to be fixed, or because I was worried about critics who think military intervention is the only way for America to avoid looking weak.”⁴²⁵

He emphasized his bottom line that “America must always lead on the world stage. If we don’t, no one else will.” The military is the backbone of that leadership he maintained, but crucially, he argued that “U.S. military action cannot be the only -- or even primary -- component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”⁴²⁶

In terms of America’s role in the world, this meant returning to a principle he put forward at the outset of his presidency “the United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it -- when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake, when the security of our allies is in danger. In these circumstances, we still need to ask tough questions about whether our actions are proportional and effective and just. International opinion matters, but America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, or our way of life.”⁴²⁷ And here came the flip side of the coin which he had continually touted right from his 2002 anti-Iraq war speech:

⁴²³ The Obama White House, "West Point Speech 2014."

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

*On the other hand, when issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United States, when such issues are at stake -- when crises arise that stir our conscience or push the world in a more dangerous direction but do not directly threaten us -- then the threshold for military action must be higher.*⁴²⁸

This articulation of the very concept of a threshold speaks once more to what he believed to be the crux of controversy such as it pertained to his foreign policy. The mere notion of placing a cap on what should and could necessitate U.S. intervention in the world struck some observers as being declinist. In his reporting of the West Point speech, Fred Kaplan dryly notes, “again, all this should seem obvious. The problem is, it isn’t to everybody.”⁴²⁹

In concluding his book *America’s Rasputin* David Milne draws a parallel between the modes of thinking which led to the wars in Vietnam and in Iraq.⁴³⁰ The book’s focus is former developmental economist and National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, who advocated for escalated bombing campaigns in order to accelerate the achievement of his idealized vision for Vietnamese society. Milne suggests that early millennium neoconservatives took up Rostow’s “internationalist, crusading mantle” and have ran with it “to potent effect.”⁴³¹ He points a finger squarely at Paul Wolfowitz who he deems “identifiably Rostovian with respect to his reading of international relations: it is beholden upon the United States, as the world’s preeminent nation, to democratize and do “good” – at the bayonet’s point if necessary.”⁴³²

Obama cast the same aspersion in his 2002 speech in Chicago. He wrapped his opposition to the second Iraq war up in an aversion to ideology, the ideology which stretched back from neoconservatives, like Wolfowitz and Perle, who Milne argues “believe in the redemptive powers of liberal capitalism in the same way as evangelical Christians believe in God – they act as if their value system is divinely authored and view deviations from the righteous path as heresy.”⁴³³ For his part, Milne argues that Rostow “believed that he was in possession of a fundamental truth that was impervious to contingency and counterargument.”⁴³⁴ This is a mindset which allows for the removal of thresholds. When one is in possession of a fundamental truth, why equivocate? Why take a middle course? Why be limited by the boundaries of necessity? When you are in possession of a fundamental truth, which is impervious to contingency and counterargument, the only thing which

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ F. Kaplan, "Obama Lays Siege to His Critics," *Slate* 28 May (2014), <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/05/barack-obamas-west-point-speech-the-president-responds-to-his-foreign-policy-critics.html>.

⁴³⁰ D. Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).

⁴³¹ Ibid. p. 256

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid. p. 256-257

⁴³⁴ Ibid. p. 258

remains necessary is to enact that truth. But Milne offers up a stark warning: “all ideologies can do awful things when they are pursued with unyielding determination.”⁴³⁵

In his embrace of ideas which are averse to ideology, in an embrace of what this thesis has traced as a pragmatist foundation of fallibilism, experimentalism, consequentialism, and contingency, Obama stands at a starting point which is nominally less inclined toward adventurism in war. His approach rejects the pursuit of ideology with unyielding determination, and instead constructs limitations of clearly drawn thresholds of necessity.

There remains debate, however, about where those thresholds lie. And, as with the Afghanistan policy review, there remains debate on the extent to which Obama ultimately bought in to the ideological trappings of the American war machine. His policy decision gave some level of succor to the universalist assumptions of counterinsurgency, the belief in an ability to reshape a society in America’s image. Obama’s own process of deliberation and consensus had led him down a path which would - despite attempted caveats - accede to ideology. In Afghanistan, we can argue that Obama’s approach to decision making, the search for consensus, for a middle ground, allowed his own instincts to be crowded out. That he could be moderately satisfied with a solution that seemed so out of kilter with his worldview has been demonstrated as being contingent, in part, on that very worldview. Obama stated in an interview with *The New Yorker’s* David Remnick that he is “comfortable with complexity,” and this is borne out in his sometimes contradictory foreign policy approach.⁴³⁶ Chollet’s notion of Obama the gambler is useful in offering some explanation for this. The thought-process attached to gambling is one that embraces uncertainty, but calculates that where wagers can be taken for the advancement of a goal, they must be done so with the acknowledgement of that uncertainty. Where Obama takes these wagers, he does so using the language of necessity. Crucially, in Obama’s conception of the world, that which is necessary often demands the costs of uncertainty in outcome.

Regrettably from Obama’s carefully curated perspective, the very nature of America’s broad engagement with the world – its role as “the one indispensable nation” which “must always lead on the world stage” - only serves to expand the parameters of ‘necessity.’ This apparent contradiction between competing conceptions of America’s role in the world which Obama laid bare in his 2014 West Point speech must remain at the core of any attempt to examine Obama’s approach to foreign policy. The following chapter will thus examine this in further depth. That expansion of the parameters of necessity finds vivid illustrations in the cases of the conflicts which emerged in Libya

⁴³⁵ Ibid. p. 256

⁴³⁶ Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

and Syria. Examining Obama's response to those crises, and the means of ideation through which he confronted them can help to give greater clarity to the means by which – when confronted with questions of where he could possibly draw that line of necessity for U.S. action – he could square the circle of being the reluctant sheriff in a town which oftentimes seemed in desperate need of an enthusiastic one.

Chapter Three

Those of us with the best intentions

On 9 October 2009, Obama was awoken in the middle of the night to be made aware of the surprising news that he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.⁴³⁷ Not yet a full year into his tenure, with little 'peace' to show for it, Obama and his team were dismayed. Despite reservations, declining the award was not an option. Obama thus turned his attention to the rhetorical possibilities open to him in crafting an acceptance speech for a global audience. The speech would serve as a meditation on the United States' role in the world and the manner in which Obama as Commander-in-Chief had to face competing imperatives on how the U.S. should respond to international affairs. He told speechwriters Ben Rhodes and Jon Favreau that he wanted to use the speech to make the case for war.⁴³⁸ Rhodes later wrote in his memoir that Obama "turned the entire speech into an effort to deal with the tension of getting the award right after he had decided to send thirty thousand troops to fight in a war."⁴³⁹ The Afghanistan review process had just been completed, Obama's moral wager placed on committing more troops to that war. Ultimately, Obama said he did not want the prize to be "a vindication of inaction."⁴⁴⁰ Writing in *Vanity Fair*, Michael Lewis suggested that Obama "wanted to reconcile the nonviolent doctrines of two of his heroes, King and Gandhi, with his new role in the violent world." Obama told him "it wasn't just that I needed to make a new argument...It was that I wanted to make an argument that didn't allow either side to feel too comfortable." He felt he had to "describe a notion of a just war. But also acknowledge that the very notion of a just war can lead you into some dark places. And so you can't be complacent in labelling something just. You need to constantly ask yourself questions."⁴⁴¹ The contrast Obama sought between the instincts of peace that Gandhi and King typified and the more sober perspectives of Reinhold Niebuhr formed the heart of a tour-de-force examining the balance of justifying war and violence against the imperative that yearns for peace.

This chapter will focus on how Obama located America's response to international crises in context of debates about the nation's broader 'role' in world affairs. These debates captured the core dichotomy of war and peace he addressed in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Over the course of

⁴³⁷ M. Lewis, "Obama's Way," *Vanity Fair* October Issue (2012), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2012/10/michael-lewis-profile-barack-obama>.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 80

⁴⁴⁰ Lewis, "Obama's Way".

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

his presidency, this became a matter of how he negotiated the process of recalibrating U.S. power to a manner that reflected his own distinct vision.

This is an idea which bears particular examination given the seismic events of the Arab Spring which upturned the political order in a string of Middle Eastern and North African countries. Obama's response would directly engage him in the question of situating the American foreign policy machine in its appropriate role. Its unique capabilities and status as historic guarantor of the international order prompted particular questions about the imperative to act in the face of security and moral disasters.

The chapter will also consider the attention Obama gave Niebuhrian thought in projecting a humble worldview with limited expectations, but will crucially acknowledge a competing perspective, which trafficked in the hope of shared universals. Ultimately, the balancing of these two perspectives, and his ensuing response to the crises in Libya and Syria, will be placed in the context of Obama's stated preference for multilateralism as a means of confronting problems, and in shaping an Obamian vision of America in the world.

===

Obama began his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December 2009 at Oslo City Hall by emphasizing the scale of the problems of war in the new security age, "a decade into a new century, this old architecture is buckling under the weight of new threats."⁴⁴² He maintained that he did not take with him to Oslo "a definitive solution to the problems of war." He instead suggested that "meeting these challenges will require the same vision, hard work, and persistence of those men and women who acted so boldly decades ago in shaping the world order. And it will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace." In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama stated "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."⁴⁴³ To emphasize the point, he argued that "a non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force

⁴⁴² The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize," news release, December 10, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

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.”⁴⁴⁴

Turning to that paradox which he had sought to portray in writing the speech, he reiterated “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace.” Yet he coupled this with the suggestion that “this truth must coexist with another -- that no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy” for “war itself is never glorious.” Obama argued that “part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths - that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.” For Obama, the effort to not allow “either side to feel comfortable” meant acknowledging the tragedy which befalls those seeking to find peace in a violent world.

Obama found inspiration in the words of President John F. Kennedy, who called for an international focus “on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.” Obama dwelled on this notion of evolution in human institutions, and posed the questions of what this would look like, and what practical steps would be required to attain it. He emphasized the importance of all nations adhering to standards which govern the use of force, reiterating the value of these institutional norms in the context of multilateralism. Emphasizing that “the world rallied around America after the 9/11 attacks, and continues to support our efforts in Afghanistan” doing so “because of the horror of those senseless attacks and the recognized principle of self-defense.” The world also “recognized the need to confront Saddam Hussein when he invaded Kuwait - a consensus that sent a clear message to all about the cost of aggression.” Obama argued that the legitimacy of interventions around the world depends on following these “rules of the road” and as such it is imperative that the U.S. live up to those standards alongside all other nations.⁴⁴⁵

Writing in *The Audacity of Hope*, he reflected a similar message that “once we get beyond matters of self-defense... I’m convinced that it will almost always be in our strategic interest to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally when we use force around the world.”⁴⁴⁶ For Obama, “acting multilaterally means doing what George H.W. Bush and his team did in the first Gulf War – engaging in the hard diplomatic work of obtaining most of the world’s support for our actions, and making sure our actions serve to further recognize international norms.”⁴⁴⁷ The use of the example of George H.W. Bush presaged the same deployment in the Nobel address. Obama expressed in *The*

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 309

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

Audacity of Hope a belief that there are practical benefits to draw from leaning in to institutional practices: "Obtaining global buy-in...allows the United States to carry a lighter load when military action is required and enhances the chances for success." Ultimately, he argued, "legitimacy is a 'force multiplier.'"⁴⁴⁸

Prophetically, in the Nobel address, Obama stated "more and more, we all confront difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region." In the instance of such tragedies arising, he reached back to his earlier testament that force can be used to stop evil, and maintained that "I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war." For, "inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later." And that, Obama explained, is why "all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace."⁴⁴⁹

This thesis has sought to locate Obama's foreign policy within an intellectual framework that draws distinctly on his own ideological development. It embraces the notion that we should take philosophical groundings and epistemology seriously in understanding history.⁴⁵⁰ Through this lens, the importance of philosophical pragmatism has been manifold. But it is also a necessary task to interrogate the means by which it interacts and shapes other intellectual influences. In examining why Obama places such an emphasis on multilateralism as an ultimate form of international action we can trace elements of that same philosophical pragmatism.

The Audacity of Hope demonstrates the premium Obama placed on multilateralism. In it he reflected on how "the painstaking process of building coalitions forces us to listen to other points of view and therefore look before we leap."⁴⁵¹ It allows for that same process of deliberation, and consensus building which is so foundational to Obama's understanding of politics, and in a practical sense it allows for engagement "in some hardheaded analysis of the costs and benefits of the use of force compared to the other tools of influence at our disposal."⁴⁵²

Obama extolled the virtue of appealing to a wider consensus, suggesting "if we hope to win the broader battle of ideas, then world opinion must enter into this calculus."⁴⁵³ In hearing out dissent and opposition to the American perspective, he argued that "it's just possible that beneath all the rhetoric are perspectives that can illuminate the situation and help us make better strategic

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 309-310

⁴⁴⁹ The Obama White House, "Nobel Address."

⁴⁵⁰ Bessner, "Thinking About the U.S. In the World."

⁴⁵¹ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 310

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

decisions.”⁴⁵⁴ He painted a picture of using a process of deliberation to sort through the good and bad choices. It is the very same process he reified in the Constitution, which promotes “the very process of information gathering, analysis, and argument that allows us to make better, if not perfect, choices, not only about the means to our ends but also about the ends themselves.”⁴⁵⁵ He mapped that same necessity of testing “ideals, vision, and values against the realities of a common life, so that over time they may be refined, discarded, or replaced by new ideals, sharper visions, deeper values” that he read in the Constitution on to the international sphere.⁴⁵⁶ It is a significant indication of how Obama viewed the idealized possibilities of a multilateral response to crises and institution building.

In his revealing interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* near the end of his presidency, he emphasized once more the indispensability of multilateralism. He explained “one of the reasons I am so focused on taking action multilaterally where our direct interests are not at stake is that multilateralism regulates hubris.”⁴⁵⁷ Multilateralism allowed for a very different conceptualization of American power and its presence in the world.

The Nobel Prize speech attested to this vision. It was of a foreign policy that could be bounded by context, a notion of war and peace which could be adjudicated by the unique necessity demanded by each situation. Yet, nevertheless, the speech also held a competing narrative, one which sought to locate perspectives on war and peace in a universalized conception of the good.

A great deal of Obama’s philosophy was centred on notions that multiple ideas can be valued at the same time. The Nobel speech reflected this in abundance. It reflected how competing visions of war and peace must be held alongside one another in a complex world. It was part of the logic that saw Obama feeding into different philosophical traditions, synthesizing the assumptions of a conventional liberal internationalism with another lens of pragmatism.

This dialectic runs through the heart of Obama’s philosophy. James Kloppenberg discusses it as the interplay of universalism’s immutable truths remaining true across time with the denial of those universal principles. This particularism holds that “human cultures are human constructions; different people exhibit different forms of behavior because they cherish different values.”⁴⁵⁸ Kloppenberg argues that “American social thought since the middle of the twentieth century has

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 310-311

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 94

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 94-95

⁴⁵⁷ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁴⁵⁸ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. 79

been marked by a struggle between champions of foundationalism and universalism.” He maintains that:

Obama’s sensibility is a product of that conflict. He understands the reasons why the ideas of foundationalism and universalism proved useful: such ideas inspired the generation of his maternal grandparents and that of his parents. He also understands the reasons why such ideals proved vulnerable to a series of challenges: those who embraced those ideals aspired to more than any theory could provide. Even though Obama shares the skepticism of those critics who eroded the foundations on which mid-twentieth-century universalism stood, he nevertheless understands – and is “haunted” by – the residual appeal that timeless ideals continue to exert. As he has been throughout his life, as president he remains caught in the force field between universalism and particularism.⁴⁵⁹

This ‘force field’ forms a central aspect of the means by which Obama set forth arguments concerning the use of American force. The terms universalism and particularism capture a sense of competing assumptions about that question of American involvement in the world. Their assumptions stand in for a broader divide between the humility of much of Obama’s perspective on American power in war and peace (particularism), and a confidence in the prospects of a sense of progress encapsulated by an international order that can reach for universal values in pursuit of war and peace (universalism).

A significant part of this dichotomy was the importance of humility in Obama’s thought. In the Nobel Prize speech there is a particular connection which can be drawn between Obama’s rhetoric and the thought of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. But this is an intellectual connection that runs deeper. In a 2007 *New York Times* interview with David Brooks, when Brooks questioned him on his familiarity with Niebuhr, Obama responded by saying “I love him,” declaring him to be one of his favourite philosophers.⁴⁶⁰ This need not necessitate an overwrought reading into Obama’s philosophical predilections, he is a well-read man who no doubt has many “favourite philosophers,” none of which can necessarily carry a causal link to his overall philosophical outlook. Nevertheless, cause for inquiry is further stirred by Obama’s own reading of Niebuhr.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 88

⁴⁶⁰ Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse".

Niebuhr was a theologian who ministered in Detroit in the early part of the twentieth century, before later teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.⁴⁶¹ His time in Detroit was significant. Being embedded in a community so entangled in labour movement concerns for automotive workers rights, alongside matters of migration and growing racial and ethnic tensions, provoked a keen sense of social engagement in Niebuhr. He became a prominent exponent of a socially conscious Christianity, at times even advocating for socialism.⁴⁶² It is perhaps no surprise that his writings on politics and international affairs were laced with a perspective which stood cognizant of the failings of the United States.

Niebuhr as a theologian addressed concerns that would later transpose to the philosophical domain. He was wrestling with the same concerns which fractured the intellectual spheres of a multitude of disciplines. He was bridging the gap between James, Dewey, and Peirce, the early pragmatists, and Rorty, Putnam, and Bernstein, their later echoes. Crucially, Niebuhr's writings offer an intriguing vision of Obama's own distillation of philosophical pragmatism in foreign policy.

Obama elaborated to Brooks that from reading Niebuhr, he took away:

*The compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain.
And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate these things.
But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction.*⁴⁶³

This is a reading which transposes neatly into Obama's Nobel speech warning that "evil does exist in the world" and which comports in significant ways with the ideas of one of Niebuhr's seminal texts *The Irony of American History*. Indeed, it offers a particularly profound treatment of the ideas linking the intellectual maelstrom which pragmatism participates in, and links them to foreign policy. While Obama may have carried an imperfect reading and understanding of Niebuhr, in tracing some of those ideas into his Nobel address and broader ideas he held on foreign policy, we may, nevertheless, see where a Niebuhrian influence lay. In the case of the Nobel Prize address, the Niebuhrian thread was by design. When undertaking the writing process, Obama had requested that the speechwriters Favreau and Rhodes put together a binder of selected works on war and peace: Niebuhr was among them.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ R. Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History: With a New Introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴⁶²

⁴⁶³ Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse".

⁴⁶⁴ B. Abrams, *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017* (New York: Little A, 2018). p. 137, Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 80

In *The Irony of American History* – first published in 1952 - Niebuhr examined the antagonisms of the Cold War through a lens of tragedy in the “human situation.”⁴⁶⁵ His focus was on the limits of humankind in the face of history. In the vortex of ideological conflict that comprised the Cold War, Niebuhr identified a certain folly in human activity. He argued:

*Perhaps the real difficulty in both the communist and the liberal dreams of a “rationally ordered” historic process is that the modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management.*⁴⁶⁶

For Niebuhr, it was important to remember that “the course of history cannot be coerced from a particular point in history and in accordance with a particular conception of its end.”⁴⁶⁷ He emphasized a viewpoint that will be familiar to us in our examination of Obama, a perspective that argues against abstraction and against imposing ideology onto understandings of historical context. Niebuhr capped off his pragmatist credentials in extolling “the triumph of experience over dogma,” echoing the thought of James in his seminal lectures and Dewey in his writings on democracy.⁴⁶⁸

The emphasis on limitations retains the most telling message from Niebuhr’s work. He framed the difficulties of America’s place in the world and the tragedy of America seeking to use its power to make a better world. In seeking solutions to problems, America could have the tendency to overstate its ability to take righteous action. As such, he warned of the perils of trusting too confidently or complacently in “virtues,” lest they turn to “vices.”⁴⁶⁹

Here he offered up a remedy to such a problem:

*The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue.*⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History: With a New Introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich*.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 88

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 79

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid. pp. 89-108

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 133

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

In foreign affairs terms, a state is “doubly tempted to exceed the bounds of historical possibilities, if it is informed by an idealism which does not understand the limits of man’s wisdom and volition in history.”⁴⁷¹

Here we can most explicitly observe Obama’s engagement and interpretation of Niebuhr. The theologian stated:

*The recognition of historical limits must not, however, lead to a betrayal of cherished values and historical attainments. Historical pragmatism exists on the edge of opportunism, but cannot afford to fall into the abyss. The difficulty of sustaining the values of a free world must not prompt us, for instance, to come to terms with tyranny. Nor must the perplexities confronting the task of achieving global community betray us into a complacent acceptance of national loyalty as the final moral possibility of history.*⁴⁷²

It is a nuanced acceptance of a need to act in the face of uncertainty. And it is what Obama – in his conversation with David Brooks - professed to have taken away from reading Niebuhr, in being “humble and modest” in the belief that evil, hardship, and pain can be eliminated.

Obama’s reading of Niebuhr comports in crucial ways with instincts within the tradition of philosophical pragmatism, and his reverence for the thought of Lincoln. The importance of humility in Niebuhr’s writing is demonstrated time and again in his emphasis on the importance of humankind recognizing the limitations in knowledge. He ascribes “the evil in human history” as “the consequence of man’s wrong use of his unique capacities.” This wrong use “is always due to some failure to recognize the limits of his capacities of power, wisdom and virtue.”⁴⁷³

As a theologian, Niebuhr was keen to portray a notion that ideology cannot offer a solution to something as inherent as sin in human history. He carried a perspective which could today be viewed as unrelentingly pessimistic, something underscored by his continued emphasis on the notion that sin cannot be escaped, and as such, it forms a tragedy in human existence.⁴⁷⁴ When it came to the use of force and the matter of pacifism at hand in a 1940 essay entitled ‘Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist’, he deemed pacifism itself inadequate in the face of sin. For, “it is because men are sinners that justice can be achieved only by a certain degree of coercion and

⁴⁷¹ Ibid. p. 143

⁴⁷² Ibid. p. 143-144

⁴⁷³ Ibid. p. 156

⁴⁷⁴ “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. R. M. Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). p. 108-109

tyranny.”⁴⁷⁵ Such logic could drive Obama to stand and accept the Nobel Peace Prize whilst professing that he was not a pacifist.

While Niebuhr’s essay was among Obama’s compilations of texts he read while writing the speech (Lewis even details some of the notes he made in the margins), it is not to say that Obama was directly channeling it, or that it took particular precedence over other texts and other ideas.⁴⁷⁶ It can, nevertheless, be compellingly argued that key ideas of Niebuhr’s writings are reflected in Obama’s words. At the very least he echoes them in that forceful entreaty to “make no mistake, evil does exist.” Niebuhr made the case for taking requisite action to confront evil but he coupled it with the perspective that such action can only be taken with the acknowledgment of one’s own imperfections, or status as a sinner. He provocatively argued:

*In its profoundest insights, the Christian faith sees the whole of human history as involved in guilt, and finds no release from guilt except in the grace of God. The Christian is freed by that grace to act in history... and he is persuaded by that grace to remember the ambiguity of even his best actions. If the providence of God does not enter the affairs of men to bring good out of evil, the evil in our good may easily destroy our most ambitious efforts and frustrate our highest hopes.*⁴⁷⁷

The notion of providence is echoed in a significant manner by Obama when discussing Lincoln in *The Audacity of Hope*. He wrote of turning to Lincoln when confronted with the complexities of his own thought, and discussed the notion of reaching “for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side; and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence.”⁴⁷⁸

Divine providence represents the notion of God’s intervention in the universe. Both Niebuhr and Obama brought forth the notion of God’s wisdom providing grace to “act in history,” an ability to act whilst accepting imperfection, whilst accepting the frailties of human existence. It offers a direct route in to the tragic pragmatism of Lincoln, and the lines drawn in the previous chapter between Obama, tragic pragmatism, and the notion of taking ‘moral wagers.’

Joseph Rhodes and Mark Hlavicik emphasize the centrality of embracing original sin in truly embodying Niebuhrian thought. They argue “without the concept of original sin, Niebuhr’s realism

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 109

⁴⁷⁶ Lewis, "Obama's Way".

⁴⁷⁷ Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist."

⁴⁷⁸ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 98

can quickly denigrate into a *resigned* form of American exceptionalism."⁴⁷⁹ Indeed, "without a sense that the human events are guided by a higher power with an unknowable purpose, it is impossible to achieve the graceful embrace of moral action in international affairs with the knowledge that it may never work out." Crucially, for Rhodes and Hlavacik, "this divine purpose and sacred view of history" was absent from Obama's Nobel speech.⁴⁸⁰ Though the speech apparently lacked this sense of a higher power and divine purpose, its "embrace of moral action in international affairs with the knowledge that it might never work out" is a notion that this thesis has argued Obama demonstrated through his engagement with Lincoln. He also showed it in statements on the process of making complex and imperfect decisions, as was the case in the Afghanistan review process. An absence of humility has never been an issue for Obama's approach to foreign policy. What Rhodes and Hlavacik contend is Obama's lack of serious engagement with Niebuhr's core concern with original sin, however, poses a more significant challenge to his Nieburhian credentials. Obama's is, it seems, a more hopeful Christianity than Niebuhr's.

Niebuhr emphasized there was not a teleological notion of humanity finding a means of overcoming evil. But Obama seemed to reject this perspective with his consistent performance of *hope* for improvement in the human condition and a firm and frequently elucidated belief in the enactment of progress. For all his Niebuhrian instincts, Obama might fall short of the theologian's approval. His frequently professed belief that the U.S. and the world with gentle prodding, can improve themselves is its own exhibition of 'sin' which Niebuhr warned so firmly against.

Whether or not Obama is categorically a *Niebuhrian*, more significant in the pursuit of intellectual history is the means by which Obama himself chooses to interpret and to use the thought of Niebuhr. Naturally he does so in a manner that is compatible with his own intellectual predispositions. The central humility in Obama's reading of Niebuhr is instructional and goes some distance to tying Obama's interpretation to a version of pragmatism. It is the humility he emphasized in conversation with Brooks, and it is that same humility he weaved in to his Nobel acceptance speech. Hitting perhaps its most Niebuhrian note, Obama argued that "adhering to [the] law of love has always been the core struggle of human nature. For we are fallible. We make mistakes, and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil. Even those of us with the best intentions will at times fail to right the wrongs before us."⁴⁸¹ Indeed, "to say that

⁴⁷⁹ J. Rhodes, and Hlavacik, M., "Imagining Moral Presidential Speech: Barack Obama's Niebuhrian Nobel," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2015).

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ The Obama White House, "Nobel Address."

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.”⁴⁸²

But from here, Obama pivoted to an argument which seems at odds with this Niebuhrian humility. At this juncture he laid bare the contradictions and paradoxes of carrying forth humility with the history of America’s engagement with the world. He grandly declared “whatever mistakes we have made the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.”⁴⁸³ Here Obama turned to the language of American exceptionalism: A heart of Niebuhr surrounded by the musculature of *Pax Americana*.

Obama’s assertion that the United States served to underwrite global security speaks to the notion of America the superpower, and places a special burden upon itself in a manner that widens the net of interests which ensnare American attention. Wrapped up in this perspective is a notion that the U.S. carries a unique capability to discern the *good* for everyone the world over.

The post-war years loom large in the sense of America setting a course for world order. This was something Obama himself detailed in his narrative of U.S. foreign policy in *Audacity of Hope*.⁴⁸⁴ And it was a notion he carried through his presidency, extolling the virtues of prominent neoconservative Robert Kagan’s *New Republic* article which challenged “The Myth of American Decline.”⁴⁸⁵ Obama channeled Kagan’s arguments in the 2012 State of the Union Address to refute the notion that he was presiding over an American decline, emphasizing instead the reinvigorated primacy of American influence in world affairs.⁴⁸⁶ Obama had liked Kagan’s article to such a degree that he spent more than 10 minutes talking about it in an off the record meeting with leading television news anchors, engaging with its arguments “paragraph by paragraph.”⁴⁸⁷ It is not surprising that he carried such an enthusiasm. Kagan continued to make the case in expanded detail in his book *The World America Made*, concluding that “for all its flaws and its miseries, the world America made has been a remarkable anomaly in the history of humanity.”⁴⁸⁸ It was a case that Obama had made in *The*

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 284

⁴⁸⁵ R. Kagan, "Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline," *The New Republic* 11 January (2012), <https://newrepublic.com/article/99521/america-world-power-declinism>.

⁴⁸⁶ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," news release, January 24, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

⁴⁸⁷ J. Rogin, "Obama Embraces Romney Advisor's Theory on 'the Myth of American Decline'," *Foreign Policy* (2012), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/26/obama-embraces-romney-advisors-theory-on-the-myth-of-american-decline/>.

⁴⁸⁸ R. Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012). p. 140

Audacity of Hope and his Nobel Prize address, and it was clearly a notion he held to be significant in conceptualizing America's place in the world.

===

In staking a claim that violent conflict will not be eradicated and that the use of force would be “not only necessary but morally justified” Obama recognized Martin Luther King Jr’s words from his own Nobel Prize address: “violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.”⁴⁸⁹ Obama noted “I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there’s nothing weak – nothing passive – nothing naïve – in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King.” But here he stated “as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people.”⁴⁹⁰ Therein he revealed the tragedy and irony at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. He expressed this as a challenge in “reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths – that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.” But in the pursuit of peace he demonstrated the existence of a similar tension, a similar dialectic. He extolled the virtue of human rights as being universal, enshrined indeed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet “too often” he argued “these words are ignored. For some countries, the failure to uphold human rights is excused by the false suggestions that these are somehow Western principles, foreign to local cultures, or stages of a nation’s development.” This extended to the U.S. foreign policy realm where “there has long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists, a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world.” For his part, Obama stated “I reject these choices” instead affirming “no matter how callously defined, neither America’s interests – nor the world’s – are served by the denial of human aspirations.”⁴⁹¹

In his most overt testament to the tension between particularism and universalism, he argued “even as we respect the unique culture and traditions of different countries, America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal.” He explicitly projected the American particular onto the universal. *America* for Obama represented ideology that is aspirational the world over.⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁹ The Obama White House, "Nobel Address."

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

In dealing with transgressors against such human rights, Obama emphasized the importance of the world standing “together as one,” in order to bring solutions which avoided the “tragic choices” of waging war. He emphasized that “agreement among nations. Strong institutions. Support for human rights. Investments in development. All these are vital ingredients in bringing about the [gradual] evolution [in human institutions] that President Kennedy spoke about.” Yet, he argued “I do not believe that we will have the will, the determination, the staying power, to complete this work without something more – and that’s the continued expansion of our moral imagination; an insistence that there’s something irreducible that we all share.”⁴⁹³ It could scarcely be more universalist.

The contradiction at the heart of Obama’s perspective on the world, the dialectic between universalism and particularism reflect in a broader sense the tragedy and irony which lay at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. They are elements which would be at play in matters of foreign policy, and challenge him in the firmness of his perspective of American power and the capabilities of the international community to solve crises as they arose. This was put to no greater test than in the events which spiraled from what became known as the Arab Spring. As Samantha Power, Obama’s second Ambassador to the United Nations, would later put it, “these uprisings would end up impacting the course of Obama’s presidency more than any other geopolitical development during his eight years in office.”⁴⁹⁴

===

On 17 December 2010 a Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, had his scales confiscated by the local authorities of the small rural town of Sidi Bouzid. Unable to pay the necessary bribes to recover his property, unable to afford to replace it, and ultimately feeling humiliated by his treatment, Bouazizi doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire.⁴⁹⁵ This act of total desperation in the face of rampant corruption pervading society stirred a sense of injustice in the Tunisian population. Protests began to spread, spurred on by anger at President Zine Ben Ali, whose 23 years in power had been characterized by a corruption and ruthlessness exemplified in Bouazizi’s treatment.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ S. Power, *The Education of an Idealist* (London: William Collins, 2019). p. 288

⁴⁹⁵ B Simon, "How a Slap Sparked Tunisia's Revolution," *CBS News* (2011), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-a-slap-sparked-tunisias-revolution-22-02-2011/>.

Bouazizi died on 4th January and ten days later tens of thousands of people came out to the streets of Tunis and brought the city to a standstill.⁴⁹⁶ Ben Ali panicked at this show of strength from the public, and fled the country. An authoritarian dictator had been forced out by the people. It was an inspiring moment for populations all across a region which roiled with disaffection for autocrats who ruled with a tight-grip, who had for generations prevented widespread democratic engagement, and who retained the nation's wealth as a personal plaything.⁴⁹⁷

On 12 August 2010, four months prior to the events in Tunisia, Obama sent a memorandum entitled 'Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa' to senior figures in the administration's foreign policy team. He wrote that "progress toward political reform and openness in the Middle East and North Africa lags behind other regions and has, in some cases, stalled."⁴⁹⁸ Ryan Lizza reported in the *New Yorker* that Obama "noted that even the more liberal countries [in the Middle East] were cracking down on public gatherings, the press, and political opposition groups." Obama wrote in his memo that there was "evidence of growing citizen discontent with the region's regimes," and it was likely that "if present trends continue" allies in the region would "opt for repression rather than reform to manage domestic dissent."⁴⁹⁹

He continued, "increased repression could threaten the political and economic stability of some of our allies, leaves us with fewer capable, credible partners who can support our regional priorities, and further alienate citizens in the region."⁵⁰⁰ The upshot of this memo was Obama instructing his staff to come up with "tailored," "country by country" strategies on political reform.⁵⁰¹ This would become Presidential Study Directive 11, in which he requested his advisers challenge the traditional idea that stability in the Middle East always served U.S. interests.⁵⁰² "Obama wanted to weigh the risks of both 'continued support for increasingly unpopular and repressive regimes' and a 'strong push by the United States for reform.'" He wrote that "the advent of political succession in a number of countries offers a potential opening for political reform in the region." Poor management of these projected transitions, he mused, "could have negative implications for U.S. interests, including our standing among Arab publics."⁵⁰³

It was a prescient foretelling of what would unfold mere months later. But Obama's memo also painted a clear picture of the dilemmas that confronted the U.S. in a region where it had long held a

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 257

⁵⁰³ Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

series of relationships which often stretched the meaning of 'friendship,' or 'alliance.' The paradox of the U.S. squaring its historic fervency for freedom and democracy and its tolerance for often repressive and undemocratic regimes who nevertheless offered strategic benefits had long cast a pall over its foreign policy.

The seismic events which unraveled would prove the ultimate challenge to Obama's foreign policy worldview. How would he conceptualize America's role in reacting to change in a volatile region? What was America's role in shaping a world in flux? Could it stand as a disinterested observer, its attention turned elsewhere, to more pressing concerns, or did its vast might, and historical entanglements in the region still necessitate a strong engagement?

When a mass wave of protest followed the Tunisian lead throughout the region, Obama's case-by-case plan was put into action. Egypt would provide the most vexing initial examination. The heart of the Arab world, home to half of its inhabitants, Egypt holds a pivotal place in Arab affairs and for many years the U.S. had cultivated its authoritarian president Hosni Mubarak as an anchor of stability in an otherwise tumultuous region who, among other things, ensured that fragile peace accords with Israel were upheld.⁵⁰⁴

When protesters filled Cairo's Tahrir Square calling for Mubarak's exit, the Obama administration was confronted with a difficult choice as to whether it should join the calls for Mubarak to go, or provide support for a staunch ally.⁵⁰⁵ It was a direct test of Obama's assertion in his memo that "our regional and international credibility will be undermined if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens."⁵⁰⁶ Lizza suggests that Obama's analysis "showed a desire to balance interests and ideals."⁵⁰⁷

When Mubarak announced that he would stay for the remaining months of his term to "carry out all the necessary measures to transfer power," protesters reacted angrily to what they perceived as an equivocation. Obama sensed the tide had turned decisively and, unwilling to push against the will of the people in the street, he called Mubarak urging him to leave. He followed this call by publicly stating "an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now."⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ M. Landler, *Alter Egos: Obama's Legacy, Hillary's Promise and the Struggle over American Power* (London: WH Allen, 2016). p. 160

⁵⁰⁵ D. E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012). p. 290

⁵⁰⁶ Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 105

Press Secretary Robert Gibbs emphasized the urgency the next day: when asked what Obama meant by “now,” Gibbs retorted “now started yesterday.”⁵⁰⁹

Lizza noted how Obama “wanted to assure other autocratic allies that the U.S. did not hastily abandon its friends” and thus his “ultimate position, it seemed, was to talk like an idealist while acting like a realist.” In calling for Mubarak to go, it appeared the talk had won out in becoming reality. Other longstanding allies in the region took note. Yet, Obama stayed true to the form of responses tailored to each country. Saudi Arabian suppression of protest did not warrant significant U.S. attention. Bahrain - home of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet - received cursory condemnation from the administration for its violent crackdown on protests by the persecuted majority population Shia - but only a muted follow-up.⁵¹⁰ In Yemen, despite being an ally in the fight against al Qaeda, sensing the tide of opposition against him, the Obama administration urged 30 year incumbent president Ali Abdullah Saleh to step aside.⁵¹¹ In Tunisia, at the start of the unrest, Obama had stated his support of a holding of “free and fair elections...that reflect the true will and aspiration of the Tunisian people.”⁵¹² Lizza suggested that in his response to the fast moving events of the Arab Spring that Obama “emphasized bureaucratic efficiency over ideology, and approached foreign policy as if it were case law, deciding his response to every threat or crises on its own merits.”⁵¹³ Obama insisted in an interview with NBC News that “when you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you’re going to get yourself into trouble.”⁵¹⁴

This acknowledgment spoke to the philosophically pragmatist instinct. It was a rejection of the idea that history could be coerced in a single direction. Instead, each crisis demanded a uniquely curated response. Yet this bumps up against a starkly different conception of America’s role in the world, one which sees it as holding the capability to shape world affairs to its own interests. Case-by-case basis or not, Obama was still left navigating the fact that the U.S., by dint of its longstanding roots in the concerns of all corners of the world, and its role in curating and upholding an international order, carried an outsized influence in the fates of the countries in the grips of the Arab Spring.

On 15 February, four days after Mubarak finally stood down, Libyan protestors took to the streets. As forces loyal to its longtime president - Muammar Gaddafi - killed more than a dozen protestors on

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 272

⁵¹¹ D. E. Sanger, "Envoy Meets with Leader of Yemen on Accord," *The New York Times* 11 July Issue (2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/11/world/middleeast/11yemen.html>.

⁵¹² The Obama White House, "Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia," news release, January 14, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/14/statement-president-events-tunisia>.

⁵¹³ Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

12 February, crucial differences in the Libyan situation became apparent. The protesters quickly became armed rebels who, beginning in Benghazi, started to take control of the eastern part of the country. This in turn only increased Gaddafi's intent on restoring back control.⁵¹⁵ A resultant round of UN sanctions, an arms embargo, and a referral of Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court did nothing to deter the dictator from turning his forces onto the Libyan people. On 22 February, he gave a speech in which he entrenched his position, vowing to "purify Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, street by street, person by person, until the country is clean of the dirt and impurities."⁵¹⁶

As violent crackdowns continued, with reports of arrests, torture, and killings, and amid fears that Gaddafi would begin to use air power to attack the uprising, familiar calls emerged for humanitarian intervention. Leading these calls were French president Nicholas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister, David Cameron. Sarkozy initiated the charge in calling for Gaddafi to go. Cameron called for the establishment of a no-fly-zone.⁵¹⁷ The opposition began to urge the outside world to take action. And amidst it all, Gaddafi seemed to show no sign of relenting in his efforts to quell protest. The Obama administration however remained conspicuously absent from the back and forth, until a somewhat languid suggestion in a "readout" of a call between Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, that "when a leader's only means of staying in power is to use mass violence against his own people, he has lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now."⁵¹⁸ Obama finally followed this up with a firmer statement in a press conference on 3 March, demanding that Gaddafi "step down and leave" immediately.⁵¹⁹

The military was reluctant to take action. This was demonstrated in no clearer sense than by Defense Secretary Bob Gates, who argued against the necessity for any form of war in Libya. In response to suggestions that a no-fly-zone might be pursued, he told a Congressional hearing "let's call a spade a spade. A no-fly-zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy its air defenses. A no-fly-zone begins with an act of war."⁵²⁰ It would not be a simple act, but would require the full force of U.S. capabilities. This came at a time when the Defense department was already stretched. The war in Afghanistan was costing the U.S. around \$10 billion a month, while the Iraq war also continued to be

⁵¹⁵ R. M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (London: WH Allen, 2014). p. 510

⁵¹⁶ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 110

⁵¹⁷ N. Watt, "Nicolas Sarkozy Calls for Air Strikes on Libya If Gaddafi Attacks Civilians," *The Guardian* (2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/11/nicolas-sarkozy-libya-air-strikes>.

⁵¹⁸ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 111

⁵¹⁹ M. Landler, "Obama Tells Qaddafi to Quit and Authorizes Refugee Airlifts," *The New York Times* (2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/world/africa/04president.html>.

⁵²⁰ Gates, *Duty*. p. 513

a considerable drain on resources.⁵²¹ The upshot was clear, the Defense department's attention and resources were finite. Writing in his memoir, Gates reflected:

What was happening in Libya was not a vital national interest of the United States. I opposed the United States attacking a third Muslim country within a decade to bring about regime change, no matter how odious the regime. I worried about how overstretched and tired our military was, and the possibility of a protracted conflict in Libya. I reminded my colleagues that when you start a war, you never know how it will go. The advocates of military action expected a short, easy fight. How many times in history had that naïve assumption proven wrong? In meetings, I would ask, "Can I just finish the two wars we're already in before you go looking for new ones?"⁵²²

Gates leant in to Obama's own conception of premising U.S. intervention on the measure of necessity. The administration more broadly, however, was divided. In favour of intervention was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Clinton was allied in this instance with Samantha Power, then a member of the National Security Council. But it was Power's previous life as a journalist covering the Balkan Wars that provided urgency for her perspective in Libya. Having witnessed the horrors of mass killings, Power wrote the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Problem From Hell* which detailed historical U.S. failures to prevent genocide. Power was determined that, should such an occasion arise again, the U.S. and the international order must not fail *again*.⁵²³ Power represented a strong voice in the administration which favoured the broad strokes of liberal internationalism. Those ideas also carried a notable presence in the form of Anne-Marie Slaughter - the administration's first Director of Policy Planning at the State Department until just prior to the Libya crisis. Along with perspectives drawn from a successful career as a legal and international relations scholar, Slaughter carried with her insights drawn from her stewardship with John Ikenberry, of the Princeton Project on National Security.⁵²⁴

The project produced a report which argued that "America must stand for, seek, and secure a world of liberty under law."⁵²⁵ It was born of an effort to search for a bipartisan alternative to the foreign policy of George W. Bush. Certain elements tracked closely with Obama's own inclinations, or at

⁵²¹ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 286

⁵²² Gates, *Duty*. pp. 511-512

⁵²³ S. Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

⁵²⁴ G. J. Ikenberry, and Slaughter, A. , "Forging a World of Liberty under Law: Us National Security in the 21st Century / Final Paper of the Princeton Project on National Security," (Princeton: The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 2006).

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6

least inclinations which would find a home in his administration. The report, in essence, advocated a deliberate strengthening of the liberal international order.⁵²⁶ According to historian Michael Kimmage this order, elucidated by Ikenberry in particular, would be “led by the United States and dedicated to rules and norms, strengthening the legal and institutional sinews of an international order that would run on deliberation.” In highlighting the prominence of the liberal international order as a core concept in the administration, Kimmage suggests that Ikenberry “was the patron saint of the Obama administration.”⁵²⁷

The Princeton Project’s report also endorsed the notion that all UN members formally accept “the responsibility to protect,” a doctrine “which acknowledges that sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens from “avoidable catastrophe,” but that when they are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the international community.”⁵²⁸ The crisis in Libya, and then Syria, would fall firmly in the rubric of “R2P.” Within the administration, Power was an advocate and had even fervently pushed for the inclusion of an embrace of the concept in the Nobel Prize speech.⁵²⁹ Susan Rice, Obama’s first UN Ambassador and final National Security Advisor (who also held a leading role in running foreign policy for Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign) also carried a similar belief in the imperatives of humanitarian intervention.⁵³⁰ She had been an NSC aide for Africa policy during the Clinton administration, and during the Rwandan genocide, and later said “I swore to myself that if I ever faced such a crisis again, I would come down on the side of dramatic action, going down in flames if that was required.”⁵³¹

Obama appeared to carry some degree of sympathy for this perspective. Despite Gates’ clear emphasis that it was not a war of necessity; circumstances in Libya steadily began to tilt in the favour of an intervention. Perhaps the most crucial step occurred on 12 March when, in Clinton’s words, “a development in Cairo began to change the calculus.”⁵³² The Arab League, after five hours of deliberation, voted to request that the UN Security Council impose a no-fly-zone in Libya.⁵³³ This was a crucial step which brought legitimacy to the notion of an intervention in Libya that was grounded in *local* concerns, distinct from yet another unwanted Western intervention into a Muslim majority country’s sovereignty. Indeed, an *Al-Jazeera* report noted that ministers from the 22 member states

⁵²⁶ Ibid. p. 7

⁵²⁷ M. Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 2020). p. 282

⁵²⁸ Ikenberry, “Forging a World of Liberty under Law: Us National Security in the 21st Century / Final Paper of the Princeton Project on National Security.”

⁵²⁹ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 82

⁵³⁰ Mann, *The Obamians*. pp. 167-168 pp. 77-81

⁵³¹ Ibid. pp. 167-168, 284

⁵³² H. R. Clinton, *Hard Choices* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014). p. 367

⁵³³ Ibid.

of the Arab league “appeared to leave Gaddafi increasingly isolated, saying his government had ‘lost its sovereignty’” and “they also conferred legitimacy on the rebels’ opposition National Libyan Council, saying they would establish contacts with the umbrella group and calling on nations to provide it with ‘urgent help.’”⁵³⁴

British and French officials made it clear that they expected the U.S. to join them in an intervention, suggesting it was time for it to repay favours - instances such as Afghanistan where Britain and France had sent troops to aid American efforts.⁵³⁵ France, the UK, and Lebanon proceeded to bring a Security Council resolution calling for the implementation of a no-fly-zone. All the while, Gaddafi’s forces had begun to overcome their opposition. With air support, government forces were moving rapidly eastward into the rebel held territory.⁵³⁶

The imperative for action had reached a fever-pitch. Gaddafi had already promised that in confronting the uprisings there would be “no mercy,” that his troops would go house to house in search of “traitors” and he instructed supporters to “capture the rats.” His son Saif had added his own horrifying rhetoric to the equation, declaring that “rivers of blood” would run through Libya if protests continued, maintaining forces loyal to Gaddafi would “fight until the last man, the last woman, the last bullet.”⁵³⁷ As the attention of Gaddafi’s forces were about to be turned fully toward rebel stronghold Benghazi, Derek Chollet reflected in *The Long Game* the sense of urgency at play. He wrote “sitting in the White House we had overwhelming evidence of Gaddafi’s intent on mass slaughter.”⁵³⁸ Thus amidst the crisis, on 15 March, Obama held a Situation Room meeting to debate the administration’s course of action.⁵³⁹

Having done diplomatic leg-work with meetings with the Arab League, Libyan opposition forces, and European powers, Clinton argued diplomatic and military support existed for a no-fly zone, and she also supported it.⁵⁴⁰ Biden, Gates, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen objected to any form of intervention, as did Chief of Staff Bill Daley. Susan Rice however was in favour. Rhodes reflects how she argued “This is like Rwanda” and as such “we have a moral responsibility to act.”⁵⁴¹ Libya was a test case for many who shared such a perspective, with one participant in the meetings reflecting that “the ghosts of 800,000 Tutsis were in that room.” Power offered her own call for

⁵³⁴ Al-Jazeera, "Arab States Seek Libya No-Fly Zone," (2011), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/03/201131218852687848.html>.

⁵³⁵ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 290

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ibid. p. 184

⁵³⁸ Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 102

⁵³⁹ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 112

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 113

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

action, emphasizing humanitarian factors and noting that Gaddafi “told us what he was going to do in Benghazi – he’d go house to house, killing people.”⁵⁴² Rhodes for his part made a similar case, arguing that the Libya crisis fit Obama’s criteria for humanitarian intervention, as laid out in the Nobel speech he had helped to write.⁵⁴³ He however also noted in his memoir “as I spoke, I could sense Obama’s ambivalence.”⁵⁴⁴

Obama proceeded to ask if a no-fly-zone – the goal of Lebanon, France, and Britain’s resolution - would prevent the projected scenario from unfolding. His intelligence and military advisers answered that it would have no impact on Gaddafi’s ground surge towards Benghazi.⁵⁴⁵ Obama expressed displeasure at “debating an option that won’t even solve this problem,” closing the meeting with a demand for more options.⁵⁴⁶ “It became clear,” Chollet writes, “that the United States could not stand aside. The circumstances were the inverse of those that had led to the intervention in Iraq nearly a decade earlier: the threat was imminent, the intelligence undisputed, and the world was clamouring for America to do something.”⁵⁴⁷

Later, reconvening the meeting, Obama was presented with an option that would allow for effective action, a UN resolution which would go beyond a no-fly zone, calling in addition for “all necessary measures” to protect civilians on the ground.⁵⁴⁸ This would in effect allow for the U.S. and international forces to protect the Libyan rebels through the bombing of government forces. After two days of intense diplomatic negotiations led by Rice and Clinton, the resolution was approved by the Security Council. Surprisingly, Russia and China abstained, effectively green-lighting the initiative. A final vote tally of 10-0 with five abstentions allowed UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to pass on March 17th, the first time in its sixty year history that the UN had authorized preemptive action to prevent an “imminent massacre.”⁵⁴⁹

Obama, despite earlier ambivalence, had come down on the side of action. David Sanger argues that Obama assumed the perspective that it was not a credible option to do nothing.⁵⁵⁰ Indeed, Sanger reports that Obama told the NSC that “we can’t play the role of a Russia or a China...If we don’t act, if we put brakes on this thing, it will have consequences for U.S. credibility and leadership, consequences for the Arab Spring, and consequences for the international community.” In a worst-

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*. p. 342

⁵⁴⁴ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 113

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 114

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.; Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*. p. 343

⁵⁴⁷ Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 98

⁵⁴⁸ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 115

⁵⁴⁹ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 291; Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

⁵⁵⁰ Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*. p. 345

case scenario, Obama argued, a mass slaughter would occur in Benghazi, and despite the opportunity presented to prevent such an atrocity, and despite Obama's rhetoric in support of universal rights, the U.S. would be viewed as running away from taking responsibility. He would be held morally responsible for failing to prevent a preventable massacre. Obama concluded "That's just not who we are."⁵⁵¹

As it was, Sanger suggests "it was an American embrace, at least in this one case, of the concept of a 'responsibility to protect.'"⁵⁵² James Mann notes that Obama's Libya decision was depicted by aides as being motivated by realistic concerns as well as moral ones, by factors which suggests a cause beyond the simple humanitarianism of "responsibility to protect," and as such it played in to the dynamic of the Nobel Prize speech in more nuanced respects. Rhodes suggested that "there is a realist component, which is that a lot of what we have been trying to do is to essentially put forward a model of U.S. leadership," suggesting that there were not only moral concerns at play, but also deeper notions of America's role in global affairs, and how it would position itself in a changing world.⁵⁵³

Obama had acceded to the interventionist cause of various figures in the administration, yet it was under a crucial proviso, and one which sought to forge a distinct direction for U.S. leadership and its place in the world order. U.S. intervention would be limited to the initial bombing campaign, and logistical and technical support, before turning the operation over to NATO command. The thinking on Obama's part was aimed at making this an intervention for which the U.S. would not be left holding the bag. Clinton appeared to buy in to this notion, emphasizing to Lizza the importance of having regional support before acting, and how crucial the Arab League's support for UN action was. She stated "so now we're going to see whether the Security Council will support the Arab League. Not support the United States – support the Arab League."⁵⁵⁴

For as much as the Libya decision was a departure from many of Obama's instincts on American power and intervention, he wrapped it up in such a manner that appeared to be clinging to the semblance of the more humble America he championed. Lizza noted "the one consistent thread running through most of Obama's decisions has been that America must act humbly in the world." He continued, "unlike his immediate predecessors, Obama came of age politically during the post-Cold War era, a time when America's unmatched power created widespread resentment. Obama

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² Ibid. p. 346

⁵⁵³ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 293

⁵⁵⁴ Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy".

believes that highly visible American leadership can taint a foreign-policy goal just as easily as it can bolster it.”⁵⁵⁵

Lizza elicited from an un-named advisor of Obama a quote that termed the efforts in Libya as “leading from behind.”⁵⁵⁶ The line has subsequently been much derided and even rejected among Obama people, but in a sense it does capture an important essence of the way Obama approached Libya. It reaches back to Obama’s own stated admiration for George H.W. Bush and his curation of multilateralism in the lead up to the first Gulf War. The approach to Libya was one which reflected in deep and important ways Obama’s preference for multilateralism which he had carefully established in *The Audacity of Hope* and his Nobel address. In international affairs which do not threaten U.S. security, multilateralism should be pursued. Libya fell firmly in to this category.

Tellingly, in her memoir, *The Education of an Idealist*, Samantha Power recalls that Obama had instructed Susan Rice “to see whether she could get a resolution through the Security Council to license coercive steps to protect civilians” and crucially, Power notes, “if she could not achieve this, he made clear that the United States would not intervene militarily.”⁵⁵⁷ Intervention was literally contingent on multilateralism. Rice for her part reflects “we genuinely favoured the more robust mandate as the only approach we thought had merit, if we were going to act.” The ambivalence which Rhodes interpreted in Obama was real to the degree that Obama himself had told Gates, that, according to the Secretary’s memoir “the Libyan military operation had been a 51-49 call for him.”⁵⁵⁸ We see a picture of Obama requiring all the right pieces to be in all the right places for him to take that decision to pursue a more aggressive UN Security Council resolution. Mann reports that there “were serious considerations” – about economic feasibility and waging another war in another Muslim majority country – “which might in other circumstances have produced an American decision to stay out of the Libyan operation entirely.”⁵⁵⁹ The drop-off from the ultimate decision to the alternative was significant. Mann notes that the critics of the decision to allow Britain and France to take the lead erred in assuming that the alternative was a military campaign dominated by America. The alternative was not for U.S. to take lead. It was for the U.S. to do nothing.⁵⁶⁰

Such critics ignored Obama’s own previously stated vision of American power in a realm where its security was not directly threatened. The importance of multilateralism in Obama’s thinking for such

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*. p. 302

⁵⁵⁸ Gates, *Duty*. p. 519

⁵⁵⁹ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 294

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 294-295

situations had been laid bare, yet given scant attention for how that might shape his perspective on American power. Mann reflects on how the approach to the intervention in Libya reflected a multilateralism of a “new strain:”

*It went well beyond previous versions, in which the United States simply consulted with its allies. This time, the United States started the military campaign and then stepped aside while allies took over. It was an approach virtually without precedent since World War II. In the Obamian view, the United States should preserve its leadership role in the world in the coming decades, but it could only do so by making some changes, acknowledging the limits of power and the greater need to share the costs and responsibilities of a military campaign.*⁵⁶¹

The campaign in Libya started in earnest on 19 March but Obama had imposed strict limitations on American involvement. “No boots on the ground” became an oft repeated mantra.⁵⁶² Chollet notes how Obama himself had crafted the idea of an initial U.S. effort being followed up and taken over by allies.⁵⁶³ Furthermore, Chollet suggests that the Libya war carried elements of the “Long Game playbook,” as “because Libya was not a vital interest, the United States needed to be careful not to allow its involvement to overwhelm other priorities. America would lead, but do so in a way that only it could, expecting partners to carry a large burden.”⁵⁶⁴

While Obama did deem what happened in Libya important, it was not a core interest to the United States. Libya fell firmly into the regional interests of European, Middle Eastern, and North African countries. It was thus important for those with most at stake to assume the most responsibility. Obama’s approach was primed at fostering other nations’ assumption of responsibility. Chollet argues that “Obama saw this crisis as an opportunity to show how he believed countries could work together, relying more on America’s uniqueness than on its dominance.”⁵⁶⁵ Or as Mann put it, “America could go along, so long as it didn’t have to carry the military burden on its own.”⁵⁶⁶ True to this effort to reduce American involvement and to promote European assumption of responsibility, the bulk of the combat would be left to the Europeans.⁵⁶⁷ Obama’s intent was for the Pentagon to use its capabilities to stop the impending massacre before turning the operation over to European

⁵⁶¹ Ibid. p. 300

⁵⁶² R. L. Russell, “The “No Boots on the Ground” Mantra Is Strategic Foolishness,” *War On The Rocks* 17 September (2014), <https://warontherocks.com/2014/09/the-no-boots-on-the-ground-mantra-is-strategic-foolishness/>.

⁵⁶³ Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 100

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 101

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 100

⁵⁶⁶ Mann, *The Obamians*. p. 300

⁵⁶⁷ Landler, *Alter Egos*. p. 176

and Arab allies within ten days.⁵⁶⁸ Indeed, Gaddafi's air defenses were destroyed and his forces stopped within three days.⁵⁶⁹

The bombing raids would last for seven months, comprising nearly 10,000 airstrikes, nearly 90 percent of which were conducted by the forces of America's allies.⁵⁷⁰ Mann suggests allowing the British and the French to be in the forefront enabled Obama to greatly reduce the costs of the Libyan operation to the United States. In mid-April "operations in Libya were costing American taxpayers roughly \$1 million to \$3 million a day; by contrast, the war in Afghanistan during the same period was costing more than \$300 million per day."⁵⁷¹ The entire campaign would cost just over \$1 billion, which was roughly equivalent to what the U.S. spent per week in Iraq or Afghanistan.⁵⁷² In many respects, the intervention was a success in its cost effectiveness and the manner in which it ultimately did not distract firmly from other U.S. priorities.

===

In August rebel forces took control of Tripoli. The Gaddafi government had fallen, and in October he himself would come to a violent end, discovered and killed by rebels in the coastal city of Sirte. This turn of events, however, provoked questions about true limits of the intervention. "All necessary measures" to protect civilians facing impending massacre in Benghazi soon became stretched to protecting civilians wherever they were.⁵⁷³ The limited intervention to prevent a specific incident from occurring was becoming not so limited. So too was the notion of limited U.S. participation, as it became clear that America's unique capabilities were required in greater quantity than previously realized. Cracks were beginning to appear in the coalition and its ability to fulfill the mission. Gates recalls that "the United States ultimately had to provide the lion's share of reconnaissance capability and most of the midair refueling of planes; just three months into the campaign" the U.S. "had to resupply even our strongest allies with precision-guided bombs and missiles – they had exhausted their meager supply. Toward the final stages, we had to reenter the fray with our own

⁵⁶⁸ J. Becker, and Shane, S., "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall," *The New York Times* 27 February (2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html>.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ Chollet, *The Long Game*. pp. 100-101

⁵⁷¹ Mann, *The Obamians*. pp. 293-294

⁵⁷² Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 101

⁵⁷³ Becker, "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall".

fighters and drones. All this was the result of years of underinvestment in defense by even our closest allies.”⁵⁷⁴

The final cataclysm in Libya was to be the total lack of forethought for what would come after, in the event that Gaddafi was removed, and a vacuum remained. Obama had made clear that “we are not looking to do another Iraq,”⁵⁷⁵ and in Chollet’s words, “the Europeans were all along saying: ‘No, no, no, we’re doing this. We got it. We believe in Libya. This is in our neighborhood.”⁵⁷⁶ Taking this cue, the U.S. set the same “fierce limits” it had for the intervention, providing help only when it could offer a unique capability, and then only after Libya explicitly requested it, and in addition, only when Libya paid for the services with its oil revenue.⁵⁷⁷

At the same time, however, the proliferation of arms that had entered the country during the uprising against Gaddafi and the NATO intervention meant there was now also a proliferation of armed militias each seeking its own piece of the new Libya. The nation descended into a vicious civil war from which it has scarcely emerged. Two rival governments set up opposing claims for control of the nation, now divided into east and west. Jon Lee Anderson writing in the *New Yorker*, summated that “effectively, the Libyan state has collapsed, replaced by a series of warring city-states.”⁵⁷⁸

Scholar Alan Kuperman suggests that Libya’s human rights situation had gotten worse since Gaddafi’s ouster. The rebels perpetrated “scores of reprisal killings, in addition to torturing, beating, and arbitrarily detaining thousands” of suspected Gaddafi supporters. They also “expelled 30,000 mostly black residents from the town of Tawergha and burned or looted their homes and shops,” based on claims that some had been mercenaries. Human Rights Watch was prompted to declare that abuses such as these appeared to be “so widespread and systematic that they may amount to crimes against humanity.”⁵⁷⁹

In addition, Kuperman argues the decision to intervene was based on faulty intelligence and an over-inflation of Gaddafi’s acts of violence against citizens and the true threat of massacre that he actually posed.⁵⁸⁰ Questions about the wisdom of intervening were adding up. It had become increasingly difficult to refute a notion the Obama and his administration had effectively sleep-

⁵⁷⁴ Gates, *Duty*. p. 522

⁵⁷⁵ J. Becker, and Shane, S., "A New Libya, with 'Very Little Time Left'," *The New York Times* 27 February (2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-isis-hillary-clinton.html>.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ J. L. Anderson, "The Unravelling," *The New Yorker* February 23 & March 2 Issue (2015), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling>.

⁵⁷⁹ A. J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure," *Foreign Affairs*, no. March/April Issue (2015).

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

walked into making the same mistakes as those which underwrote the Iraqi disaster. A disaster which Obama had so relentlessly critiqued years previously.

The faith in Libyans to rebuild a country riven by tribal divides and the total suppression of civil society for the four previous decades, and in the Europeans to live up to their insistence that they would take responsibility in their region became obviously and wildly misplaced. No party was willing in the aftermath to heed Colin Powell's famous adage that "if you break it, you own it."⁵⁸¹ Obama had long maintained a wariness of the fact that it was easy for the U.S. to get into a war and hard to get out. But now a carefully calibrated entry had yielded just as disastrous results.

===

In the early hours of 21 August 2013 President of Syria Bashar al Assad used chemical weapons in a bombing attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. The attack killed nearly 1500 civilians including over 400 children.⁵⁸² It also crossed a "red line" laid out by Obama months before. Responding at a press conference to an innocuous question on the state of affairs in Syria Obama stated "we have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation."⁵⁸³ Thus the red line was drawn and along with it, a set of institutional expectations and assumptions carried throughout the foreign policy establishment and media.

The Syrian chapter of the Arab Spring had begun in a familiar fashion. But with nascent protests in the street being suppressed by Assad's military forces, it began to most closely resemble and then ultimately surpass Libya in its violence. This was not Libya, however, and despite continued violence wrought on the part of Assad on his own people, an intervention, the sort fostered in Libya, was not forthcoming. A crucial difference was the absence of the multilateral support that had prompted Obama to take action. The military situation was also different. Mullen's successor as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey warned that as many as seventy thousand American troops

⁵⁸¹ Becker, "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall".

⁵⁸² Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 1

⁵⁸³ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," news release, August 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

would be required to dismantle the anti-aircraft system and to enforce a no-fly zone over the country.⁵⁸⁴

Furthermore, Russia held strategic interests in Syria. Its naval base at the port of Tartus is the only such base it holds outside of the former Soviet Union, and is thus vital for its continued projection of power in the international sphere.⁵⁸⁵ In addition to the different calculation of interests for Russia, there was a lingering sense of anger and distrust that the limited scope of the resolution in Libya had transformed into regime change. Russian abstention had allowed the UN resolution on Libya to pass. This time, no such abstention was forthcoming.⁵⁸⁶

The dilemma for the Obama administration was acute. As in the case of Libya, there were calls for action to abate the horrors being inflicted upon the Syrian people, or to, at the very least, arm the rebels. The feared massacre of Benghazi and claims of thousands being killed by Gaddafi in Libya were being realized in Syria. So why would the international community not take action?

There had been a growing sense of moral imperative similar to Libya to *do something*.⁵⁸⁷ When Obama's professed 'red line' was crossed, the sense was strong that finally, force would be used. Ben Rhodes reflected on an initial meeting, the tone of which "suggested an imminent strike" and that steadily that time began to feel like "an unfolding drama that would inevitably conclude in cruise missiles hitting Syria."⁵⁸⁸ Power even reflects that "enraged by Assad's attack," Obama was convinced of the necessity of punishing the Syrian leader.⁵⁸⁹

There remained obstacles to overcome, however. Members of Congress from both parties had bristled at Obama's failure to seek Congressional approval before undertaking action in Libya, and they were determined that he would not do so again. Furthermore, the Obama legal team had their own concerns, Rhodes notes how "there was no firm international legal basis for bombing Syria – no argument of self-defense, which justified our actions against al Qaeda; no UN resolution such as we had had in Libya." There was also no "domestic legal basis beyond the assertion that the president had the inherent power to take military action that did not constitute a "war" under the Constitution, which the Republicans were disputing."⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁴ Landler, *Alter Egos*. p. 215

⁵⁸⁵ Y. Karmanau, "Naval Base in Syria Anchors Russia to Mediterranean," *Navy Times* 26 September (2019), <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/09/27/naval-base-in-syria-anchors-russia-to-mediterranean/>.

⁵⁸⁶ Landler, *Alter Egos*.

⁵⁸⁷ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 227

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; *ibid.* p. 234

⁵⁸⁹ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*. p. 365-366

⁵⁹⁰ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. pp. 232-233

Chief of Staff Denis McDonough convened a meeting for a call with congressional leaders, who each expressed a level of support for strikes, yet crucially, demanded Obama seek authorization.⁵⁹¹ They even referred to Obama's own response to a 2007 candidate questionnaire in the *Boston Globe* in which he said "the president does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation."⁵⁹²

During this meeting the administration learned that David Cameron's efforts to persuade the House of Commons to vote in favour of joining U.S. led strikes in Syria had been rejected by a vote of 285-272.⁵⁹³ Obama turned to Angela Merkel of whom Rhodes notes "there was no foreign leader he admired more. Like him, she was a pragmatist, driven by facts, dedicated to international order, deliberate in her decision making."⁵⁹⁴ Obama asked Merkel for her support, which could in turn bring the rest of the European Union along, but Merkel counselled caution, citing a need for time to build agreement among European countries. Rhodes writes of the interaction "it was the first time I saw him look uneasy about acting in Syria."⁵⁹⁵ Steadily, this collection of reasons for caution added up to a picture of hesitancy on Obama's part. When it appeared inevitable that the U.S. would take action, Obama pulled back from the brink. As plans were being drawn up for strikes, Obama took a walk in the White House grounds with Denis McDonough. Pivotaly, McDonough - Obama's fifth and final Chief of Staff - had been a consistent voice against an intervention in Syria.⁵⁹⁶

Upon Obama's election, McDonough worked on the National Security Council, before becoming Deputy National Security Advisor after Tom Donilon had ascended from that role to the top position. Obama reportedly personally trusted McDonough more, due to their previous relationship (he had been a staffer in Obama's Senate days), but also because he was, according to Glenn Thrush "philosophically in tune with McDonough," given "both men were allergic to military intervention – and McDonough was an enthusiastic executor of Obama's plan for running foreign policy: concentrating as much decision-making power in the West Wing national security staff as possible, at the expense of the harder-to-control Defense and State departments."⁵⁹⁷ In taking his role as Obama's Chief of Staff, McDonough's strong bond with his boss ensured he became a fierce gatekeeper of Obama's time, and pivotal to the process of decision-making in the White House

⁵⁹¹ Ibid. p. 233

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid. pp. 230-231

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 231

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 227, 235

⁵⁹⁷ G. Thrush, "Obama's Obama," *Politico Magazine* January/February Issue (2016), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/denis-mcdonough-profile-213488?paginate=false>.

itself. The two began a practice of conducting a daily meeting called the afternoon “wrap” which would often take place during long walks around the White House grounds.⁵⁹⁸ McDonough had the president’s ear, and in the case of the storied walk on that August afternoon, he appears to have represented a perspective which Obama very much wanted to hear.

True to Rhodes’ impression that the administration was gearing up for action in Syria, Obama had ordered the Pentagon to draw up lists of targets for strikes, and five naval vessels were in place in the Mediterranean ready to fire cruise missiles at those selected targets.⁵⁹⁹ But as those doubts began to enter Obama’s mind, Jeffrey Goldberg reports, he steadily came “to believe that he was walking into a trap—one laid both by allies and by adversaries, and by conventional expectations of what an American president is supposed to do.”⁶⁰⁰ Goldberg notes that he did not randomly choose McDonough to sound his doubts to, as “the Obama aide most averse to U.S. military intervention, and someone who, in the words of one of his colleagues, ‘thinks in terms of traps.’” In this instance Obama, “ordinarily a preternaturally confident man, was looking for validation, and trying to devise ways to explain his change of heart, both to his own aides and to the public.”⁶⁰¹

On their walk, Obama told McDonough that he was worried Assad would place civilians as “human shields” around obvious targets for strikes.⁶⁰² He also carried a concern that strikes would do nothing to actually remove the threat of the chemical weapons themselves. Perhaps most significantly, Obama “also shared with McDonough a long-standing resentment: He was tired of watching Washington unthinkingly drift toward war in Muslim countries. Four years earlier, the president believed, the Pentagon had “jammed” him on a troop surge for Afghanistan. Now, on Syria, he was beginning to feel jammed again.”⁶⁰³

When Obama returned to the Oval Office from his *tête-à-tête* with McDonough he informed a stunned staff that he had chosen to seek congressional authorization for strikes on Syria. Rhodes recalls of the moment “at some point, [Obama] said, a president alone couldn’t keep the United States on a perpetual war footing, moving from one Middle Eastern conflict to the next.” Simply put, “it is too easy for a president to go to war.” Obama argued.⁶⁰⁴ “That quote from me in 2007 – I agree with that guy. That’s who I am. And sometimes the least obvious thing to do is the right thing.”⁶⁰⁵ Rhodes summarized Obama’s logic as being “if we got congressional authorization for an attack on

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 235

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

Syria, everyone would be in on the action, and we'd have more credibility – legally, politically, and internationally. If we couldn't we shouldn't act."⁶⁰⁶

As this process was unfolding, a throwaway comment from John Kerry set in motion an *ad hoc* diplomatic initiative with Russia to persuade Assad to relinquish his chemical weapons stocks. To the surprise of many, this initiative succeeded (at least in principle) – with Assad acceding to the demands and concrete steps being taken to remove the weapons. This would allow the administration to make - admittedly strained - claims that it had indeed taken action after Assad crossed Obama's red line.⁶⁰⁷ Any action which brought about the removal of harmful weapons from an already disastrous war-zone was a laudable achievement. But for many, this was not enough. This was, in the eyes of the Washington establishment, opinion writers, old hands of foreign policy, but also many within the administration, a matter of *credibility*. For these critics, when Obama drew a red line for action, he was obligated to follow through with the threat or he would lose all credibility in the international sphere. For them, the United States had to be perceived as being willing to back up its threats of force, otherwise its abilities of coercion will be severely undermined as both allies and adversaries would never be sure if they could count on the U.S. to follow through on its word. Going to the brink only to step back again provided yet more ammunition to those who wanted to pillory Obama for his "dithering," for his weakness, and for his unwillingness to adhere to clear grand strategic thinking.⁶⁰⁸ It is valuable to note Power's assertion "on no other issue did I see Obama so personally torn – convinced that even limited military action would mire the United States in another open-ended conflict, yet wracked by the human toll of the slaughter. I don't believe he ever stopped interrogating his choices."⁶⁰⁹

Obama's ultimate rejection of military action in Syria spoke to his own reluctance to get the U.S. entangled in more wars – but why was it so different from Libya? It is necessary to demonstrate not how the approach to Syria was different to Libya, but to instead emphasize the logical consistencies which Obama carried from one to the next. Obama's was not a decision to *not act*, as such, but it was an effort to recreate in Syria some of the conditions which had allowed him to act in Libya. For Obama the importance of gaining some version of consensus which approved action was paramount. It was the developing tapestry of factors which were demanding he gain purchase among other constituencies that ultimately put the brakes on unilateral strikes. This was a search

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ Chollet, *The Long Game*. pp. 19-26

⁶⁰⁸ D. J. Rothkopf, "Barack Obama, Alone," *iPolitics* (2013), <https://ipolitics.ca/2013/09/06/barack-obama-alone/>

⁶⁰⁹ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*. p. 508

for consensus approval from other leaders, like Merkel, other parliaments like Britain, and from U.S. society in the form of Congressional authorization.

For his part, reflecting at the end of his presidency in his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic*, Obama found great success in the handling of the Syrian “red line” crisis. He described it as one of his proudest moments as president.⁶¹⁰ This can fairly be seen as a curious assessment. Syria was still in crisis. The outcome still catastrophic for those killed in Assad’s brutal assault. Meanwhile, fetishists of credibility remained aghast at Obama casting aside the image of a U.S. ready and willing to follow through with its threats. But for Obama, at least in his – undoubtedly rose-tinted – retelling, this was the triumphal denouement of his own Sisyphean attempt to recast American power. It was the moment he felt he had put a stick in the levers and gears of the war machine.⁶¹¹

Rhodes later reflected on Obama’s approach to the Syria crisis, suggesting there was something of a deliberate machination at play:

I saw what he had been doing – testing Congress, testing public opinion, to see what the real maneuvering room was for his office when it came to intervention in Syria. It was the same thing he’d done in Situation Room meetings on Syria and in his mind, testing whether anything we did could make things better there or whether it would turn out to be like Afghanistan and Iraq, if not worse. It wasn’t just politics he was wrestling with. It was something more fundamental about America, our willingness to take on another war, a war whose primary justification would be humanitarian, a war likely to end badly. “People always say never again,” he said. “But they never want to do anything.”⁶¹²

This was for Obama an important statement to make as it spoke to broader questions about American power and what it was for. He was reflecting a perspective that held another American-led war in the Middle East as anathema to a smarter more restrained foreign policy. Another war in the Middle East would be in danger of following the same patterns of the previous efforts: a quagmire only serving to detract from other interests.

Yet it does not escape attention that he couched his deferral of action in such a manner that placed a burden on the democratic processes of the country – placing great significance in the manner in which American military action abroad can garner political support at home. Was it a burden the public were willing to bear? In Syria - for all the reasons Obama felt he could ask Americans to die

⁶¹⁰ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁶¹¹ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 235

⁶¹² *Ibid.* p. 239

for the country - upholding hastily drawn red lines and preserving the ephemeral concept of credibility, was not one he felt he could do without gaining that popular buy-in.

In a speech outlining his decision on Syria, he noted that it was his own determination that it was “in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike.” He added a crucial rejoinder however, noting “I’m also the President of the world’s oldest constitutional democracy. So even though I possess the authority to order military strikes, I believed it was right, in the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our security, to take this debate to Congress. I believe our democracy is stronger when the President acts with the support of Congress. And I believe that America acts more effectively abroad when we stand together.”⁶¹³ He was pushing the logic of a consensus-based foreign policy decision making process. He did so in a manner that acknowledged its necessity as being “especially true after a decade that put more and more war-making power in the hands of the President, and more and more burdens on the shoulders of our troops, while sidelining the people’s representatives from the critical decisions about when we use force.”⁶¹⁴ For Obama there was a democratic imperative at play when seeking to make war.

It was the practice he had advocated in *The Audacity of Hope*, that “painstaking process of building coalitions forces us to listen to other points of view and therefore look before we leap.”⁶¹⁵ It was once again the reinforcement of a humble outlook on American power. Indeed Bart Schultz reads in Obama a sense of “Lincolnesque pragmatism, the pragmatism of this worldly doubt and action.”⁶¹⁶ Schultz suggests that “Lincoln has magnetized pragmatists like no other political figure, no doubt because of his deeply experimental temper in grappling with the deeply divisive problems of forging democratic community.”⁶¹⁷ Schultz argues “what Obama has found in Lincoln just is what the pragmatists have always found in him, and this has been the type of pragmatism long associated with the University of Chicago. It is a vision of a democratic community as an educating community, as an experimental, open community of inquiry that through participation mobilizes our collective intelligence and problem-solving abilities”⁶¹⁸ In the case of Syria, where he could not secure a broad-based international consensus, Obama sought to forge a consensus in the democratic community of the United States. Reaching a broad-based agreement on the appropriate course to take would

⁶¹³ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria," news release, September 10, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Obama, *Audacity*. p. 310

⁶¹⁶ Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy." p. 157

⁶¹⁷ Ibid. p. 169

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. p. 169

create legitimacy for difficult actions. The Chicago lawyer had applied the logic of Deweyan democracy. Pragmatism in action.

Circumspection and humility about the United States' capabilities to shape events in Syria for the good served only to raise the threshold for what could persuade Obama to intervene. In a Niebuhrian sense, Obama had earlier lamented to Rhodes that "we can't fool ourselves into thinking that we can fix the Middle East."⁶¹⁹ This recasting of American power found a humbler, greater sense of the tragedy of history. But he still carried faith in a process of deliberation whereby better outcomes can be protected by widening the participation of those who can have stakes in the process.

This circumspection was important in shaping Obama's generally restrained perspective on the U.S. role in world affairs. It represented an idealized vision of how the U.S. could recast its role, re-emphasizing the value of multilateralism, approaching war-making through seeking political consensus at home. These two processes formed part of the same deliberative core of Obama's philosophical outlook, a pragmatist effort to forge - as a community of inquiry - new understandings and better outcomes through that consensus. But the reality of achieving this idealized outcome was much more difficult, not least for reasons advanced by Obama himself.

He bristled at notions of American decline, and justifiably so in the respect that American military pre-eminence remains real and remains a significant aspect of its status in world affairs. Economically it remains dominant. Culturally, U.S. output remains dominant in ways other countries do not match. All these arguments make a case for a continued forward presence for the United States. And in Libya, this is exactly what happened. The simple material reality was that the U.S. was the only nation capable of providing the needed military strength to complete the task. As Gates lamented, the underinvestment in military technology by allies necessitated America's re-entry into the battlefield where it had intended to step back having passed control over to NATO. All 28 NATO allies had voted to support the mission in Libya, but only eight sent combat forces, and most of them ran out of ammunition.⁶²⁰ Steven Erlanger of the *New York Times* argued "The economic crisis has only exacerbated Europe's unwillingness to live up to its grand ambitions to play a global role in foreign and defense matters."⁶²¹ Such failings beg the question of whether multilateralism that truly shares burdens can ever be accomplished while the U.S. remains so uniquely capable. Will the burden not always fall disproportionately to the U.S.?

⁶¹⁹ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 200

⁶²⁰ S. Erlanger, "Libya's Dark Lesson for Nato," *The New York Times* (2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/sunday-review/what-libyas-lessons-mean-for-nato.html>.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*

Where Chollet argued Obama saw the Libya crisis as “an opportunity to show how he believed countries could work together, relying more on America’s uniqueness than on its dominance,” the resulting debacle raised questions about the willingness of nations to participate in vexing international issues without the dominant presence of the United States.⁶²² The virtues of multilateralism are such that they do indeed facilitate Obama’s desired recalibration of American attention. But the catastrophic results of the Libya intervention, pose questions about the merits of such an approach if the type of planning for day-after scenarios required an altogether firmer commitment than the international and multilateral community were willing to provide. The inability to mobilize multilateral or even national support for a Syrian intervention suggests a complete inability to confront tragic situations where major buy-in is not secured. It provokes a troubling sense that where there is not mass multilateral support, there can be no action taken. The absence of Congressional Authorization for taking action does not mean the problem goes away. In such a situation those who suffer must do so without the prospect of rescue.

Obama’s demurral on immediate action in Syria appears in Ben Rhodes’ narrative to deflate Rhodes’ own “do something” sensibility. Obama seemed conscious of this dynamic in asking for a vote. He argued that to lose the vote and not receive Congressional authorization would “drive a stake through the heart of neoconservatism.”⁶²³ As with the Afghanistan review, a vexing sense of ambivalence in Obama’s thinking is clear. But also laid bare is his long held antipathy and skepticism towards the ideology of the neoconservative movement.

It was his belief instead in multilateralism that curated a specific space for humanitarian initiatives to develop. Strict ‘national security’ concerns and their resultant wars of *necessity* placed such initiatives into a box, firmly established in his dichotomy of “dumb” wars of choice and smart wars of necessity. This in effect leaves all other military endeavors outside in a roiling uncategorized maw. Multilateralism appears as the answer to that problem in Obama’s worldview. It is the box into which all other endeavors and the possibilities thereof are placed. Wherein their pursuit and attainment depend entirely on the formation of a functioning multilateral framework, but the possibility nevertheless exists.

The marked distinction of Obama’s foreign policy and his foreign policy legacy might well be the premium he put on multilateralism and the manner in which he compartmentalized causes for U.S. intervention in a fashion that weighed the viability of facilitating multilateralism. This is underscored crucially by the manner in which he reflects upon the Syrian and Libyan episodes, as being his high

⁶²² Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 100

⁶²³ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 240

and low points of his foreign policy. Syria was a high point by virtue of the road not taken – a multilateral endeavor was not forthcoming, the U.S. was thus on the hook for action that he deemed out of its wheelhouse, and its appropriate expense of capabilities.

“I’m very proud of this moment,” Obama told Goldberg.

*The overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom and the machinery of our national-security apparatus had gone fairly far. The perception was that my credibility was at stake, that America’s credibility was at stake. And so for me to press the pause button at that moment, I knew, would cost me politically. And the fact that I was able to pull back from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America’s interest, not only with respect to Syria but also with respect to our democracy, was as tough a decision as I’ve made – and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make.*⁶²⁴

But more significant is his reflections on Libya. When asked in an interview what he viewed as the worst mistake of his presidency, Obama answered “probably failing to plan for the day after, what I think was the right thing to do, in intervening in Libya.”⁶²⁵ It was not a failure in the decision to intervene itself. But instead it was a failure to plan for the aftermath of the intervention, for a post-Gaddafi Libya.

He told Goldberg “we actually executed this plan as well as I could have expected: We got a UN mandate, we built a coalition, it cost us \$1 billion—which, when it comes to military operations, is very cheap. We averted large-scale civilian casualties, we prevented what almost surely would have been a prolonged and bloody civil conflict. And despite all that, Libya is a mess.”⁶²⁶

“When I go back and I ask myself what went wrong,” Obama reflected, “there’s room for criticism, because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya’s proximity, being invested in the follow-up.”⁶²⁷ Obama’s reasons for the failure in Libya form the vexing phenomenon of him identifying similar failures occurring under his watch as those which he so famously chastised Bush *et al* for in their prosecution of the Iraq War. It also appeared somewhat unbecoming to merely blame allies (even if justifiably so) for failings which were ultimately shared by him.

⁶²⁴ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁶²⁵ BBC News, "President Obama: Libya Aftermath 'Worst Mistake' of Presidency," *BBC* 11 April (2016), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36013703>.

⁶²⁶ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*

But it is apparent the multilateral framework that enabled the Libya intervention, were conditions within which Obama would have once again pursued military action. Critics of Obama and the intervention can justifiably suggest that he demonstrates inadequate reckoning with the notion that the steps taken to intervene militarily were the mistake, they led to the “shit show” – as he has been wont to describe the situation in Libya – and the manner in which that intervention was constructed did not matter so much as the fact of it.

But, for Obama, multilateralism was the logical framework within which to translate the philosophical mindset which shaped his perspective on America to the international sphere. It was the closest approximations of realizing a democratic, deliberative, consensus-building process in the international architecture. Obama seemed to carry an outsized hope in the processes of multilateralism, as acting as a deliberative mechanism redolent of the devices birthed in the Constitution. Reflective of a hope that different groups coming together will be able to source an outcome that is beneficial to all. It makes his vivid public excoriation of Nicholas Sarkozy and David Cameron for their failures to assume responsibility in the Goldberg interview particularly telling. They failed to deliver on the promises of multilateralism. In many respects, it appears that Obama was ultimately unprepared for the breakdown of rationality, the breakdown of actors making responsible choices that was required to underwrite a successful and consistent multilateralism in the international order. But of course, this was rationality as Obama conceived it. He deemed it to be in the rational interests of all actors to play their role in upholding a multilateral order, assuming responsibilities which would be for the benefit of all. But he disregarded that other leaders would make different calculations about their own rationality. It was a failure of imagination on his part, to presume others should think the same as him.

It is perhaps Obama’s steady reckoning with aspects of these ideas, such as the trying persistence of tribalism that underpins Goldberg’s notion that he personally “came to see Obama as a president who has grown steadily more fatalistic about the constraints on America’s ability to direct global events.”⁶²⁸ His accomplishments came in the face of what Goldberg describes as “his growing sense that larger forces—the riptide of tribal feeling in a world that should have already shed its atavism; the resilience of small men who rule large countries in ways contrary to their own best interests; the persistence of fear as a governing human emotion—frequently conspire against the best of America’s intentions.”⁶²⁹ The Arab spring seemed to represent a slow motion compounding of misery – a vivid demonstration that the U.S. suffers impotence in the face of extrinsic factors. Rhodes chronicles this descent into fatalism quite effectively in his memoir. As he seems to develop

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

a more credulous perspective on U.S. capabilities to effect change in the world, Obama appears to evolve a measure of cynicism.⁶³⁰ He even suggested at one point, in a comment which Rhodes professes to have found “jarring,” that “maybe we never would have done Rwanda.”⁶³¹ Turning to notions of public and Congressional support, Obama noted that those who were urging intervention in Syria had maintained a silence over the millions killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He reflected “there’s no way there would have been an appetite for that in Congress.”⁶³²

Clinton talked about this notion of knowing where and when to make the choice to intervene, noting how every day she would “look around the world” and see “people are being killed in Côte d’Ivoire, they’re being killed in the Eastern Congo, they’re being oppressed and abused all over the world by dictators and really unsavory characters.” As such, the U.S. “could be intervening all over the place.” “What is the standard?” she asked. In response, she suggested “part of it is having to make tough choices and wanting to help the international community accept responsibility.”⁶³³

Coinciding with this notion of *helping* the international community to take necessary actions, Goldberg notes how Obama had come to learn that “very little is accomplished in international affairs without U.S. leadership.” Obama noted the importance of a president who “has the sense that you can’t fix everything” but who also accepts that if the U.S. does not set the agenda, something will not happen. “The fact is, there is not a summit I’ve attended since I’ve been president where we are not setting the agenda, where we are not responsible for the key results.”⁶³⁴ Reconciling this with his own avowed acknowledgment of limitations, and the importance of tempering hubris, we can begin to see Obama piecing together a multilateralism which functions through the active leadership of America.

The dynamic which still found the U.S. as paramount in world affairs was instrumental in shaping the foreign policy echo-chamber which lasted through to the end of Obama’s presidency. Despite his notion of driving a stake through the heart of neoconservatism, many of those same assumptions which underwrote it would continue to receive prominent airing in the form of a consistent stream of commentariat, foreign policy establishment members, and partisan opponents who, in evaluating an array of emerging foreign policy crises, never failed to excoriate him for not doing more. Indeed, Robert Kagan argued that a “search for normalcy” represented an effort to shed the historic responsibilities America carried in the world. Without a forward presence in the project of

⁶³⁰ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. pp. 199-200, 202-203, 205-206

⁶³¹ *Ibid.* p. 239

⁶³² *Ibid.*

⁶³³ Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy”.

⁶³⁴ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”.

promoting and defending a liberal world order, he maintained that order could “unravel.” The world depends, he argued, on America sending signals about its reliability that it will act to uphold it.⁶³⁵

It would become a consistent genre of critique for the administration that it was failing to act assertively enough in Syria, in Ukraine, and in response to the rise of ISIS.⁶³⁶ And this in turn became a source of increasing frustration for Obama and his administration. Rhodes reflects on this notion - of a constant push to *do more* - in a manner that makes it apparent that over time he had begun to mirror Obama’s increased weariness of interventionist policy: “what bothered both of us the most about the debates in Washington was the sense that there had been no course correction after Iraq – no acknowledgment of the limits to what the United States could achieve militarily inside other countries.”⁶³⁷ This was ultimately a course correction that Obama sought, and as new opportunities to engage militarily elsewhere arose, the imperative to reckon with this need appeared more and more pressing.

But more than this, the constant din calling for U.S. action prompted Obama, in Rhodes’ telling, to reflect on broader questions about the historical moment and its implications for the United States. Rhodes himself noted reasons why advocacy for action got traction:

*There’s something innately American about believing that there must be a solution. Many of the people who work in American foreign policy today were shaped by the experience of the 1990s, when the United States was ascendant... We really could shape events in much of the world.*⁶³⁸

Rhodes effectively channels ideas discussed by authors such as Fred Kaplan in *Daydream Believers*, who detail the overconfidence which accompanied America’s new-found post-Cold War status as the world’s sole superpower.⁶³⁹ It reflected a sense of the hubris which had accompanied the post-Cold War American ascendancy. Rhodes notes that “Obama occasionally pointed out that the post-Cold War moment was always going to be transitory. The rest of the world will accede to American leadership, but not dominance.”⁶⁴⁰ The implication carries that Obama had an awareness of the illusory nature of Post-Cold War dominance as a permanent order of things. For his part, Rhodes notes a “global correction” started to take place by the time Obama took office, as China and Russia began to assert themselves once more.⁶⁴¹ As a tonic to this, Obama “didn’t want to disengage from

⁶³⁵ Kagan, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire: What Our Tired Country Still Owes the World".

⁶³⁶ Stephens, *America in Retreat*. p. 228

⁶³⁷ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 274

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 205

⁶³⁹ Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power*.

⁶⁴⁰ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 275

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the world; he wanted to engage more. By limiting our military involvement in the Middle East, we'd be in a better position to husband our own resources and assert ourselves in more places, on more issues."⁶⁴² The kicker though is that despite these best intentions, despite these notions of redirecting attention, that attention is not easily controlled. "American politics pushes military interventionism, even as public opinion is wary."⁶⁴³ It forms a mindset, he argues, which kept the political frame for national security debates consistent: "doing more was tough, anything else was weak."⁶⁴⁴

===

Whilst on a trip through Asia, Obama took some time aboard Air Force One to make his way back to where the press sat on the plane. Rhodes recounts that Obama complained to them "about the recent negative coverage of his foreign policy." He aired grievances Rhodes had heard him express privately – "about how the press ignored the steady work of American leadership and legitimized every demand that he do more to escalate conflicts."⁶⁴⁵ In a meeting held prior to the trip, a member of the NSC who focused on strategic planning had reminded those in attendance, including Obama and Rhodes, "that the most important foreign policy work often involved incremental advances" or, as the NSC staffer put it in baseball vernacular, "hitting singles and doubles."⁶⁴⁶ Obama agreed with this assessment, and noted how upon re-election he had brought a group of presidential historians in to the White House – including Doris Kearns Goodwin, David McCullough, and Douglas Brinkley. "It's interesting" Obama commented, "they made the point that the most important thing a president can do on foreign policy is avoid a costly error."⁶⁴⁷

Back in the cabin of Air Force One, Rhodes recalls Obama proceeding to "go on a long tangent about how the failures of American foreign policy were ones of overreach, complaining about the lack of accountability for Iraq War supporters who were still the tribunes of conventional wisdom."⁶⁴⁸ "What's the Obama doctrine?" he provocatively asked, before answering with the same conclusion he had drawn from his meeting with the presidential historians, from the examples of Johnson in

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ Ibid. pp. 275-276

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 276

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 277

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 278

Vietnam, Carter with Desert One, and Bush Jr in Iraq. The lesson, and the newly named Obama doctrine was: “don’t do stupid shit.”⁶⁴⁹

Mark Landler, a *New York Times* reporter who was a recipient of the impromptu lecture, later wrote of the episode that Obama had meant it as an attempt to “set the press straight about our coverage of his foreign policy,” which he noted Obama viewed as shallow, “mistaking prudence for fecklessness, pragmatism for lack of ambition.”⁶⁵⁰ Landler reflected on Obama’s emphasis that “the key to managing a sound foreign policy was to avoid entanglements in places where America’s national interests were not directly at stake,” before he then “offered a brisk tour of places his White House had *not* started new conflict: the Middle East, Asia, eastern Europe.”⁶⁵¹

Hillary Clinton famously derided Obama’s coarse summary of his foreign policy, echoing a lot of critics when she stated it was “not an organizing principle.”⁶⁵² Yet from Obama’s perspective, it represented an important rejoinder to an atmosphere of assumptions about U.S. power which led to an overinflated sense of what it could do in the world. It was a rejection of the sense of intervention in any corner of the world as being a cause worthy of expending American blood and treasure. “Don’t do stupid shit” was once more a handbrake on these assumptions. It encapsulated a mode of thought which recognized limitations. In placing his diatribe to journalists in terms of American overreach, avoiding the doing of “stupid shit” would allow for the needed recalibration of American power. It was an echo once more of the necessary and the dumb war.

In the context of Syria and Ukraine, the sentiment provided renewed vigour to Obama’s disinclination to act where American interests were not threatened and the burden could not be shared multilaterally. In many respects the bar of expectation had been moved erroneously as a response to misperceptions of American power coming out of the Cold War. But so much of what Obama confronted on a day-to-day basis was borne from such error. In the case of Libya, the error was his own. The Goldberg interview and the “don’t do stupid shit” declaration can both be seen as watershed moments. Obama’s own self-assigned doctrine did not satiate calls for grand strategy initiative, it did not speak to a hard and fast threshold for action, it did not suggest any imperative humanitarian compulsion for military intervention. But it did speak to carrying faith in an instinct which places circumspection over the assumption that the U.S. can always affect its desired outcomes around the world.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Landler, *Alter Egos*. p. xii

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Ibid. p. xiv

Obama's affinity for Niebuhr reflected in his Nobel Prize speech speaks to this instinct, almost to a pessimism about human knowledge. While not reaching the stark Niebuhrian territory of original sin as a precluding factor, Obama nevertheless depicts in his own reading of Niebuhr the importance of humility in confronting choices on the world stage. His reading of Niebuhr echoes his reading and rhetorical deployment of Lincoln, that sense of "making choices whilst still admitting doubt." It is the language of *The Audacity of Hope* which makes the case for the regretful pursuit of absolutes – absolutes that might place moral foundations as a core, as a compass point to aim towards.⁶⁵³ But the Obama of the "don't do stupid shit" lecture, of the final stretch of his administration, betrayed a jadedness which put a renewed emphasis on a Niebuhrian-Lincolnian predilection. It is one which casts a different light on U.S. power and its role and responsibilities in the world. Most pointedly, in terms of the rhetoric and concept discussed in the previous chapter of gambling and the placing of moral wagers, the jaded, and world weary Obama of "don't do stupid shit" vintage appeared to be making his wagers based upon a very different calculation, one which viewed the deck as being stacked much more firmly against him. The odds were no longer as promising for the U.S. to tip the scales of world affairs in meaningful ways. The hard lessons of six plus years in the White House drilled that in to Obama, compelling him towards more humble instincts.

Goldberg notes that Obama had told him "if there had been no Iraq, no Afghanistan, and no Libya...he might be more apt to take risks in Syria."⁶⁵⁴ Obama said "a president does not make decisions in a vacuum. He does not have a blank slate. Any president who was thoughtful, I believe, would recognize that after over a decade of war, with obligations that are still to this day requiring great amounts of resources and attention in Afghanistan, with the experience of Iraq, with the strains that it's placed on our military—any thoughtful president would hesitate about making a renewed commitment in the exact same region of the world with some of the exact same dynamics and the same probability of an unsatisfactory outcome."⁶⁵⁵

Obama expounded to Goldberg of finding ground between the imperative for American leadership, and the restraint of humility, stating that "I am very much the internationalist," admitting:

*I am also an idealist insofar as I believe that we should be promoting values, like democracy and human rights and norms and values...because it makes the world a better place.*⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵³ B. Obama, "Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Remarks by Senator Barack Obama," 2005.

⁶⁵⁴ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

And yet, “having said that,” he contemplated his own deep contradictions:

*I also believe that the world is a tough, complicated, messy, mean place, and full of hardship and tragedy. And in order to advance both our security interests and those ideals and values that we care about, we’ve got to be hardheaded at the same time as we’re bighearted, and pick and choose our spots, and recognize that there are going to be times when the best that we can do is to shine a spotlight on something that’s terrible, but not believe that we can automatically solve it. There are going to be times where our security interests conflict with our concerns about human rights. There are going to be times where we can do something about innocent people being killed, but there are going to be times where we can’t.*⁶⁵⁷

This was a near total doubling down on the core tenets of his Nobel speech, pointing to these twin elements. The gulf in time between these comments does not disabuse the notion that both say much on his broad foreign policy perspective, and each tease out this dialectic of outwardly incompatible ideas coexisting alongside one another.

Goldberg attempted to put a name to this Obamian contradiction. Recognizing in Obama “a tragic realist’s understanding of sin, cowardice, and corruption, and a Hobbesian appreciation of how fear shapes human behavior” while “consistently, and with apparent sincerity [professing] optimism that the world is bending toward justice,” Goldberg argues that Obama is “in a way, a Hobbesian optimist.” It is this sense of optimism that strikes at the very heart of the complication in defining Obama. It is a simple characterization of Obama that calls back to the heady days of the 2008 election, of Obama the “hope” candidate. But the notion of hope and optimism for the future has been a consistent motif in Obama’s rhetoric from before his ascendancy to the end of his presidency. The most grounded theory to expound as a means of explanation is to place this hope once more in the context of his reading of the Constitution and in his embrace of the ideals wrapped up in the perfection of the nation.

Bart Schultz acknowledges that pragmatism carries these contradictions at its own core. As a philosophy:

It has always been viewed as peculiarly American, somehow carrying on its sleeve the American ideal—for Obama, the Bob the Builderism of “Yes We Can,” because “when Americans come together, there is no destiny too difficult or too distant for

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

*us to reach.” Yet at the very same time, the universalizing, Platonizing, Christianizing elements of Americanism are the very things pragmatism usually seeks to undercut, albeit in ways that avoid the old dualisms. Against the declaration of self-evident truth in the Declaration of Independence, pragmatists hold that accepted “truths” are always provisional, experimental, and open to revision.*⁶⁵⁸

It is in this paradox that pragmatism navigates through the divide between the universal and the particular. Schultz locates this interplay in Obama’s thought. He notes the consistent theme in Obama’s speeches that captures the essence “from the many, one, from the particular, the universal, and from the transient, the permanent. We live in the particular and the transient, but we live by the universal and the permanent.”⁶⁵⁹

He later frames this interaction as Obama “modulating his other worldly side into his this worldly side,” noting that “although [Obama] has gone on record as explaining that his most important philosophical influences were Gandhi, King, and Lincoln, it is manifest that in his political realization, increasingly evident in his speeches, the politics of the first two gets subordinated to the politics of the third.”⁶⁶⁰ In the Nobel address we could also substitute Niebuhr in as standing on the Lincolnian side of this divide. But in the speech, Obama overtly wrestles with what it means to subsume one type of politics to another, and acknowledges the difficulty at play in choosing to do so.

Schultz notes great harmony between Obama and King’s universality. But in recognizing King’s own sense of being an ‘extremist’ for his beliefs, Schultz asks, “What is Obama’s extremism?” answering with a suggestion that “if anything” it is “an extremism of hope—that ‘audacity’ of hope of which his second book speaks. But it is an extremism that, like Lincoln’s and unlike King’s, is tied to democratic mobilization to change the electoral process, rather than the pacifist direct action that King directed against the going political and legal institutions.”⁶⁶¹ It is a hope which finds progress in the steady processes of institutions and multilateral initiatives. The hope which drove a young Obama to move from community organising into practicing civil law, the hope that through the processes of law, better outcomes could prevail.

Schultz draws some lines between Obama’s thought and the latter-day work of Richard Rorty, whose 1998 *Achieving Our Country* was a clarion call for the notion of a political Left in America assuming the mantle of being the party of progress: “The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that

⁶⁵⁸ Schultz, “Obama’s Political Philosophy.” p. 145

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 148

⁶⁶⁰ Schultz, “Obama’s Political Philosophy.” p. 152-153

⁶⁶¹ Ibid. p. 153

our nation remains unachieved.”⁶⁶² This could be an earlier incarnation of Obama’s own writings on the Constitution and the opposing visions of the immutability of Constitutional truths.

But for Obama, as for Rorty, while the United States, and indeed the world, remains imperfect, the task before us is to *perfect* it. Obama’s embrace of multilateral and international institutions, whilst tapping into conventional liberal internationalist philosophies, can be argued to also find important grounding in a philosophical pragmatism that views the experimental and deliberative possibilities of democratic practices as being essential in the pursuit of *better* outcomes and for *progress* in the face of the irony and tragedies of history.

Obama’s “extremism” of hope, as Schultz would have it, rests upon a faith that human institutions will aid in the progression towards *more perfect* outcomes. They are the embodiment of the effort to achieve something better for a broad swathe of humanity, his is a hope that channels Rorty’s own embrace of the imperfect society as advocated historically by the likes of pragmatists Walt Whitman and John Dewey. For Rorty “all that can be said in its defense is that it would produce less unnecessary suffering than any other, and that it is the best means to a certain end: the creation of a greater diversity of individuals – larger, fuller, more imaginative and daring individuals.”⁶⁶³

But Obama addresses this conceit in his Nobel address with a familiar refrain – “we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected.”⁶⁶⁴ He took his central reading of the U.S. Constitution, the core pillar of his ‘More Perfect’ speech on race in Philadelphia, and universalized it. “We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place.”⁶⁶⁵

Turning again to Gandhi and King, he argued their non-violence:

May not have been practical or possible in every circumstance, but the love that they preached – their fundamental faith in human progress – that must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey.

*For if we lose that faith – if we dismiss it as silly or naïve; if we divorce it from the decisions that we make on issues of war and peace – then we lose what’s best about humanity. We lose our sense of possibility. We lose our moral compass.*⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶² R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998). p. 14

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 30

⁶⁶⁴ The Obama White House, "Nobel Address."

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Between the Niebuhrian and Lincolnian acceptance of tragedy and belief in the fallibility of humankind in navigating the evils of the world, and the Gandhian and Kingian sense of love and peace, there is a broad dialectic of the choices which faces all actors in the international sphere. But in staking the United States' centrality in the international order, Obama the Commander-in-Chief takes upon himself an outsized responsibility to wrestle with this dynamic.

In treading this dialectical tightrope, Obama displays a universal sense of duty, but a particular sense of capability in confronting it. It is a confident and morally clear perspective on what should animate action in the world sphere, what should drive recourse to make things better, to prevent tragedy, to stop massacres. But it is accompanied by a humility that recognizes that sense of moral clarity cannot always be satisfied, such are the limitations of possibility.

He started his Nobel address with a Niebuhrian sense of war, but ended it on a Kingian sense of peace. He quoted King's statement that "I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present condition makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him." Obama urged the watching world to "reach for the world that ought to be – that spark of divine that still stirs within each of our souls."⁶⁶⁷ For two ideas could be true at the same time. "We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of depravation, and still strive for dignity. Clear-eyed, we can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that – for that is the story of human progress; that's the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on Earth."⁶⁶⁸

===

At its core, this act of "classifying" or "defining" Obama's foreign policy and its perspective on intervention is a thoroughly unsatisfying pursuit, for it is ultimately definable only in its *indefinability*. Instead it is premised on a series of necessary and contingent factors. It is perhaps a fool's errand to extrapolate from Obama's actions as president and portray a wider cohesive perspective. In his eight years, Obama could only respond to the crises that befell him. Through it all, he maintained that American leadership, and the ideals America stands for, were immutable, and drove the world order, yet he coupled this with a philosophical pragmatism which emphasized the need for humility and

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

fallibilism in recognizing limitations. Crucially though, this pragmatism still maintained the optimism of being able to seek better outcomes through a careful process of deliberation and consensus building, to form more workable solutions. For historians of foreign policy it is an unsatisfying approach, for at its core it is one which is constantly weighing between the twin poles of what is possible and what is desirable. The notion that each and every decision, especially those regarding use of force hangs upon the balance of these competing factors almost makes outcomes feel arbitrary in their “closeness.” A 51-49 decision betrays an unsatisfying elision of decisiveness and direction, instead leaving history up to fate. For a gambler intent on taking “moral wagers” however, this would be a welcome approach to foreign policy. It is an approach that places humility at the centre of decision-making, never presuming to carry ordained knowledge of what is the correct course to take.

The complexity of such an approach, cannot be underestimated. Wendy Sherman, a figure in the State Department, offered an instructional metaphor that addresses such complexity, in reference specifically to the Iranian nuclear deal:

The symbol I used all the time was a Rubik’s Cube. There were multiple moving pieces, and every time you moved a piece – the number of centrifuges, the level of enrichment, the level of the stockpile – it moved the other elements. And so you constantly had to recalibrate until all of the pieces fit snugly together and the last cube of the Rubik’s Cube locked into place. That is what made this so staggeringly complex.⁶⁶⁹

This metaphor can be a useful tool in more broadly conceptualizing the mechanisms of Obama’s foreign policy. His approach to American intervention in the world often appeared to adhere to this Rubik’s cube logic. It too carried a sense of a reliance on all the pieces lining up in a particular way in order to provide the solution. It is a logic which carries with it the possibility of one slight piece moving in a manner that produces a worse outcome. It is the process of balancing contradictory forces and searching for an equilibrium between them.

In this respect, the Nobel Prize speech remains the most complete exposition of Obama’s foreign policy. Its logic remains consistent with his choices in war and peace. The Nobel speech laid out the logic that drove the dialectic between pessimism and humility on the one hand, and optimism and American exceptionalism on the other. The dialectic between a Niebuhrian emphasis on the necessity of contending with evil whilst acknowledging limitations in doing so, and the optimistic hope represented by King, advocating for a sense of the universal good, in reaching for a peaceful

⁶⁶⁹ Abrams, *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017*. p. 353

world despite doubts to the contrary. It is the dialectic of an America constantly having to reconcile with itself what its role in world affairs ought to be.

The following chapter will continue to examine this dynamic. It will consider the means by which Obama and his administration sought to affect its vision of American power through the strategic dynamic of the Pivot to Asia, but also through its deployment of drone technology. Together, both initiatives would stand as vivid representations of the breadth by which the Obama administration viewed the possibilities of American power, and its role in the world. But further to this, the chapter will also examine in greater depth the very notion of Obama's identity, and the way in which it was shaped, and how that in turn shaped a presidency.

Chapter Four

With every element of American power

In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama starts his chapter on international affairs by discussing Indonesia. His encyclopaedia-like entry reflected an important personal connection to the country. As a six year-old Obama moved with his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, to live with her husband - his step-father - in Jakarta, where he stayed until he was ten. Forty-three years later, Obama made a remarkable return to the nation, as the President of the United States. Speaking at the University of Indonesia, in Jakarta, he wasted no time practicing his old language skills, declaring “*Indonesia bagian dari didi saya*” – “Indonesia is a part of me.”⁶⁷⁰ He recounted aspects of his time in Indonesia that shaped him, recalling an idyllic and carefree childhood. Obama’s every use of Indonesian language was greeted by cheers and applause from the audience. Here was one of the most powerful political figures in the world exhibiting a sense of intimate connection to an archipelago thousands of miles and an ocean away. But this connection forged something more important for Obama. He noted “because Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands, and hundreds of languages, and people from scores of regions and ethnic groups, my time here helped me appreciate the common humanity of all people.”⁶⁷¹

This encapsulated a sense of cosmopolitanism that formed a part of Obama’s intellectual make-up. In visions of ‘common humanity,’ furthermore, we find an important relationship between cosmopolitanism and pragmatism. As will be seen, they are each premised on the recognition of different perspectives. Both rely on the notion of not precluding alternative possibilities, but also on the notion that often these alternative perspectives can cohere together to forge common ground. Pragmatism prizes deliberation in this process.

Ruminations upon Obama’s childhood exposure to different cultures and the absorption of values of ‘common humanity’ prompt consideration of a vital aspect of his intellectual make-up. It is perhaps the most elemental aspect of his thought - simply *who* he is as a person. There is, of course, enormous difficulty in truly ascertaining this, but it is nevertheless important to try. This is especially

⁶⁷⁰ D. Maraniss, *Barack Obama: The Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2012), pp. 219-223; D. J. Garrow, *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama* (London: William Collins, 2017). P. 64

⁶⁷¹ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta," news release, November 10, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/10/remarks-president-university-indonesia-jakarta-indonesia>.

the case when considered in relation to what Obama called his own search for a place in America's history that would "admit the uniqueness of [his] own life."⁶⁷²

The impact of this "uniqueness" might be hard to pinpoint but it is necessary to examine his identity and biography in the context of his foreign policy outlook. As such, this chapter will consider how Obama's own affinities for the Asia-Pacific played a role in shaping his approach to the region. In doing so it will build upon the previous chapter in also considering the ramifications for Obama's wider understandings of America's role in the world and how it should be appropriately directed.

Obama held an inexorable teleological belief in human progress. In many senses he conditioned such progress upon the nurturing of universal tendencies that reflected a broader project of liberal internationalism (or American hegemony, to critics). But it was this liberal internationalism and its universalism that helped tie his many disparate worlds together. In contending with these ideas the chapter will likewise tie together two disparate foreign policy initiatives that - on the surface - do not co-habit in the same sphere of foreign affairs: the administration's much vaunted Pivot to Asia and its much deplored drone programme. They run at polar ends of the foreign policy spectrum yet, crucially, when considered in the context of one another, make up a coherent picture of American power.

The desire to extend America's engagement with the Asia-Pacific meant the creation and recreation of an imperative for America's place in the region becoming a core part of the administration's approach. This also bore a relationship to deeper historical roots in America's long-held process of extending its power outwards; be it culturally, economically, or militarily. The military aspect encapsulated the administration's escalation of the use of drone strike capabilities to continue the war on al Qaeda. But this extension of military power also played a vital part in the broader reconfiguration of American power; the redirection towards more necessary aims.

For Obama, this meant moving America's focus away from the folly of Middle Eastern wars and instead towards the Asia-Pacific. It was a region of growing economic importance, but also, with the emergence of China as a peer competitor, one of immense geostrategic concern too. The U.S. wanted to play a role in bringing about a desired shared destiny with its allies in the region. This relied on assumptions which had profound ramifications on the way American power was conceptualized. This chapter will contend that this conceptualization prompted the administration to direct American power towards realizing itself as a Pacific nation. It also found it willing to deploy remote weaponry as a means by which to find foreign policy equilibrium. The Pivot to Asia would

⁶⁷² Obama, *Dreams*. p. 135

allow America to enhance its ties to a region, share in its progress, and counter Beijing's intentions. Drones would be an accessory to this rebalance.

===

It is tempting to remark on Barack Obama's mixed-race, continent-crossing heritage and thus label him a *cosmopolitan* figure. His is a life and an identity that does not conform to lines on a map. Yet, these factors do not by themselves confer onto Obama a *cosmopolitan* identity. They do however signal his openness to a world beyond borders. And offer a window into a worldview unbound by a parochial lens. They reflect broader horizons and an acknowledgment of America as it exists in the wider context of the world around it.

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah developed a definition of cosmopolitanism comprising two strands that intertwine, one "the idea that we have obligations to others," the other "that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which mean taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance."⁶⁷³ Appiah argues that "people are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single model of life."⁶⁷⁴ Cosmopolitanism is indeed a complicated and often conflicted term, nevertheless Appiah's definition prompts interrogation of the very same complications that lie at the heart of Obama's story.⁶⁷⁵ With this in mind, what would it mean for Obama to exhibit cosmopolitanism as a political thinker and actor? And how did this relate to his pragmatism traced in this thesis? Ulrich Beck describes a cosmopolitan outlook as being a "global sense, a sense of boundarylessness. An everyday, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions. It reveals not just the 'anguish' but also the possibility of shaping one's life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture. It is simultaneously a sceptical, disillusioned, self-critical outlook."⁶⁷⁶ In *Dreams*

⁶⁷³ K. A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: W.W. Norton, 2007). p. xv

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁵ S. Vertovec, and Cohen, R., "Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism," in *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, ed. S. Vertovec, and Cohen, R. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). pp. 3-14

⁶⁷⁶ U. Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. C. Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). p. 3

From My Father this perspective appears in abundance as Obama writes openly about a struggle to find his identity and his search to reconcile his “many worlds into a single, harmonious whole.”⁶⁷⁷

Stuart Hall reflects on a notion that cosmopolitanism means “the ability to stand outside of having one’s life written and scripted by any one community, whether that is a faith or tradition or religion or culture... and to draw selectively on a variety of discursive meanings.”⁶⁷⁸ Throughout his own narrative in *Dreams From My Father* Obama sought to draw particularly from his Black and African heritage, seeking to uncover the meanings attached to those communal bonds. He recalled “I decided to become part of that world,” which writer Ta-Nehisi Coates assesses as “one of the most incredible sentences ever written in the long, decorated history of black memoir, if only because very few black people have ever enjoyed enough power to write it.”⁶⁷⁹ Coates argues in part that it was the uniqueness of Obama’s background, and his non-hostile introduction to the world of white people, with the love of his mother and grandparents who raised him, that enabled this power. He contends “Obama’s early positive interactions with his white family members gave him a fundamentally different outlook toward the wider world than most blacks of the 1960s had.” This in turn enabled him to trust in white people and allowed him to express the hope that underwrote his introduction to the nation in his 2004 Democratic Convention Speech.⁶⁸⁰

While he was still in high school, confronting his confusion over identity and the apparent powerlessness of African-Americans in American society, Obama looked “to corroborate this nightmare vision,” gathering books by the likes of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, W.E.B. DuBois, and Malcolm X, luminaries in the history of Black intellectual culture.⁶⁸¹ “At night,” he wrote “I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do, and there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as I’d found it with the terms of my birth.” The more he wrestled with such texts, the more he found “there was no escape to be had. In every page of every book...I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt; a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect.”⁶⁸² Coates’ assertion of the remarkableness in his decision to “become part of that world” is laid bare.

⁶⁷⁷ Obama, *Dreams*. p. 51, 76, 111, 347

⁶⁷⁸ S. Hall, “Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities,” in *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, ed. S. Vertovec, and Cohen, R. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). p. 26

⁶⁷⁹ Obama, *Dreams*. p. 78; T. Coates, “My President Was Black,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2017.

⁶⁸⁰ “My President Was Black.”

⁶⁸¹ Obama, *Dreams*. p. 85

⁶⁸² *Ibid.* pp. 85-86

Obama did reflect on a glimmer of hope he found in this endeavour, where “Malcolm X’s autobiography seemed to offer something different.” Obama wrote of Malcolm X that “his repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me; the blunt poetry of his words, his unadorned insistence on respect, promised a new and uncompromising order, martial in its discipline, forged through sheer force of will.”⁶⁸³ This sense of self-realization and determination of the self became themes he would carry forth. David Garrow’s biography emphasizes the notion that Obama “willed himself into being” in forging an identity as an African American man, but proffers a searing critique that “while the crucible of self-creation had produced an ironclad will, the vessel was hollow at its core.”⁶⁸⁴ Garrow adds salt to the wound he inflicts by arguing that “eight years in the White House had revealed all too clearly that it is easy to forget who you once were if you have never really known who you are.”⁶⁸⁵ Nevertheless, in contrast to Garrow’s bellicosity, James Kloppenberg suggests that Obama’s “early reading and thinking about race laid the groundwork for his exceptional self-awareness.”⁶⁸⁶

Whilst Obama sought to root himself in the African-American community, he has stressed that he is not “limited” by it.⁶⁸⁷ Embracing variety in perspective is thus an inherent part of Obama’s identity. It is no surprise that he should offer up such an understanding of himself, telling journalist David Mendell that “I was raised as an Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child. And so what I benefitted from is a multiplicity of cultures that all fed me.”⁶⁸⁸

For Appiah, cosmopolitan engagement with the world entails “moral conversation between people across societies.”⁶⁸⁹ But he reminds us that such disagreements also occur within societies.⁶⁹⁰ The political and cultural polarization of American society attests to this, and Obama’s approach to it recognizes and, to an extent, embraces these disagreements. His remains a vision of an American community constituted by multiplicity in identity where, through aspiring to the ideals of the constitution, people, “black and white, they make their claim on this community we call America. They choose our better history.”⁶⁹¹

Reflecting on his time working as a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago, Obama told Coates, “when I started doing that work, my story merges with a larger story.” Yet he had some

⁶⁸³ Ibid. p. 86

⁶⁸⁴ Garrow, *Rising Star*. p. 1078

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁶ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*. p. 15

⁶⁸⁷ Singh, *Barack Obama’s Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement*. pp. 28-29

⁶⁸⁸ Mendell, *Obama*. p.32

⁶⁸⁹ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*. pp. 45-46

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 46

⁶⁹¹ Obama, *Dreams*. p. 439

hesitancy once more about his identity in the process. “How do I pull all these different strains together” he mused:

*Kenya and Hawai'i and Kansas, and white and black and Asian—how does that fit? And through action, through work, I suddenly see myself as part of the bigger process for, yes, delivering justice for the [African American community] and specifically the South Side community, the low-income people—justice on behalf of the African American community. But also thereby promoting my ideas of justice and equality and empathy that my mother taught me were universal. So I'm in a position to understand those essential parts of me not as separate and apart from any particular community but connected to every community. And I can fit the African American struggle for freedom and justice in the context of the universal aspiration for freedom and justice.*⁶⁹²

For Appiah, “cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation.”⁶⁹³ Early in his presidency, in the Cairo speech aimed at reaching out to the Muslim world, Obama spoke of how his father came from a Kenyan family “that includes generations of Muslims” and noted how, living in Indonesia he “heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and at the fall of dusk.”⁶⁹⁴ He spoke in Accra, declaring “I have the blood of Africa within me,” and acknowledged the spectre of colonialism as having impacted upon his grandfather, not simply as being “the creation of unnatural borders or unfair terms of trade” but something “experienced personally, day after day, year after year.”⁶⁹⁵ Other Presidents may be able to offer platitudes, but he has lived a life, and possesses an identity, that speaks more fervently to an engagement across societies.

In both of his books Obama's reflections upon his time in Indonesia serve to forcefully emphasize the world in which he had in-part been raised – the world that was so far removed from the experiences of a conventional American childhood. Arriving as a six year old, it was an alien world.⁶⁹⁶ Yet - returning forty-three years later - embracing his broader philosophical tendencies to flatten out differences, to find common understandings, Obama emphasized in Jakarta how the promises of mutual understanding can serve a purpose. Even where cultures can seem alien and strange, common humanity can be uncovered. In reference especially to the Muslim communities of

⁶⁹² Coates, "My President Was Black."

⁶⁹³ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*. p. 57

⁶⁹⁴ The Obama White House, "Cairo Speech."

⁶⁹⁵ "Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament," news release, July 11, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-ghanaian-parliament>.

⁶⁹⁶ Obama, *Dreams*. p. 32-35

Indonesia, Obama argued “we do have a choice. We can choose to be defined by our differences, and give in to a future of suspicion and mistrust. Or we can choose to do the hard work of forging common ground, and commit ourselves to the steady pursuit of progress.”⁶⁹⁷

Mendell notes how Obama’s mother possessed a philosophy of common humanity “that had been ingrained in him throughout his childhood.”⁶⁹⁸ This notion of ‘common humanity’ has been reflected time and again by Obama in speeches to international audiences. In Berlin, Obama referred to himself and his audience as “citizens of the world.”⁶⁹⁹ He spoke to a belief in the connectedness of humankind, and indeed a notion that “certain principles are universal” in Yangon, and as noted above, used the language of ‘common humanity’ in Jakarta.⁷⁰⁰ Appiah suggests cosmopolitan openness to the world “is perfectly consistent with picking and choosing among the options you find in your search.”⁷⁰¹ It precludes ignoring other possibilities that lie *out there*.

Tensions lie at the heart of cosmopolitanism though. Primary among them is the emphasis placed upon global obligations to that common humanity, as opposed to the emphasis that celebrates local differences. These complexities and tensions underwrite, to a large degree, Obama’s own commitment to both the *particular* of community and the *universal* of common humanity. He tended towards opening a ‘conversation’ with those of different perspectives seeking understanding and to forge common ground. In Appiah’s terms, a cosmopolitan approach acknowledges that there is much to learn from differences in perspective and, such are the multitude of possibilities, it should not be expected that every person or society should converge on this single model.⁷⁰² We might question, however, the extent to which makers of American foreign policy have ever accepted societies that diverge from its own designs. Even Obama’s lived experience and belief in engaging across societies would be hard pushed to change that.

Assessing the impact of a cosmopolitan worldview on the choices of a political actor in office is a fraught pursuit. We must be wary of accepting at face-value the notion that awareness of identities and openness to the *otherness* of the world can necessarily engender policy choices that match. Ultimately, Obama’s acknowledgment of the fluidity and boundarylessness of identities was always subsumed to one identity that mattered above all others: that of President. Obligations to *common humanity* would extend only as far as it did not intrude upon his attendant responsibilities as

⁶⁹⁷ The Obama White House, "Jakarta Speech."

⁶⁹⁸ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 3

⁶⁹⁹ CNN Politics, "Full Script of Obama's Speech".

⁷⁰⁰ The Obama White House, "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Yangon," news release, November 19, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/19/remarks-president-obama-university-yangon.>; "Jakarta Speech."

⁷⁰¹ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*. p. 5

⁷⁰² *Ibid.* p. xv

Commander-in-Chief. Civilian victims of America's continued efforts at counterterrorism can attest to this. The very aspects of Obama's identity that invoke cosmopolitanism also raised the stakes of the imperatives of the presidency. Those imperatives stood as a constant reminder that to not maintain America's hegemony would be to be perceived as *un-American*.

It is in cosmopolitanism's slipperiness as a term – standing for so many things that we can question if it stands for anything at all - that its usefulness can be questioned. Nevertheless it is in these elements that it overlaps with aspects of philosophical pragmatism. To locate value in simply terming Obama a cosmopolitan is a fruitless task. But in the same means by which pragmatism stands for a method of interrogating the world, understanding cosmopolitanism in a similar manner can hold value: as a mode of thought that rejects the absolutes of one single identity and perspective. That Obama was himself constantly engaging in that same self-aware process of identity formation and understanding is of great value to endeavours of intellectual history.

===

Obama spent four important years living on Java, but another Pacific island locale was foundational to shaping him. Obama's first biographer (former *Chicago Tribune* reporter David Mendell) wrote that Obama's wife, Michelle, advised him that "to truly understand her husband, it was necessary to visit Hawai'i. No matter how much Obama had philosophized in print about his Kenyan father, she told [Mendell], that Pacific island held even more answers to Obama's complex persona." Indeed, "there's still a great deal of Hawai'i in Barack," she said. "You can't really understand Barack until you understand Hawai'i."⁷⁰³

Barack himself appeared to share this sentiment. In 1999, at that time merely a semi-notable alumni of the prestigious Punahou School, Obama reflected in its newspaper:

*When I look back on my years in Hawai'i, I realize how lucky I was to have been raised there. Hawaii's spirit of tolerance might not have been perfect or complete, but it was – and is – real. The opportunity that Hawai'i offered – to experience a variety of cultures in a climate of mutual respect – became an integral part of my world view, and a basis for the values that I hold most dear.*⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰³ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 20

⁷⁰⁴ Remnick, *The Bridge*. p. 92

Hawai'i became an American state in August 1959. It arrived at this fate after an initial half-century of missionary zeal mixed with business exploitation, and then another half-century of annexation. It was part of the United States, but very much apart from the United States. Through a combination of the rapacious practices of American capital, and the islands' location in between continents, it boasts a varied population of native Hawaiians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, Samoans, Okinawans, Portuguese, African-Americans, and whites from the mainland.⁷⁰⁵

The Hawaiian language served to designate Obama within its own culture as being *hapa* - someone who is half one race and half another.⁷⁰⁶ But this was by no means a rarity. From 1960 to 1969 (the decade of Obama's birth) 45.9 percent of all marriages that involved a Black man in Hawai'i were interracial. During that decade, more than a third of all marriages in Hawai'i were interracial.⁷⁰⁷ It is a stark reminder to recognize that the marriage of Obama's parents would have been illegal through breaking miscegenation laws in a full twenty-one other states in the union.⁷⁰⁸ Hawaiians meanwhile did not have a word for such a 'crime.'⁷⁰⁹ These facts reflect the culture of diversity which Obama says shaped his worldview, but they also reflect that it was the particularities of Hawai'i that made Obama's story at all possible.

David Remnick of the *New Yorker* notes that "since the nineteen-twenties, scholars have been referring to Hawai'i as a kind of racial Eden."⁷¹⁰ Obama himself mused in *Dreams From My Father* that in Hawai'i "there were too many races, with power among them too diffuse, to impose the mainland's rigid caste system; and so few blacks that the most ardent segregationist could enjoy a vacation secure in the knowledge that race mixing in Hawai'i had little to do with the established order back home" and thus "the legend was made of Hawai'i as the one true melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony."⁷¹¹ Hawai'i represented the aspirations of Obama's family – and the nation more broadly - as "a bright new world where differences of race or culture would instruct and amuse and perhaps even ennoble. A useful fiction, one that haunts me no less than it haunted my family, evoking as it does some lost Eden that extends beyond mere childhood."⁷¹²

The true realities of Hawai'i's history of violent occupation and racial struggles – in keeping with American society writ-large - should not be obfuscated. Obama himself reflected that in his notion of

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 50; Maraniss, *Barack Obama*. p. 139

⁷⁰⁶ *Barack Obama*. p. 165

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 162

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁹ B. Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). p. 180

⁷¹⁰ Remnick, *The Bridge*. p. 50

⁷¹¹ Obama, *Dreams*. pp. 23-24

⁷¹² Ibid. pp. 25-26

a “useful fiction.” But it does bear emphasizing the scale of diversity on the island. Obama grew up in an environment in which his *differences* were in their way typical. David Maraniss helpfully points out that his name - *Obama* - fit “unobtrusively into the ethnic cacophony of surnames of babies born in Honolulu that week: Arakawa, Caberto, Clifford, Kamealoha, Walker, Chun, Wong, Nakane, Murui, Uyeda, Kanoa, Abele, Torres, Camara, Kobayashi, Ikeda, Kawazoe, and Simpson.”⁷¹³

Accordingly, this diversity mattered to Obama, as seen in his aforementioned comment to Mendell about being raised an “Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child.” Obama noted this distinction to emphasize its benefit.⁷¹⁴ In conjunction with his time in Indonesia, his identity as Hawaiian had an indelible effect in shaping Obama’s own self-conception. He evinces a comfort with different identities that cut across boundaries.

Cosmopolitanism can be at once an embrace of difference while simultaneously a sense of the overlap that can be shared across communities. In Jakarta, Obama tied America and Indonesia’s histories and identities together in this respect. He professed a belief that “the history of both America and Indonesia should give us hope.” Importantly, “it is a story written into our national mottos. In the United States, our motto is *E pluribus unum* -- out of many, one. *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* -- unity in diversity.” Despite their differences, both nations represented for Obama a notion that “hundreds of millions who hold different beliefs can be united in freedom under one flag.”⁷¹⁵

“Such is Indonesia’s spirit. Such is the message of Indonesia’s inclusive philosophy, *Pancasila*” he argued. Obama found in the country “the ability to bridge divides of race and region and religion -- by the ability to see yourself in other people. As a child of a different race who came here from a distant country, I found this spirit in the greeting that I received upon moving here: *Selamat Datang*.” In celebrating the openness of different religions towards one another, he reified “that spark of the divine lives within each of us,” and argued that:

*We cannot give in to doubt or cynicism or despair. The stories of Indonesia and America should make us optimistic, because it tells us that history is on the side of human progress; that unity is more powerful than division; and that the people of this world can live together in peace. May our two nations, working together, with faith and determination, share these truths with all mankind.*⁷¹⁶

⁷¹³ Maraniss, *Barack Obama*. p. 165

⁷¹⁴ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 32

⁷¹⁵ The Obama White House, “Jakarta Speech.”

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In the sense of Jamesian philosophical pragmatism, scope exists for common understandings to be forged to serve the best function for a wider community. It is in this respect that Obama's *cosmopolitanism*, such that he exhibited it, reflected an inherent teleology. It possessed a certain direction of travel and logic of *telos*. Here it is important to note his deep belief that, despite whatever differences might exist within and between communities of people, the progress of humanity can be assured through the realization of these common bonds.

This hopeful vision of humanity reflected once more the mark his mother's philosophy left on Obama. His grandmother Madelyn told Mendell that Stanley Ann "was an Adlai Stevenson liberal... and he got a heavy dose of her thinking, you know, as a youngster."⁷¹⁷ Obama told him that his mother's influence was ever-present in his life. And Mendell reflects that "it is apparent from private and public conversations with him that he set his moral compass not only from his readings of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Bible but from his mother's guidance."⁷¹⁸ As an example Mendell noted:

*Obama said his mother's extreme idealism – her continued ability to see the good in people, even when they failed to live up to her lofty ideals – was the quality that he most admired. It is also the central message that he imparts in his political speeches – that all of us are bound together as one, and if we are to prosper as a country and, indeed, as a species, that we must focus on the good we see in others.*⁷¹⁹

Mendell's assessment locates fervency in Obama's belief in coming together for progress. But it also reflects how his mother's values played a similarly lofty role in his rhetoric. It was also found in his conception of progress on an international level, reflected in his speech in Indonesia where he emphasized the same "out of many, one" idea that shapes both Indonesia and the United States. Right there, alongside these nation's conceptions of pluralism in diversity, he could find his mother's idealism.

===

⁷¹⁷ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 24

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 27

Following Michelle Obama's advice, David Mendell visited Hawai'i. Upon taking a tour of Obama's former school, he wrote that "absorbing the atmosphere" of its campus gave him "a sense of the cool, unflappable Hawaiian nature at Obama's core."⁷²⁰ This cool persona is often attached to notions of the serenity that *must* naturally accompany a childhood and adolescence in Hawai'i. Part of that was the opportunities such an environment accorded young people looking for leisure activities. Much has been made of Obama's own admitted (frequent) enjoyment of marijuana.⁷²¹ His group of friends became known as the "Choom Gang," who "enjoyed drinking beer, playing basketball, bodysurfing when the waves were up, and getting high whenever they had enough money."⁷²² David Maraniss writes "for teenage boys in pursuit of good times, the island of O'ahu was a wonderland."⁷²³ Indeed, David Remnick suggests that "Hawai'i does not much resist the image of paradise: the physical beauty, the isolation from the mainland (from *everywhere*), the languid pace of life, the self-marketing as the "Aloha State," the ultimate vacation spot, are intoxicating."⁷²⁴ Obama himself could not resist such rhapsodizing about his home-state, "you know," he told a coterie of aides whilst visiting the state for a summit, "everything is just better in Hawai'i."⁷²⁵

Yet Hawai'i the island paradise also stands in a paradox with another significant element of the state's place in the wider American story. In *Dominion From Sea to Sea*, his sweeping history of America's 'Pacific ascendancy,' Bruce Cumings notes that Hawai'i - as home to the headquarters of the United States Indo-Pacific Command - is "a base of a great armada of naval, land, and air forces and the unrivalled core of American power in the Pacific."⁷²⁶ As such, Hawai'i is "the earthly foundation for a truly awesome power projection across some 100 million square miles of land and sea, just about half of the planet's entire surface."⁷²⁷ In effect, it holds military power and responsibility over an area that contains two thirds of the Earth's population.⁷²⁸ It is, Cumings suggests, "the core of the nation's global power."⁷²⁹

Writing in 2008, Cumings argued that "Edenic Hawai'i...was and is the most militarized state in the union" and it appears difficult to argue much differently over a decade later.⁷³⁰ The islands sitting as

⁷²⁰ Ibid. p. 37

⁷²¹ Remnick, *The Bridge*. p. 93

⁷²² Garrow, *Rising Star*. p. 92

⁷²³ Maraniss, *Barack Obama*. p. 294

⁷²⁴ Remnick, *The Bridge*. p. 77

⁷²⁵ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 165

⁷²⁶ Cumings, *Dominion*. p. 177

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ Ibid. p. 421

⁷²⁹ Ibid. p. 420

⁷³⁰ Ibid. p. 378; A. Kiersz, "Here's How Much Land Military Bases Take up in Each State," *Business Insider* 10 November (2014), <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-land-military-bases-take-up-in-each-state->

a hub of America's military concern stands in sharp contrast to visions we might carry of the sun, surf, and drug-hazed good times of Obama's youth. The laid back paradise of postcards and palm trees, the home of the "perpetual state of serenity in the air" that Mendell observed at Punahou was also a seat of American power.⁷³¹

===

Hawaii's own set of contradictions – its diversity (created in part through empire and exploitation), its remoteness (whilst representing an American bridge to the Pacific world), and its serenity (whilst housing some of the might of the American war machine) - usefully illustrates the promises and perils of Obama's much vaunted pursuit of a 'Pivot to Asia.' The recasting of America's relationship with the Pacific region was a complex undertaking that posed questions about the very nature of the relationship as it existed historically and could exist in the future.

The Pivot - more officially referred to as the 'rebalance' - was an initiative taking root from priorities shaping the overall strategic direction for the administration. The strategy was pushed into motion in November 2011 when a landmark visit by Obama to the region followed hot on the heels of a *Foreign Policy* op-ed penned a month earlier by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.⁷³² Titled 'America's Pacific Century,' Clinton's article was the first prominent effort to articulate the administration's initiative. She wrote "the Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics" and as a result "harnessing Asia's growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests and a key priority for President Obama." She floated arguments which would become familiar to observers of the administration's Asia policy, suggesting that "open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-edge technology." Economic recovery in the U.S. would "depend on exports and the ability of American firms to tap into the vast and growing consumer base of Asia."⁷³³ She emphasized how multiple visits as Secretary of State allowed her to see "the rapid transformations taking place in the region, underscoring how much the future of the United States is intimately intertwined with the

2014-11?r=US&IR=T.; Hawaii Defense Economy, "Defense Personnel in Hawaii," <http://hawaiidefenseeconomy.org/defense-economy-personnel/>.

⁷³¹ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 37

⁷³² H. R. Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy* 11 October (2011), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

⁷³³ *Ibid.*

future of the Asia-Pacific.” Consequently, she wrote “a strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America’s global leadership.”⁷³⁴

For his part, in a speech to the Australian Parliament, Obama outlined the core tenets of this grand strategic initiative. The “larger purpose” of his visit to the region was to address U.S. efforts “to advance security, prosperity and human dignity across the Asia Pacific.” He argued that for the U.S. this reflected “a broader shift” as, crucially, “after a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.”⁷³⁵

He placed this in the context of simultaneous policies of troops leaving Iraq and the initiation of a transition to allow an exit from Afghanistan. In doing so he optimistically advised the audience to “make no mistake, the tide of war is receding, and America is looking ahead to the future that we must build.” That tide of war was bound inextricably to the Middle East. But now, the U.S. could direct its attentions, unobstructed, to the Asia-Pacific – “here, we see the future.”⁷³⁶ This shift in direction would be a boon for Obama’s own ambitions for the United States. Similarly to Clinton, he argued “as the world’s fastest-growing region -- and home to more than half the global economy -- the Asia Pacific is critical to achieving my highest priority, and that's creating jobs and opportunity for the American people.”⁷³⁷

Obama grandly proclaimed “as President, I have, therefore, made a deliberate and strategic decision,” and proceeded to enunciate a theme which became important in the administration’s rhetoric on the policy: “as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends.” He established just what was meant by the U.S. “shaping” the region: speaking first of security and the continued unique projection of power; second, of advancing “shared prosperity” through free markets and “an open international economic system, where rules are clear and every nation plays by them.” Third, he spoke of supporting fundamental human rights. Combined, this was “the future we seek in the Asia-Pacific – security, prosperity, and dignity for all.”

“That’s what we stand for,” he noted. “That’s who we are.” That’s the future the U.S. would pursue “in partnership with allies and friends, and with every element of American power.” This was a crucial statement of intent. It was also a significant indicator of how Obama would conceive of the

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ The Obama White House, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," news release, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

appropriate direction of U.S. power. As a punctuation mark on this point, he added “let there be no doubt: In the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in.”⁷³⁸

In many crucial respects, Obama’s Pivot was focused on enhancing ties with the region, developing overlap between cultures that could enable consensus, and to thus enable progress. This inexorable march of progress was part of Asia’s future, and it could be shared by the United States. Obama told the Australian parliament that “across a vast ocean, it’s impossible to know what lies beyond the horizon. But if this vast region and its people teach us anything, it’s the yearning for liberty and progress will not be denied.” People’s collective fight for that progress stood as a reminder of an idea “the world must never forget,” and crucially an idea that:

*The currents of history may ebb and flow, but over time they move -- decidedly, decisively -- in a single direction. History is on the side of the free -- free societies, free governments, free economies, free people. And the future belongs to those who stand firm for those ideals, in this region and around the world.*⁷³⁹

Perhaps the most vivid representation of this collective push for progress can be seen in the administration’s more purposeful engagement with a range of regional multilateral organisations. Often derided as a veritable “alphabet soup” of organisations, Southeast Asia is home to several international organisations such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), ARF (Asian Regional Forum), and regional fora such as the East Asia Summit, which had often lacked legitimacy and sway in the region.⁷⁴⁰ Obama argued, however, that he would emphasize the importance of engagement with such regional organisations.⁷⁴¹ Clinton did likewise, highlighting the potential for the reinforcement of “the system of rules and responsibilities” that undergird an effective international order. This would go some way, she maintained, to curating “a web of partnerships and institutions” throughout the Pacific “as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we have built across the Atlantic.”⁷⁴² These were endeavours that spoke to the same pragmatist ideals of consensus building and sustained collective process of deliberation that Obama deemed so important in shaping a functional international order.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁰ Cumings, *Dominion*. p. 401; J. A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012). pp. 3-4

⁷⁴¹ The Obama White House, "Australian Parliament Speech."

⁷⁴² Clinton, "America's Pacific Century".

===

In his speech in Jakarta, Obama argued that “America has a stake in Indonesia.” He made apparent this stake in its development and prosperity, and in pointing to the interconnectivity of the two nations he noted that “above all, America has a stake in the success of the Indonesian people.” He continued, “underneath the headlines of the day, we must build bridges between our people, because our future security and prosperity is shared.” Simply, “as vast and diverse countries; as neighbors on either side of the Pacific; and above all as democracies,” he maintained, “the United States and Indonesia are bound together by shared interests and shared values.”⁷⁴³

In collapsing the sheer scale of the Pacific, in casually naming the U.S. and Indonesia as “neighbours,” it was not merely an emphasis of friendly bonhomie between nations. Instead, it was an idea born of a broader effort to reshape understandings of the United States as being *itself* a Pacific nation. It was the understanding of it not being a nation with Pacific borders, but being a nation *of* the Pacific. Indeed, in his speech to the Australian Parliament in Canberra, Obama was at pains to emphasize “our new focus on this region reflects a fundamental truth -- the United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation.”⁷⁴⁴ This became a commonly reflected notion in the administration.

Kurt Campbell - who served as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2009 to 2013 - played a prominent role in curating the policy. He is also the figure who has, arguably, most taken it upon himself to be the chief articulator and defender of the Pivot to Asia, especially with his post-administration book – *The Pivot*.⁷⁴⁵ At its core, Campbell’s vision is underwritten by a staunch belief in the centrality of the U.S. to the region’s future. He establishes that “the United States has deep and enduring interests in Asia dating to the earliest days of the republic.” And what’s more, “American power has long been a calming and welcome factor in the region.”⁷⁴⁶ He projects an almost messianic quality to the United States’ role in Asia – indeed arguing it carries a “vital and leading role in the Asian Century.”⁷⁴⁷ He traces this role in a particular reading of history that holds the U.S. as having been the benevolent protector of China against European imperial interests. He then sets forth the modern incarnation of this benevolent role – one of leading in the curation of multilateral relationships that can promote international norms to benefit all members.

⁷⁴³ The Obama White House, "Jakarta Speech."

⁷⁴⁴ "Australian Parliament Speech."

⁷⁴⁵ K. M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 197

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 198

In Canberra, Obama offered up his own summary of America's history as a Pacific nation, recognizing the cultural and economic importance of Asian immigrants to the U.S., and the more martial connections of America's numerous military engagements in the region, where generations of Americans served and died "so democracies could take root; so economic miracles could lift hundreds of millions to prosperity." Americans, he maintained "have bled with you for this progress, and we will not allow it -- we will never allow it to be reversed."⁷⁴⁸ For Campbell "the U.S. pursuit of its own economic interests, and its dedication to a liberal and open economic order has been one of the longest, most enduring, and most successful American traditions in Asia." In this conception, the fusing of American interests with those of the region was an indelible part of America's history in interacting with it, and according to Campbell, is "a tradition that the U.S. Pivot to Asia is designed to continue."⁷⁴⁹

The presence looming over the administration's articulation of the Pivot was that of China. China's rise was an important reality underlying the Pivot. Every effort was made to emphasize the integrated and co-operative relationship the U.S. sought with China, while acknowledging points of contention such as its economic practices, human rights violations, and territorial disputes.⁷⁵⁰ Yet it also obfuscated that much of the Pivot aimed at stressing the importance of the U.S. as a leading force in the region, leaving people aware, in no uncertain terms, that the U.S. – and not China - had made Asia into what it is today. And though some of the administration's rhetoric obscured it, that was intended to continue in the face of China's emerging competition.

Jeffrey Bader, who served for the first two years of Obama's presidency as the senior director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council, wrote of the administration's Asia policy that "the major geostrategic challenge facing Asia, and the United States in Asia, was how to react to the dramatic rise of China in the previous decade." China's economic growth and integration into the economies of the region "had permanently altered the geopolitical landscape."⁷⁵¹

The U.S. was wary of such competition but so too, Bader argued, were the countries of the region, especially when it came to China's military spending.⁷⁵² As such, the administration concluded that "more active U.S. participation in regional organizations was a necessary component of an effective Asia policy."⁷⁵³ It believed, Bader suggested, "that an America embedded in emerging multilateral

⁷⁴⁸ The Obama White House, "Australian Parliament Speech."

⁷⁴⁹ Campbell, *The Pivot*. p. 101

⁷⁵⁰ Clinton, "America's Pacific Century".

⁷⁵¹ Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*. pp. 2-3

⁷⁵² *Ibid.* p. 3

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*

institutions would give comfort to countries uncertain about the impact of China's rise and provide important balance and leadership."⁷⁵⁴

According to Bader, America was viewed by other states in the region as a source of economic innovation, a strong security presence, and a partner in responding to disasters. "In their eyes," he argued, "America is an essential stabilizing force" as rising powers (principally China) "gain in influence."⁷⁵⁵ As such, the administration held the perspective that "a sustained and strong U.S. presence" was "welcomed by most of the states of the region."⁷⁵⁶

Obama told Jeffrey Goldberg that he believed the relationship of the United States with China was "going to be the most critical" in terms of "traditional great-state relations." He argued that "if we get that right and China continues on a peaceful rise, then we have a partner that is growing in capability and sharing with us the burdens and responsibilities of maintaining an international order." He conceded, nevertheless, that Chinese failure on this front, would prompt not only "potential for conflict with China, but we will find ourselves having more difficulty dealing with these other challenges that are going to come."⁷⁵⁷

The perspectives that constituted the Obama administration's approach to the region and China all held that China, in its pursuit of its self-interest, would be "a threat to peace and equilibrium."⁷⁵⁸ In contrast, the U.S. would uphold that equilibrium. It was the role it played in the region. Chinese aspirations for its own *rightful* interests of regional dominance, necessary for its maintenance of economic growth and social stability, were to be somehow accommodated or subsumed by this greater American role.⁷⁵⁹ Campbell argued that the U.S. was doing its part to ameliorate against bad outcomes in the region, as the multilateral framework it sought in Asia could "set the contours for China's rise." This approach, he maintained, "informed the U.S. Pivot to Asia."⁷⁶⁰

But here, the specific nature of this rendering of America's role should be noted. Campbell's and Obama's histories of America the Pacific nation elide the history of America the imperial power that had over time annexed the Philippines, Hawai'i, and Guam, among others and which now maintains vast number of military bases across the region. Bruce Cumings notes "the seizure of Hawai'i and the Philippines, the proclamation of the Open Door, and the intervention in the Boxer Rebellion marked

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 4

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 7-8

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 7

⁷⁵⁷ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁷⁵⁸ Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*; A. Carter, "The Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security: Building a Principled Security Network," *Foreign Affairs* November/December (2016).

⁷⁵⁹ T. J. Christensen, "Obama and Asia: Confronting the China Challenge," *ibid.* September/October (2015).

⁷⁶⁰ Campbell, *The Pivot*. p. 232

a new outward advance, a thrust fully embodied in Teddy Roosevelt – it *was* empire, and it all happened in the Pacific.”⁷⁶¹ For Cumings, the pursuit of the Pacific was a consequence of feted instincts of American power. Its “empire grew out of the western thrust across the continent by expansionists who disdained Europe, its power politics, and its colonies, desiring instead maximum, unhindered American freedom in the world.”⁷⁶²

America’s relationship with the Pacific was therefore altogether more complex (and bloody) than Obama and Campbell allowed. Nevertheless, their versions of history informed enunciations of the policy. In this it formed one plank of a twin effort by the administration to emphasize the importance and necessity of the Pivot for America’s global concerns. This twofold logic was self-reinforcing: the U.S. future, prospects of progress, and visions of future U.S. greatness all lay in the Asia-Pacific. This was coupled with the notion that the U.S. was *inherently* a Pacific nation, sharing a common bond with nations and peoples in the region. Clinton reflected in her memoir that Asia was “where we expected much of the history of the 21st century to be written.”⁷⁶³ Kurt Campbell, for his part, suggested the Pivot was “motivated by a simple set of unrelenting truths; the lion’s share of the history of the twenty-first century will be written in Asia; the path to progress on every major global governance challenge runs through Asia; and the dynamism of Asia’s economies will be central to American economic prosperity for generations to come.”⁷⁶⁴ The turn to such a strategy would “prove critical for positioning the United States to prosper, thrive, and protect in the coming Asian Century.”⁷⁶⁵ This became an oft-repeated notion by figures throughout the administration.⁷⁶⁶

In *The Long Game*, Derek Chollet concluded his discussion of the Pivot by evaluating that, despite setbacks, “the rebalance to Asia has been a significant strategic shift, positioning the U.S. for the future.”⁷⁶⁷ It is notable that in his book, one of the earliest post-administration *defences* of Obama’s foreign policy, Chollet himself turned to David Milne’s assessment that “the pivot toward Asia may be viewed as the Obama administration’s principal foreign-policy legacy thirty years hence” and particularly so in respect to the rise of China into the great-power arena.⁷⁶⁸ The very nature of the policy was so *future* oriented, that defenders of it might locate success in an unseen, distant legacy.

⁷⁶¹ Cumings, *Dominion*. p. 391

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*

⁷⁶³ Clinton, *Hard Choices*. p. 41

⁷⁶⁴ Campbell, *The Pivot*. p. 32

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 13

⁷⁶⁶ Asia Society, "Complete Transcript: Thomas Donilon at Asia Society New York,"

<https://asiasociety.org/new-york/complete-transcript-thomas-donilon-asia-society-new-york> (; Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 53; Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*. pp. 6-7; Carter, "The Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security: Building a Principled Security Network."

⁷⁶⁷ Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 59

⁷⁶⁸ Milne, *Worldmaking*. p. 508

Yet this only served to emphasize its import, as what else is grand strategy but a matching of means towards future necessities, and long term objectives? In the immediate sense, Chollet added his own assessment by noting that “administration officials often remark how much better America’s standing in Asia is today, saying that when they attend Asia summits, they don’t hear much about U.S. “retreat” or “credibility” or “red lines” – terms that dominate the conversation in other regions, especially the Middle East.”⁷⁶⁹

This last notion here hints at a fundamental pillar of what the Pivot to Asia represented. The more official name of the strategy – the ‘Rebalance’ to Asia – reflected a crucial ideal that underpinned it, just as it underpinned the Obama presidency. This was a deeply held desire to steer the United States out of its ill-fated wars in the Middle East, and to instead turn its attention to a more appropriate direction of its power. Tom Donilon - who became National Security Advisor in 2010 - succinctly outlined this notion in a speech given at the Asia Society: “After a decade defined by 9/11, two wars, and a financial crisis, President Obama took office determined to restore the foundation of the United States’ global leadership—our economic strength at home.”⁷⁷⁰ The argument Obama had made on the campaign trail - and as far back as his anti-Iraq War speech in 2002 - held at its core that America’s global leadership been sapped by Bush’s profligate adventurism. Remediating this, Donilon argued, necessitated focusing “efforts and resources” on the regions that would “shape the global order in the decades ahead.” It was Obama’s judgment, he reflected, “that we were overweighted in some areas and regions, including our military actions in the Middle East. At the same time, we were underweighted in other regions, such as the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, we believed this was our key geographic imbalance.”⁷⁷¹ From the outset of the Obama administration there was a core sense that the balance of American energies had been tilted off-kilter, and it was necessary to restore them. We can recognize once more the pragmatist imperative to site U.S. actions in places where material (and not simply ideological) benefits could be achieved.

Reflecting in his memoir, Ben Rhodes emphasized this notion, arguing “many of the issues that motivated Obama... depended upon cooperation in Asia.” And most pointedly, “while the Middle East represented the past – its religious wars, American-backed autocrats, Iranian revolutionaries, terrorist threats – Asia seemed to represent the future.”⁷⁷² But this dichotomy between the different regions and their import to American interests was perhaps most vividly expressed by the president himself. His interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* came late in his term, where he appeared willing to offer more forthright opinions than he had previously. But even still, Obama’s comments

⁷⁶⁹ Chollet, *The Long Game*. p. 59

⁷⁷⁰ Asia Society, "Donilon Speech".

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 164

on the matter of the Middle East and its impacts on U.S. policy found him at perhaps his least guarded in his whole presidency, and with regards to the Middle East, found him at his most jaded and cynical. “Right now, I don’t think that anybody can be feeling good about the situation in the Middle East,” he said.

*You have countries that are failing to provide prosperity and opportunity for their people. You’ve got a violent, extremist ideology, or ideologies, that are turbocharged through social media. You’ve got countries that have very few civic traditions, so that as autocratic regimes start fraying, the only organizing principles are sectarian.*⁷⁷³

He continued, “contrast that with Southeast Asia, which still has huge problems – enormous poverty, corruption – but is filled with striving, ambitious, energetic people who are every single day scratching and clawing to build businesses and get education and find jobs and build infrastructure. The contrast is pretty stark.”⁷⁷⁴

His comments betrayed scathing, dismissive feelings about the failings of the Middle East. We might ask where this impugning of individuals and their motives comes from. Is it the result of years of frustration with the Middle East as a region? An outcome of the U.S. having spent years of toil ultimately for little gain? Fatigue at the continual gravitational pull exacted by the region on his foreign policy efforts? He was not finished in expressing his dismay. Goldberg wrote how “in Asia, as well as in Latin America and Africa, Obama says, he sees young people yearning for self-improvement, modernity, education, and material wealth.” Obama provocatively argued of such people, that “they are not thinking about how to kill Americans... What they’re thinking about it is *How do I get a better education? How do I create something of value?*”⁷⁷⁵ He then made an observation which Goldberg posited “was representative of [Obama’s] bleakest, most visceral understanding of the Middle East today – not the sort of understanding that a White House still oriented around themes of hope and change might choose to advertise.” Obama argued “if we’re not talking to them,” referring to young Asians and Africans and Latin Americans, “because the only thing we’re doing is figuring out how to destroy or cordon off or control the malicious, nihilistic, violent parts of humanity, then we’re missing the boat.”⁷⁷⁶

Such causational logic is also proffered in critical assertions that Obama’s rebalance away from the Middle East is what allowed for the rise of that “malicious” and “nihilistic” element. Under such a

⁷⁷³ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid.

view, the staggering and violent emergence of ISIS resulted from the group eagerly filling a vacuum created by America's absence.⁷⁷⁷ But crucially, Obama held fast to a notion that the general malaise that beset the United States arose largely through its efforts to manage the affairs of the Middle East. Such efforts had only served to leech on to American foreign policy more broadly, reshaping it in a deleterious manner. In important respects, these sorts of statements served as a signal on the part of the administration that notions of American decline were premature, and assessments of Obama's strategic failings were wrong-headed. For Obama, instead, it was the prescriptions that America need do more in certain parts of the world that led it down blind alleys – that led it to risk “missing the boat.” A redirection of American attention to other – neglected – parts of the world would allow it to once more take a lead in seizing global opportunity. The violence of ISIS, under this conception, was itself an unpleasant distraction from what actually mattered for American power.

For Obama and his administration it had become a simple equation, the Asia-Pacific offered the opportunity to address problems such as those raised by Obama in his 2002 speech – domestic political and economic concerns. As noted above, Obama told the Australian parliament that “the Asia Pacific is critical to achieving my highest priority, and that's creating jobs and opportunity for the American people.”⁷⁷⁸ Just as he had in 2002, throughout his presidency he still held this perspective that the military entanglements of his predecessor (and those he argued to be favoured by the Washington establishment) were the obstacle to achieving America's true interests, those interests which would redound to benefit Americans at home.⁷⁷⁹

This necessitated a recalibration of what it meant to use American power; reconfiguring the allocation of resources, time, and attention for its different tools' direction of use. This version of grand strategy held no place for outright militarism, unilateralism, pre-emptive wars, or democracy promotion. It was a vision that instead leant on the sort of multilateralism that reinforced notions of consensus building, and shared institutions for economic and security issues. These would be a more effective means of contending with the still necessary task of dealing with threats to U.S. interests, but also recognizing the opportunities offered by the Asia-Pacific region.

===

⁷⁷⁷ D. Ross, "How Obama Created a Mideast Vacuum," *Politico Magazine* 10 January (2016), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/obama-mideast-vacuum-213513>.

⁷⁷⁸ The Obama White House, "Australian Parliament Speech."

⁷⁷⁹ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

To realize its entrance into the so-called Pacific century, emphasis was placed on America's historic bonds with the region. The quest for progress through its relationship with the region formed part of an immutable logic that would not be denied. It was desirable for the U.S. to pursue what came naturally to it; an extension of *rightful* U.S. policy. The Middle East adventurism left over from the Bush years was the aberration as instead it made logical and historical sense for American power to be directed towards the Asia-Pacific.

On more than one occasion, Obama declared himself to be "the first Pacific President." This sense of identity carried important implications for how an American president could relate to another part of the world. In the first instance, his connection to Indonesia had a profound impact on shaping an understanding of the world that existed beyond the parochial confines of American life. David Milne suggests that Obama, having grown up in Hawai'i and Indonesia "lacks the habitual eastward orientation of his predecessors. Most American presidents have had a strong Atlanticist perspective, believing that Europe is the continent in which the world's most significant geostrategic conflict plays out."⁷⁸⁰ We find in Obama instead a reflexive Pacificist orientation.

This played a latent role in the broad initiative of the Pivot to Asia. The geostrategic imperative located in Asia took its place in a complex vortex of Obama's own identity and intellectual predilections, the westward orientation formed an irreducible part of his outlook on the world, as did a cosmopolitanism and its attendant belief in shared humanity and the march towards common shared understandings. This *telos* had its own curious relationship with the necessity of the United States' direction of power towards the Asia-Pacific region. Obama and his administration placed America's own progress – and its long recovery from the financial crisis of 2008 – in the context of the anticipated growth of the Asia-Pacific region. This became almost received wisdom in the Obama administration.

Obama was by no means driving this initiative by himself. Whilst recognizing notions of his identity itself being the decisive factor, it would be reductionist to suggest that was entirely so. But the coinciding of an administration staffed with figures who consistently argued for the necessity of such a rebalance with a President who was uniquely situated in his remove from traditional Atlanticism, does place a level of import on the decisive role a President's preferences can carry. In this respect, where Obama came from and the places he encountered are worthy of engaging with, to the extent that they played a role in shaping his assumptions about American power. Ben Rhodes writes in his memoir of spending an evening with Obama in Hawai'i, and finding him in a reflective mood, where "he started talking about Asia more broadly – the mix of cultures, religions, and races, he found so

⁷⁸⁰ Milne, *Worldmaking*. p. 508

familiar.” Obama said “Hawai’i has a lot in common with Jakarta...There’s a certain communal spirit. Americans are more individualistic.” Rhodes recounts Obama’s suggestion that “when you spend time growing up in Jakarta like I did, and see the masses of humanity in a place like that, it makes it harder for you to think purely of yourself.”⁷⁸¹ Obama, in Rhodes’ retelling, is a figure prone to reflecting on where he has come from and how that shaped his own thought. It is a reflection we must take seriously. Rhodes certainly did so, in suggesting of Asia, “this part of the world, which had shaped Obama, was going to be more important to the future than the familiar battlefields of the Middle East, but it was distant from the debates that dominated in Washington.”⁷⁸² Rhodes both centred Obama’s identity, and where he came from, whilst acknowledging that, in some sense, that centre of interest was remote from the direction of travel of U.S. foreign policy – mired in its concerns for its post-9/11 Middle Eastern wars.

Cumings argues that, over time, isolated Hawai’i became “a strategic centrepiece rather than a bunch of Polynesian islands almost equidistantly remote from Los Angeles or Shanghai,” in the transformation of “the seemingly limitless North Pacific into an American lake.”⁷⁸³ Just as Hawai’i was “now sat in the middle,” the *hapa* kid from Honolulu by way of Kansas and Kenya, the street-running kid of Menteng Dalam - America’s “first Pacific president” - was at the centre of a significant re-orientation of American power.⁷⁸⁴ America’s first Pacific president in America’s new Pacific Century.

===

The ‘progress’ to be found in the Asia-Pacific marked out the necessity of a re-direction away from the Middle East and served to emphasise the failures of those wars that had defined America’s recent presence in the region. Yet, amidst talk of turning America’s attention to more pressing concerns, one could risk obscuring the ways in which the United States still had vital military priorities to attend to in the Middle East. The United States would remain for the entirety of Obama’s presidency at war with al Qaeda.

Obama had emphasized he would not hesitate to act in order to prevent threats to America’s national security. He took this grave duty as Commander-in-Chief seriously as the war entered its

⁷⁸¹ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 165

⁷⁸² *Ibid.* p. 166

⁷⁸³ Cumings, *Dominion*. pp. 195-196

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; Maraniss, *Barack Obama*. p. 216

eight year when he assumed the presidency. Barely a full year into his first term, on December 25 2009, a 23 year old Nigerian national - Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab – attempted to detonate an explosive device that would have decimated the plane bound from Amsterdam to Detroit on which he was a passenger.⁷⁸⁵ He came to be known as “the underwear bomber” (in reference to the location of his explosives) and he had committed to jihad after being trained and instructed by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).⁷⁸⁶

In the aftermath of the tragic events of 9/11, George W Bush’s White House set about designing its military response. In doing so it secured ‘The Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2001’ which shaped the parameters of what use of American force would be legal. The AUMF stated:

*The President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.*⁷⁸⁷

This was an authorization which the Bush administration took to its limits. The Obama administration’s legal team, for its part, also sought those limits out, determining that the president had authority to direct efforts against not only members of al Qaeda, or indeed the Taliban, but also “associated forces” that were fighting against the United States and its partners.⁷⁸⁸

The “war on terror” initiated against al Qaeda - specifically as it operated out of Afghanistan and Pakistan - had steadily become more nebulous in its focus. Al Qaeda affiliates were emerging across a range of nations further afield, and thus expanded the urgency of that question of how to prosecute a war against a criminal organisation that did not adhere to laws of conventional warfare. Compounding these issues, fighters affiliated with these groups could slip through cracks and hide out in countries that lacked strong centralized government, often far from traditional war zones where U.S. ground forces were engaged in sustained armed combat.⁷⁸⁹ In addition to Afghanistan and the mountainous tribal regions of Pakistan, this meant Yemen, Somalia, and later the wreckage

⁷⁸⁵ C. Savage, *Power Wars: The Relentless Rise of Presidential Authority and Secrecy* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2017). p. 11

⁷⁸⁶ BBC News, "Underwear Bomber Abdulmutallab Sentenced to Life," *BBC News* 16 February (2012), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17065130>

⁷⁸⁷ Congress.gov, "Public Law 107-40-Sept. 18, 2001," Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

⁷⁸⁸ Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 119

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 240

of post-Gaddafi Libya, became prime locales for such groups. Afghanistan aside, these were not places where U.S. forces could legitimately form a ground presence. In this context it is important to acknowledge journalist Charlie Savage's note that "without ground forces or a functional government, there is no way to capture a terrorism suspect."⁷⁹⁰

This posed a significant problem for the Obama administration in its efforts to win its fight in the post-9/11 war. How could the U.S. reach in to ungoverned and insecure countries and appropriately disarm an enemy intent on attacking again? Furthermore, in the context of Obama's Pivot to Asia and his overwhelming desire to shift American focus from the Middle East, how could this be achieved absent an enormous investment of resources in manpower, munitions, and - perhaps most vexingly from Obama's perspective – processes of state-building?

===

The development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles was a profound leap forward in the ways in which America would conduct military affairs. More commonly referred to as 'drones,' they initially merely offered capabilities of flying over an area of interest, providing the benefit of surveillance and reconnaissance. Crucially, they were a technology that could be operated remotely at no risk to those responsible for its flight. The vessel in which the greatest potentials of this Unmanned Aerial revolution were realized was officially called the General Atomics MQ-1 Predator. The Predator was designed originally by Iraq-born Israeli aeronautics engineer Abraham Karem, but after the General Atomics Corporation took ownership of the technology, undertaking further development, it began to attract the interest of the Pentagon and the CIA.⁷⁹¹

Predator drones could fly at an altitude of 25,000 feet, for twenty-four hours straight, carrying a sophisticated set of communications equipment and a camera fixed on the ground below.⁷⁹² After initial teething problems (including the propensity to be blown off course in anything but calm weather) the advent of GPS technology and a simultaneous revolution in communications technology meant the potentials of drones were expanded in a significant way.⁷⁹³

After the Air Force wrested control of the Predators from the Army, they were utilized in the air campaign against Serbia in Kosovo, at first purely as a reconnaissance tool. Despite disputation of

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid. pp. 240-241

⁷⁹¹ A. Cockburn, *Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins* (London: Verso, 2015). pp. 51-72

⁷⁹² Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power*. p. 33

⁷⁹³ Cockburn, *Kill Chain*. Pp. 56-58

the actual effectiveness of the aerial campaign in bringing about Slobodan Milosevic's negotiation of a peace settlement, the Air Force nevertheless sought to highlight it as a success. As such, journalist Andrew Cockburn argues "the campaign's apparent confirmation that precisely targeted bombs and missiles could achieve victory at no cost in friendly casualties, and in a good cause, too, prepared the political landscape for the wars of the next century."⁷⁹⁴ Politically it fit in to the logic of the Revolution in Military Affairs, the notion of modernizing the military which had long been a project of key figures who became part of the Bush administration.⁷⁹⁵ As the potentialities of drones in warfare became apparent, the extension of their use to other theatres and, more pressingly, the onrushing "global war on terror" became the next step.

On 3 November 2002, in a watershed moment, a Hellfire missile fired from a Predator successfully killed Qa'd Salim Sinan al-Harithi in Yemen. He was a leader of al Qaeda in Yemen, reputed to be a mastermind behind the bombing of the battleship *USS Cole*. Whilst there had been previous such strikes in Afghanistan, this was notable in being the first such targeted killing by drone in a country with which the U.S. was not at war.⁷⁹⁶ The Predator became part of Bush's war on terror, offering the ability to take out such targets in the perceived broader fight against al Qaeda. The Obama administration for its part would come to vastly accelerate this use of drones.

In answer to the problems of capturing terrorism suspects without ground forces or a functional government, Savage notes that "the rise of drones has made it increasingly possible to penetrate inaccessible regions and kill people from the air."⁷⁹⁷ It followed that "under Obama, remote-controlled aircraft were becoming the weapon of choice for strikes away from traditional battlefields."⁷⁹⁸ He recognizes that the increase in their utilization by Obama was in part because "he had far more of them to deploy than Bush had had." But, crucially, "Obama was also enraptured by their potential for risk reduction. Conventional air strikes put American pilots – and sometimes Special Operations spotters on the ground – at risk." By contrast, however, "if a drone crashed or was shot down, its pilot still went home for dinner." The technology "also enabled operators to watch a target for a long period before unleashing a missile, which held out the promise of greater precision and fewer civilian deaths."⁷⁹⁹ Dave Deptula, formerly a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force,

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 62

⁷⁹⁵ Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power*.

⁷⁹⁶ Cockburn, *Kill Chain*. p. 234

⁷⁹⁷ Savage, *Power Wars*. pp. 240-241

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 272

and a key theorist of air war affirmed that “the real advantage of unmanned aerial systems is that they allow you to project power without projecting vulnerability.”⁸⁰⁰

Drone technology offered a significant alternative – an ability to continue the fight against the enemies of America, without the same commitment and risk encountered before. For Obama, the tragedy was no longer contained in asking American men and women to die for the cause of a complex war. As Andrew Cockburn relays, “sooner or later, U.S. officials and diplomats toiling to implement what they believed was American policy came to realize that there was really only one issue at stake: the domestic U.S. political fortunes of the Obama administration.” In the wake especially of the attempted Christmas Day bombing of 2011, the imperatives of not wishing to answer searching questions the day after the successful perpetration of such a tragedy, became overwhelming. “‘No bombs on my watch,’ that’s all they wanted to be able to say,” explained a former Obama White House official to Cockburn. Crucially, in searching for a solution, the official reflected, “drones were a cheap, politically painless way of dealing with that. No one even talked about it very much.”⁸⁰¹ The consequentialism of Obama’s broad pragmatist ‘sensibilities,’ shines through here. The ends were clear, and drones offered a means to achieve those ends without compromising them. But the tragic pragmatism discussed previously nevertheless also carries obvious bearing in the issue of drone strikes. That expediency was weighed up against the moral questions posed by the strategy.

As such, in examining Obama’s foreign policy record, failure to reckon with his approach to drone warfare would be negligent. Such is the strength of opinion on the matter in some quarters, that this very set of policy choices is, in part, what marks Obama out as the disappointment he became (especially to many on the left) by the end of his presidency. The prolific use of weapons technologies that frequently caused the deaths of innocent civilian bystanders was a moral failing beyond the pale of what many should bear from their leaders.⁸⁰² Whilst the tragedy of American service people dying in war was eliminated by the use of such technology, tragedy nevertheless remained. In addition to this, critics ably point to the potential blowback effects that the drone war could unleash, the despair and fury provoked by an unseen enemy reigning death from the sky was enough to radicalize a whole new set of populations now determined to fight Americans. By this measure it was not only a moral failing but also a strategic failing in merely expanding the list of U.S. adversaries in its war on terror.⁸⁰³ Cockburn reflects that “Yemenis would experience a lesson in

⁸⁰⁰ G. Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, trans. J. Lloyd (London: Penguin, 2013). p. 12

⁸⁰¹ Cockburn, *Kill Chain*. p. 232

⁸⁰² Ibid. pp. 215-219, 248,

⁸⁰³ M. Hasan, and Sayedahmed, D., "How Drones Create Blowback," Video, *The Intercept* 22 January (2018), <https://theintercept.com/2018/01/22/blowback-cia-drones-middle-east/>; E. Pilkington, and MacAskill, E.,

drone warfare all too often lost on far-off officials who authorize the killings: though it may appear that drones offer a remote, sanitized mode of warfare, to their victims they are very much a local affair.”⁸⁰⁴

The most severe criticisms of Obama’s use of drones argue that the term *targeted killings* - which would become the preferred administration nomenclature - was merely a euphemism for what was in reality nothing more than a process of systematic assassination. Jeremy Scahill of *The Intercept* termed it “The Assassination Complex.”⁸⁰⁵ At the core of Scahill and other such critics’ argument lay the notion that whatever the drone programme was called, it resulted in a government sanctioned process of *extrajudicial* killing.

In his book *Drone Theory* - a “philosophical investigation” of the drone - Grégoire Chamayou suggests that the use of drones in warfare marked a particularly virulent dawn of “one-directional injuring,” which thus made warfare “absolutely unilateral.” Most damningly, he argues that through the utilization of drones, “what could still claim to be combat is converted into a campaign of what is, quite simply, slaughter.”⁸⁰⁶ He suggests that drones led to a transformation of the paradigm of war, into one of “a hunter advancing on a prey that flees or hides from him.”⁸⁰⁷ This is a theme Chamayou returns to time and again; one of a “hunt,” that the use of drone technology is reflective of a disparate power dynamic, where the *predator* the U.S. is hunting the *prey*, those deemed to be threats to it.

Consistent critic of the Obama presidency, Glenn Greenwald, wrote on Obama’s record as a Senator where he had advocated in favour of acceding to judicial procedures before treating suspects as terrorists, fearing the danger of casting “too wide a net” and accusing “the wrong person.” But Greenwald argued that “as president, Obama not only ignored those lofty statements but trampled all over them.” He argued that “the centrepiece of his drone assassination programme is that he, and he alone, has the power to target people, including American citizens, anywhere they are found

"Obama's Drone War a 'Recruitment Tool' for Isis, Say Us Air Force Whistleblowers," Online Article, *The Guardian* 18 November Issue (2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/18/obama-drone-war-isis-recruitment-tool-air-force-whistleblowers>.

⁸⁰⁴ Cockburn, *Kill Chain*. p. 237

⁸⁰⁵ J. Scahill, and the Staff of The Intercept, *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016).

⁸⁰⁶ Chamayou, *Drone Theory*. p. 13

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 33

in the world and order them executed on his unilateral command, based on his determination that the person to be killed is a terrorist.”⁸⁰⁸

Notwithstanding the arguable inaccuracies in Greenwald’s notion that suspects can be targeted “anywhere they are found” (there are still laws and strictures in place – as are designations of who falls under the 2001 AUMF), there is nevertheless a strong case to be made that Obama exhibited a disappointing lack of consistency in not extending the clamour for due process to those targeted in the drone programme.⁸⁰⁹ Greenwald sardonically commented that “somehow it was hideously wrong for George W. Bush to eavesdrop on and imprison suspected terrorist without judicial approval, yet it was perfectly permissible for Obama to assassinate them without due process of any kind.”⁸¹⁰ This ably demonstrates the dissonance between Obama’s previous opposition to Bush in his prosecution of the war on terror, and his own approach to the issue. It could also be termed hypocrisy.

In key respects, both critics of Obama and admirers of Bush were surprised to find that the case could be ably made by the likes of General Michael Hayden (Bush’s final CIA Directory, whose appointment Obama had opposed) that “there’s been a powerful continuity between the 43rd and the 44th president.” Former vice-president Dick Cheney, meanwhile, suggested the experience of assuming office and taking consequential decisions had changed Obama’s perspective.⁸¹¹ In comparing Obama’s pre-presidency responses to a candidate survey on presidential power, as well as his record upon assuming office, Charlie Savage observed “the problems of the world and presidential war powers would look more complicated from the Oval Office than they had from the campaign trail.”⁸¹²

This matter of perspective proved a crucial factor in determining the responses to Obama’s deployment of the drone programme and his broader approach to counterterrorism. Yale legal scholar Harold Koh argued at the end of Bush’s presidency that “to regain our global standing, the next president and Congress must unambiguously reassert our historic commitments to human rights and the rule of law as a major source of our moral authority.”⁸¹³ Savage assessed, however, at the conclusion of Obama’s presidency, that “the marks were ambiguous and inextricably entangled in whether the observer thought particular counterterrorism policies were necessary or bad

⁸⁰⁸ G. Greenwald, "Afterword: War without End," in *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*, ed. J. Scahill and the Staff of The Intercept (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016). pp. 181-182

⁸⁰⁹ Savage, *Power Wars*. pp. 248-249

⁸¹⁰ Greenwald, "Afterword." p. 182

⁸¹¹ Ibid. p. 184-185

⁸¹² Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 633

⁸¹³ Ibid. p. 695

ideas.”⁸¹⁴ Savage makes the Obama administration’s perspective on this matter apparent, writing that it “clearly accepted that the United States was at war with al-Qaeda and its allies.” The Obama team did not think this war had ended upon his replacement of Bush at its helm. As such “in the team’s legal-policy view, the powers available only to a nation that was literally at war remained in the government’s toolbox – and Obama would use them with vigor.”⁸¹⁵ We are returned once more to Obama’s conception of the ‘necessary’ war. His pragmatist sensibilities here found the approach to this issue as one grounded not in abstractions, but in reality.

At the core of the discussion of drone policy lays a pivotal distinction. Savage notes that there are indeed “important policy considerations in weighing the rise of drones,” but vitally, “they are not legal factors.”

*In public debate, people sometimes conflate the legality of targeted killings with the use of drones. This is a fallacy. There are some weapons systems, like chemical and biological weapons, that are inherently indiscriminate – a cloud of poisonous gas or a virus is not controllable enough to be targeted – and are banned. But drones are not one of those systems, and so the use of a drone is legally irrelevant: killing someone with a missile from a drone is the same as killing him with a missile fired from a traditional manned aircraft, or with a bullet, or with a rock to his head; sometimes that would be legal, and sometimes not. From the legal angle, the killing is what matters, not how the killing is done.*⁸¹⁶

Jeremy Scahill, noting the “intense focus on the technology of remote killing” which he argues often “serves as a surrogate for what should be a broader examination of the state’s power over life and death,” put this distinction more bluntly: “Drones are a tool, not a policy. The policy is assassination.”⁸¹⁷

International Relations scholar Stephanie Carvin, in her article ‘Getting drones wrong,’ warns against focusing on the technology and debates around it as anything particularly new or unique, doing so can obscure a preferable focus on “the strategic rather than the tactical level.” Meaning “scholars could and should be focusing on the second- and third-order effects of drone/targeted killing campaigns, rather than getting caught up in the nitty-gritty details.”⁸¹⁸ Importantly, she argues “by

⁸¹⁴ Ibid.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid. p. 61

⁸¹⁶ Ibid. p. 273

⁸¹⁷ J. Scahill, "The Drone Legacy," in *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*, ed. J. Scahill and the Staff of The Intercept (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016). p. 2

⁸¹⁸ S. Carvin, "Getting Drones Wrong," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no. 2 (2015). p. 137

avoiding a magpie-like distraction from the ‘shiny-object’ that in the drone, scholars can focus on the larger issues at stake, such as proportionality...and necessity.”⁸¹⁹

These terms are significant. Carvin defines (military) necessity as the principle which acknowledges the necessity of measures which are “indispensable for securing the end of the war” yet which are also “lawful according to the modern law and usages of war.” It is a recognition that states “have to actually wage war in an effective manner so as to be able to achieve their aims.”⁸²⁰ Proportionality refers to the principles of Just War, namely *jus ad bellum* (“proportionality of a military action in response to a grievance”) and *jus in bello* (“proportionality in the conduct of hostilities”).⁸²¹ Carvin also discusses a third key term, that of *distinction*, which she defines as “the notion that a weapon should, as a matter of law, be capable of adequate control both as to the place of its impact and the nature and extent of its effects.” It is a concept that “balances humanitarian concern for civilians and civilian objects and military interest in directing their destructive effects as accurately and reliably as possible.”⁸²² Altogether, she argues, “these principles acknowledge that militaries have a job to do and must be allowed to accomplish their goals within the boundaries of law. They also clearly acknowledge and presuppose that some suffering is inevitable in warfare and a normal consequence of the use of weapons.”⁸²³

These legal distinctions proved vital for the Obama administration. On 25 March 2010, Harold Koh, by then appointed as the Legal Advisor of the Department of State, gave a speech to the Annual Meeting of the American Society of International Law, in which he delivered a paper titled “The Obama Administration and International Law.”⁸²⁴ Addressing the use of drones Koh put forth the argument that “it is the considered view of this Administration...that U.S. targeting practices, including lethal operations conducted with the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, comply with all applicable law, including the laws of war.” He emphasized this point by reiterating that “as a matter of international law, the United States is in an armed conflict with al-Qaeda, as well as the Taliban and associated forces” in response to the 9/11 attacks “and may use force consistent with its inherent right to self-defense under international law.”⁸²⁵ He argued that al Qaeda was still intent on attacking the United States, thus “the United States has the authority under international law, and the responsibility to its citizens, to use force, including lethal force, to defend itself, including by

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

⁸²⁰ Ibid. p. 130

⁸²¹ Ibid. p. 131

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ H. H. Koh, "The Obama Administration and International Law," news release, 25 March, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

targeting persons such as high-level al-Qaeda leaders who are planning attacks.” In conducting this fight, he assured that the administration had “carefully reviewed the rules governing targeting operations” to ensure that the operations carried out, were “conducted consistently with law of war principles” among which he emphasized *distinction* and *proportionality*.⁸²⁶

It was a very legalistic discussion of matters of war. But legalism mattered in the Obama administration. Savage argues this was a key and defining feature of Obama’s entire presidency, especially in its approach to matters of prosecuting the “war on terror.” He suggests “lawyerliness shaped Obama’s governance as a matter of style and thought, not just process.” Indeed, “Obama was a lawyer and a law teacher, not a CEO,” who staffed his administration with many other holders of law degrees. For Savage this is important to note, with lawyers being trained to think in “very particular ways.” In analysing a problem “they try to identify all the issues and grapple with the strongest arguments against their own position. They demand good writing. They attempt to keep options open as an end in itself. They prize rigorous adherence to process. They consider it a judicial virtue to move incrementally and stay within the narrow facts at hand.”⁸²⁷

In an interview with the author, Edward Fishman – a former member of John Kerry’s Policy Planning Staff – similarly identified “almost a lawyerly process” in the Obama administration’s approach to policy. Addressing “one of the biggest misconceptions about Obama era foreign policy” - that the White House centralized power to the exclusion of other agencies of government – Fishman suggests instead:

*Obama’s revolution in foreign policy from the Bush era wasn’t just in terms of substance, it was really primarily process... He demanded a very rigorous process to occur before any decision was made. And so what that meant, I think relative to other administrations, there were far more National Security Council meetings than ever before.*⁸²⁸

This was felt by some to be an excessive mode of “micromanaging,” but Fishman argues that “just because there was a process that was very clearly defined and followed – almost a lawyerly process... it doesn’t mean that decisions are centralized.” Adherence to process was a means of ensuring an effective interagency process; making coherent perspectives from multiple parts of the foreign policy apparatus. What appeared to be the White House reaching for total control over policy was instead its implementation of a process that, if adhered to, actually empowered other

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

⁸²⁷ Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 65

⁸²⁸ E. Fishman, interview by J. Middleton, 7 May, 2019, Telephone Interview.

agencies to shape their policy area. What mattered was basing decisions upon a rigorous examination of the matter at hand. Indeed, Fishman recalls “oftentimes, meetings at the White House would feel more like legal reviews than policy meetings.”⁸²⁹

He notes that Obama “as a lawyer and legal thinker is an important theme” in examining an intellectual history of his presidency and, in many important respects, this “lawyerliness” identified by Savage and Fishman accords with the pragmatism this thesis has emphasized in Obama’s thinking.⁸³⁰ It entails working in a manner that prioritizes the deliberate establishment of facts, keeping options open as a virtue, holding closed modes of enquiry as problematic, and warns against dogmatic attachment to ideological precepts. This lawyerly approach very much played a crucial part establishing a process that embedded these modes of thought into foreign policy both in and out of the direct control of the White House. We clearly see in this William James’ notion of pragmatism as ‘method.’⁸³¹ In drawing the connection between the two, we can make the case that the process-centred focus of Obama’s ‘lawyerliness’ was as clear a sign as any of how pragmatism became a part of the very means by which Obama’s White House functioned.

===

For most of the first term the administration remained tight-lipped on matters of the drone programme. Obama himself never addressed it. This lasted until January of 2012, where Obama broke this silence in the unlikely forum of a Google+ “Hangout.”⁸³² It was a question and answer session in which one question came from a young participant who - referring to the civilian toll from drone strikes - asked Obama to explain whether the programme was beneficial to the United States and if the strikes were worth these civilian costs.⁸³³ Obama’s own rules on secrecy dictated that he was supposed to give, as journalist David Sanger termed it, “a bland recitation of American combat rules, without ever acknowledging that the CIA uses drones to mount attacks” but instead, he launched a broad defence of the programme. “I want to make sure that people understand, actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties... For the most part they have been very precise precision strikes against al-Qaeda and their affiliates. And we are very careful in terms of

⁸²⁹ Ibid.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. p. 28

⁸³² Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*. p. 251; J. Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2013). p. 515

⁸³³ Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*. p. 251

how it's been applied."⁸³⁴ He rejected the perception that the U.S. was "just sending in a whole bunch of strikes willy-nilly" and asserted instead that "this is a targeted, focused effort at people who are on a list of active terrorists, who are trying to go in and harm Americans, hit American facilities, American bases and so on." He added, "it is important for everybody to understand that this thing is kept on a very tight leash. It's not just a bunch of folks in a room somewhere just making decisions. And it is also part and parcel of our overall authority when it comes to battling al-Qaeda. It is not something that's being used beyond that."⁸³⁵

This relative informality in discussing the matter would be superseded on 23 May 2013, when Obama gave a speech at Fort McNair, the home of the National Defense University in Washington D.C.⁸³⁶ In typical Obamian style, he opened the address by establishing the historical context which would animate his speech, culminating in 9/11 and the nation's abrupt turn to war. He proceeded into a defence of the administration's policies for reshaping that war. In its initial response to 9/11 the U.S. had driven al Qaeda out of Afghanistan, but its shift of focus to war in Iraq "carried significant consequences for our fight against al Qaeda, our standing in the world, and -- to this day -- our interests in a vital region."⁸³⁷ As a response, after assuming office, Obama's administration "stepped up the war against al Qaeda" but also "sought to change its course." This involved "relentlessly" targeting al Qaeda's leadership, ending the Iraq war, a new strategy in Afghanistan, and "unequivocally" banning torture.⁸³⁸ He outlined what challenges still faced the U.S. in its efforts to defeat terrorist threats, conceding that "neither I, nor any President, can promise the total defeat of terror. We will never erase the evil that lies in the hearts of some human beings, nor stamp out every danger to our open society." Nevertheless, he maintained "what we can do -- what we must do -- is dismantle networks that pose a direct danger to us, and make it less likely for new groups to gain a foothold, all the while maintaining the freedoms and ideals that we defend." He noted that the ideology which drives the majority of such terrorism persists, and as such "in an age when ideas and images can travel the globe in an instant, our response to terrorism can't depend on military or law enforcement alone." He then echoed a phrase he had used in Canberra two years prior, "we need all elements of national power to win a battle of wills, a battle of ideas."⁸³⁹

⁸³⁴ Scahill, *Dirty Wars*. p. 516

⁸³⁵ Ibid.

⁸³⁶ The Obama White House, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University," news release, May 23, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

⁸³⁷ Ibid.

⁸³⁸ Ibid.

⁸³⁹ Ibid.

In this context, at Fort McNair, he openly admitted for the first time in a formal setting that in those areas which ground troops cannot easily access, and the national government is ineffectual, “the United States has taken lethal, targeted action against al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones.”⁸⁴⁰ Accepting that this new technology raised “profound questions,” about “who is targeted, and why; about civilian casualties, and the risk of creating new enemies; about the legality of such strikes under U.S. and international law; about accountability and morality,” he began to address these questions. In the first instance, he argued for the efficacy of the drone strikes as a strategy, citing intelligence gathered from the operation to kill Osama bin Laden, which showed dismay among al Qaeda at losses sustained and disruption such strikes caused to its plots. “Simply put,” Obama argued, “these strikes have saved lives.” He proceeded to justify the strikes by emphasizing their legality, with the United States being at war with al Qaeda, the Taliban, “and their associated forces.” As such, he maintained, “we are at war with an organization that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first. So this is a just war -- a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense.”⁸⁴¹ He was re-affirming the logic Harold Koh had previously outlined, but was also returning to the Just War concepts he had utilized in his Nobel Prize speech.⁸⁴²

At this point, his speech at Fort McNair assumed a noteworthy intellectual and moral slant. Just as upon accepting the Nobel Prize in Oslo, where he contended with the moral weight of using American force, Obama conceded that “America’s legitimate claim of self-defence cannot be the end of the discussion. To say a military tactic is legal, or even effective, is not to say it is wise or moral in every instance.”⁸⁴³ He was wrestling with the moral criticisms that had plagued the administration for as long as it had escalated the practice of targeted killing. Acknowledging the risk of abusing such power, Obama noted how the administration had worked to establish a governing framework for its use of force against terrorists, “insisting upon clear guidelines, oversight and accountability” which he had codified in a Presidential Policy Guidance signed the day before.⁸⁴⁴ These were again those same processes which centred a pragmatist method as a means of achieving outcomes grounded strictly in necessity and not on ideological abstraction; the abstraction that could unleash the weapon on a myriad of targets.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid.

⁸⁴² "Nobel Address."

⁸⁴³ "National Defense University Speech."

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

A pressing concern of critics, nevertheless, was how these policies were being extended outside of the confines of the Afghan theatre. Obama emphasized that “America cannot take strikes wherever we choose; our actions are bound by consultations with partners, and respect for state sovereignty.” Where it does strike beyond the confines of the Afghanistan War, he noted the U.S. only targeted al Qaeda and its “associated forces,” and only did so if it was unable to “capture individual terrorists” the preference being “always to detain, interrogate, and prosecute.”⁸⁴⁵

Here he addressed one of the key points of contention over the drone strike programme, first establishing the criterion for how a target is selected and confirmed as suitable:

*America does not take strikes to punish individuals; we act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people, and when there are no other governments capable of effectively addressing the threat. And before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured -- the highest standard we can set.*⁸⁴⁶

Much has been written about this process, and what has variously been called Obama’s “kill list” or later in more official-ese, the “Disposition Matrix.”⁸⁴⁷ Obama was reported to have insisted on approving of each new name added to the “kill list,” examining the biographies of terrorist suspects as exhibited on so-called “baseball cards.” Such meetings would occur regularly, becoming colloquially known as “Terror Tuesdays.”⁸⁴⁸ With counterterrorism chief, and later CIA director, John Brennan at his side, Obama would carry a hands-on role in bringing a driving theory of Just War to the targeting practices of the CIA and the Pentagon in its use of drones. Obama had to approve any name, and sign off on every strike in Yemen and Somalia, in addition to the “more complex and risky strikes in Pakistan.”⁸⁴⁹

Despite Brennan’s grizzly reputation and history as a senior figure in the CIA during the era of the Bush administration’s most brutal interrogation practices, Harold Koh argued that “if John Brennan is the last guy in the room with the president, I’m comfortable, because Brennan is a person of genuine moral rectitude... It’s as though you had a priest with extremely strong moral values who

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ J. Hudson, "How the White House 'Kill List' Became the White House 'Disposition Matrix,'" *The Atlantic* 24 October (2012), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/10/how-white-house-kill-list-became-white-house-disposition-matrix/322180/>

⁸⁴⁸ Becker, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will".

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

was suddenly charged with leading a war.”⁸⁵⁰ Jo Becker and Scott Shane, whose reporting was crucial in bringing information on the drone programme to light in 2012, wrote that “aides say Mr. Obama has several reasons for becoming so immersed in lethal counterterrorism operations. A student of writings on war by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, he believes that he should take moral responsibility for such actions.”⁸⁵¹ Brennan, educated by Jesuits, shared this affinity for Just War.⁸⁵² Meanwhile Becker and Shane wrote how Obama also knew that “bad strikes can tarnish America’s image and derail diplomacy.”⁸⁵³ Here we must be cautious in considering such accounts. Brennan’s “moral rectitude” and Obama’s assumption of “moral responsibility” do nothing to guarantee a process that is free from error. Nor do they assuage fears about what it means to have such an opaque process reliant on the judgment of so few. Those fears are exacerbated by those very claims of morality attached to Brennan and Obama. The realities of American democracy meant that *their* Just War theories would not always remain the determinant factors in the room. Successors in such roles might not have done the requisite reading of the previous millennia’s pre-eminent Christian ethicists.

In his speech at the National Defense University, Obama noted that “much of the criticism about drone strikes...understandably centers on reports of civilian casualties.” Whilst providing some meagre pushback against critics, anaemically arguing “there’s a wide gap between U.S. assessments of such casualties and nongovernmental reports,” he nevertheless conceded “it is a hard fact that U.S. strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in every war.”⁸⁵⁴ He admitted that “for the families of those civilians, no words or legal construct can justify their loss. For me, and those in my chain of command, those deaths will haunt us as long as we live, just as we are haunted by the civilian casualties that have occurred throughout conventional fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.”⁸⁵⁵

But here he turned to more arguments familiar from his Nobel address. He reflected on the dilemmas posed by the prospect of civilian casualties: “as Commander-in-Chief, I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties” not only in American cities, but also in cities such as Sana’a, Kabul, and Mogadishu, where terrorist networks sought to gain footholds.⁸⁵⁶ In

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

⁸⁵² M. LeVine, "The Dangerous Rebranding of John Brennan," *Al Jazeera* 9 February (2013), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132894728377540.html>.

⁸⁵³ Becker, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will".

⁸⁵⁴ The Obama White House, "National Defense University Speech."

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

Oslo he invoked the examples of Martin Luther King Jr and Gandhi and the pacifism they advocated as being testimony to the “moral force of non-violence.”⁸⁵⁷ But he also emphasized that “as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people.” Indeed, in Oslo, Obama also argued “there will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.”⁸⁵⁸

He maintained that “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace. And yet this truth must coexist with another – that no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy.”⁸⁵⁹ In stating “where force is necessary, we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct,” Savage suggests that this was once more the lawyerly instincts of Obama shaping his response in reconciling those clashing truths.⁸⁶⁰ This was also reflected in Obama’s rhetorical approach, “bringing up the best arguments against his own position and not rebutting them so much as acknowledging their strengths and looking for procedural rules to resolve the tensions.” Savage emphasizes again how “lawyers prize rigorous adherence to process” and as such “confronted with ambiguous situations where the right outcome may not be clear” they “tend to look at whether the right procedures were followed and take satisfaction if they were.”⁸⁶¹ The impetus for a legalistic framework became especially important for Obama in early 2012, when he was facing the prospect that he might lose his bid for re-election. As such, “he decided to institutionalize the targeted-killing procedures that had evolved over his three years in office so he could hand it off to any successor. He also wanted to tighten up the standards for targeting.”⁸⁶² Ben Rhodes told Savage “he would like to leave his successor with a sustainable approach, not open questions... On drones and the direct action side, that means nesting it in clearly established guidelines.”⁸⁶³

Brian Abrams’ oral history of the Obama administration holds interesting reflections on the drone programme. One such reflection comes from Nick Shapiro, who rose to be Deputy Chief of Staff of the CIA. He suggested that:

The counterterrorism structure that President Obama built with the help of John Brennan was, I thought, one of the crowning achievements. I’d say a couple

⁸⁵⁷ "Nobel Address."

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 692

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

⁸⁶² Ibid. p. 283

⁸⁶³ Ibid.

*things to support that. Yes, ISIL had grown, but al-Qaeda was the one who could conduct those large-scale attacks – the 9/11s. They were very skilled. They had the ability to move people and cause significant damage. The counterterrorism operations that this president did – instead of invading countries like Afghanistan or Iraq – were dealt with surgically, using drones. We dealt with it in a way that had the least civilian casualties and inflicted the most damage against the enemy, which was al-Qaeda in the AfPak region or in Yemen. Those were really the two areas we focused on the most.*⁸⁶⁴

Shapiro reflected on “a higher [legal] standard” that was met in order to carry out the extremely controversial strike on Anwar al-Awlaki – an American citizen killed by a drone strike in Yemen - and this fit the pattern of how the administration approached targeting.⁸⁶⁵ “When you looked at the structure that the White House put in place” he argued, it was going after the most significant senior leaders, the folks who could afflict the most harm against Americans and who were plotting to kill Americans, but it was brought under the rule of law.”⁸⁶⁶

Koh once more noted to Abrams the importance of curating a legal standard: “when you’re fighting a terrorist network, you’re invoking the laws of war. That meant that you’re lawfully entitled to make decisions as long as you’re hitting legitimate targets and doing it in accordance with the rules.” Koh forcefully emphasized that “Generals need lawyers to help them make distinctions – whether something was a lawful act of war or murder. And so, as a lawyer, that’s my job: to make sure that my client didn’t break the law and commit murder.”⁸⁶⁷

Barbara Lee, a member of Congress from California, perhaps most notable for being the lone member to vote against the 2001 AUMF (warning that it “was a blank check to the president to attack anyone involved in the Sept. 11 events” and as such “a rush to launch precipitous military counterattacks runs too great a risk that more innocent men, women, children will be killed.”)⁸⁶⁸ nevertheless offered a modicum of praise for the Obama administration’s approach to drones, suggesting it “was very deliberative in how they approached this. They were always concerned about unintended consequences, collateral damages.”⁸⁶⁹ Such a critic finding merit in the operation of the programme offers at least the patina of a process that was not merely engaged in the indiscriminate

⁸⁶⁴ Abrams, *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017*. p. 247

⁸⁶⁵ Savage, *Power Wars*. pp. 227-228, 229-230, 235, 252-253,

⁸⁶⁶ Abrams, *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017*. p. 248

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 248-249

⁸⁶⁸ G. Greenwald, "Barbara Lee's Lone Vote on Sept. 14, 2001, Was as Prescient as It Was Brave and Heroic," *The Intercept* 11 September (2016), <https://theintercept.com/2016/09/11/barbara-lees-lone-vote-on-sept-14-2001-was-as-prescient-as-it-was-brave-and-heroic/>.

⁸⁶⁹ Abrams, *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017*. p. 243

murder of civilians. It is a low bar, perhaps, but nevertheless important. Obama held a faith that the implementation of that deliberative process – a signature of philosophical pragmatism – would reign in the worst potentialities of America’s drone wars.

===

Writing in his 2012 book *Confront and Conceal* David Sanger noted that Obama was not the first president to use drones, nor to employ cyberweapons, each being relatively new technologies that allowed the president to fight ‘secret wars.’⁸⁷⁰ Sanger argued instead that Obama:

*Will go down in history as the man who dramatically expanded the use of those new weapons. Quietly, he is attempting to fit them into a new concept of how the United States can ensure its military predominance around the globe without resorting to the lengthy, expensive, and unpopular wars and occupations that dominated the past decade. They are the perfect tools for an age of austerity – far cheaper than landing troops in remote deserts and mountains, and often more precise. Obama’s aides, when persuaded to talk about the subject, are the first to volunteer that these new tools are exactly that – tools, useful in some situations, useless in others.*⁸⁷¹

While discussing these weapons as ‘tools’ and indeed *tactical* means of conducting warfare, Sanger hits upon a crucial idea which lay at the centre of justifications for the *strategic* use of such tools.⁸⁷² At Fort McNair, Obama reminded the audience that “the terrorists we are after target civilians, and the death toll from their acts of terrorism against Muslims dwarfs any estimate of civilian casualties from drone strikes.” As such “doing nothing is not an option.”⁸⁷³ For him, the imperative was clear. But that would necessitate a strategic means of confronting the situation.

Grégoire Chamayou contends that “what is important is not so much to grasp how the actual device works but rather to discover the implications of how it works for the action that it implements.” He suggests that the means adopted – the deployment of drones – “not only make it possible to take action but also determine the form of that action.” With this, “rather than wonder whether the ends

⁸⁷⁰ Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid. p. 243

⁸⁷² Ibid. p. 244

⁸⁷³ The Obama White House, "National Defense University Speech."

justify the means, one must ask what the choice of those means, in itself, tends to impose.”⁸⁷⁴ This is a significant point for consideration. We are prompted to ask, what did the choice of utilizing drones say about Obama’s approach to American power? This is thus where placing drone strikes and the Pivot to Asia upon the same spectrum of *elements of American power* forms part of the same picture. Many of the assumptions which underlay Obama’s Pivot to Asia would interact indelibly with the strategic logic of the continuing war against al Qaeda. It also interacted with Obama’s own determination to conduct that war in a manner which moved beyond more conventional attempts of *boots-on-the-ground* warfare. It was an approach that was pre-limited, or *determined*, in the sense suggested by Chamayou, by the pursuit of “precision” and most importantly of avoiding entrapment in ground-wars. The means were “light-footprint” and the consequences which followed would allow the U.S. to maintain its attentions on perceived core interests.

Obama argued that “where foreign governments cannot or will not effectively stop terrorism in their territory, the primary alternative to targeted lethal action would be the use of conventional military options.” But he had already rejected such options as “even small special operations carry enormous risks” where “conventional airpower or missiles are far less precise than drones, and are likely to cause more civilian casualties and more local outrage.”⁸⁷⁵

Obama argued that:

*It is false to assert that putting boots on the ground is less likely to result in civilian deaths or less likely to create enemies in the Muslim world. The results would be more U.S. deaths, more Black Hawks down, more confrontations with local populations, and an inevitable mission creep in support of such raids that could easily escalate into new wars.*⁸⁷⁶

The drone programme was framed by Obama as being a means of preventing the inexorable slide of America’s military into the quicksand of mission creep. Obama’s first CIA director Leon Panetta placed the use of drones in the context of more force intensive options. “When you consider the alternatives” he argued, “if we had to go to full-scale war against al-Qaeda, I’d think history would say” that the drone programme “was an effective way to decimate our enemy in a way that resulted, really, in much less collateral damage than otherwise would have been the case.”⁸⁷⁷ Obama himself turned to that history to emphasize the utility of the drone programme. “Our efforts must be measured against the history of putting American troops in distant lands among hostile

⁸⁷⁴ Chamayou, *Drone Theory*. p. 15

⁸⁷⁵ The Obama White House, “National Defense University Speech.”

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁷ Abrams, *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017*. p. 247

populations” he maintained. “In Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of civilians died in a war where the boundaries of battle were blurred. In Iraq and Afghanistan, despite the extraordinary courage and discipline of our troops, thousands of civilians have been killed.”⁸⁷⁸

“Yes,” Obama conceded, “the conflict with al Qaeda, like all armed conflict, invites tragedy. But by narrowly targeting our action against those who want to kill us and not the people they hide among, we are choosing the course of action least likely to result in the loss of innocent life.” He made the case that morality was not necessarily a panacea in confronting this dilemma, arguing that “neither conventional military action nor waiting for attacks to occur offers moral safe harbor, and neither does a sole reliance on law enforcement in territories that have no functioning police or security services -- and indeed, have no functioning law.”⁸⁷⁹

The case he made is interesting, and exemplified a rhetorical tactic he was criticized for using time and again, that is, the utilization of straw-man arguments to bolster his perspective.⁸⁸⁰ In this respect, it can be readily argued that the alternative to a drone war is not necessarily a ground war on the scale of Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Such straw men represented specious reasoning on the part of Obama. More than anything else they obscured questions about the very assumption that any form of military action was the solution. The opposite of ground forces was not drones, it was a complete re-evaluation of America’s entire counterterrorism framework.

Nevertheless, Obama’s argument was noteworthy in its acknowledgement of the risks any ground war carries to escalate uncontrollably to the scale of America’s catastrophe in Vietnam. In part, we can trace this fear of Obama’s from his own scepticism of Washington’s Defense establishment and how it errs not on the side of caution, but instead historically has favoured options which will steadily increase involvement in distant lands. As a tonic to this poison-pill, we see why Obama might be tempted by an option that renders even a nascent ground presence obsolete. Crucially, whatever the recourse of action, Obama believed firmly in the absolute, inviolable *necessity* of some form of action, in what he firmly believed to be a *necessary* fight. Pragmatism’s rigorous process of weighing possibilities and consequences against each other dictated this.

===

⁸⁷⁸ The Obama White House, "National Defense University Speech."

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁰ H. Cooper, "Some Obama Enemies Are Made Totally of Straw," *The New York Times* 23 May Issue (2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/us/politics/24straw.html>.

As noted above, the connection between Obama's Pivot to Asia and his drone policy – such that they can form part of a coherent thematic chapter – might seem strained. Yet, in the means by which they each demonstrate Obama grappling with concepts of American power and its strategic deployment, they intermingle.

The simple rendering of this relationship is that Obama and his team diagnosed a misappropriation of American resources in their outsized direction towards militarism in the Middle East, and an overall squandering of America's standing in the world. In an interview with the author, Charles Edel, who worked on the Asia-Pacific portfolio on the Policy Planning Staff in John Kerry's State Department suggests that amongst the broad contours of Obama's foreign policy approach to the world lay "a need to recalibrate what was sustainable from an American point of view, in terms of American foreign policy." More pointedly, the administration directed its attention to a "need to recalibrate and re-orient to the Asia-Pacific region as, in many ways, a possible driver of geo-economics [and] geo-political affairs in the twenty-first century."⁸⁸¹

But Edel also expressed an important notion that "there is a limited bandwidth any presidency has to deal with" given the national security issues and international economic issues that always falls onto the president's plate.⁸⁸² Crucially, this means that "when an American president, particularly, has U.S. forces not only stationed abroad, but in harm's way and engaged in war-fighting, that is inevitably going to take up more of their time" and entangle more of the interagency process "than it would if they were just stationed abroad."⁸⁸³ The recalibration of American foreign policy was vital, as much as anything, to free up some of that limited bandwidth. Drones fulfilled their part in this equation and its overall sense of strategic balance by providing a method by which the United States could expend the smallest amount of resources – and indeed "bandwidth" - in the wider Middle East while still achieving its continued military necessities in fighting al Qaeda. This balance would ensure that the administration's drive towards a re-orientation to the Asia-Pacific could be preserved.

This is not an entirely radical assessment, yet it serves as a potential answer to some of the more persistent criticisms of Obama: that he lacked a grand strategy and was ceding ground in America's perpetual quest for exceptional greatness. The introduction of this thesis acknowledged critiques of Obama's foreign policy that held him responsible for overseeing and underwriting a process of American retreat. Bret Stephens, Robert Singh, and Colin Dueck all found Obama guilty of being

⁸⁸¹ C. Edel, interview by J. Middleton, 13 December, 2017, Telephone Interview.

⁸⁸² Ibid.

⁸⁸³ Ibid.

naïve, feckless, and reckless in his approach to American power.⁸⁸⁴ Criticisms from the likes of Vali Nasr also held Obama as lacking strategic direction.⁸⁸⁵ These failings combined, in this perspective, to allow America's crown to slip and for cracks to appear in its leadership of the liberal world order. The crises that arose under Obama's watch, as such, resulted from an abdication of responsibility on the global stage, and an unwillingness to use American power to re-assert adherence to the rules of its road.⁸⁸⁶

Yet, the Pivot to Asia (and the utilization of drones as a ballast to achieve it) stands as a strong indication that Obama did carry a sense of largescale strategic thinking, premised on addressing issues and crises which he and his administration deemed of vital interest to the country. Pragmatism in this sense did not preclude the grand and the long term. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, ISIS's violent surge across Iraq and Syria, and the subsequent establishment of its caliphate, were all important issues and asked probing questions of American foreign policy making. But Obama's foreign policy outlook had established its own hierarchy of what were the most pressing concerns for America's future. And it differed from that of his critics. The Pivot to Asia was reliant upon an ideational foundation that held U.S. power and global leadership as paramount, and the reinforcement thereof as a normative pursuit. Contrary to those critiques which held Obama in contempt for abdicating America's position as the world's superpower, he was still very much engaged in the pursuit of this primacy. The Pivot to Asia and the use of drones were necessarily a largescale change in how America ordered its priorities in the world, and also how they would be achieved according to its capabilities, matching means to ends.

===

If the fit between the Pivot and drones seemed incongruous, perhaps more challenging to fit in to this mix is the importance of Obama's identity which opened the chapter. But alongside Obama's conceptualization of American power and the direction in which it might be channelled, we should also consider the cultural artefacts that helped to shape those directional instincts. One's experience of the world matters a great deal when you are making choices in how to interact with it.

⁸⁸⁴ Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*. p. 14; Singh, *After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order*. p. 12, 101; Stephens, *America in Retreat*.

⁸⁸⁵ Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*.

⁸⁸⁶ Stephens, *America in Retreat*. p. 228

In a work of intellectual history, it behoves us to once more take seriously David Milne's suggestion that Obama lacks the "habitual eastward orientation of his predecessors."⁸⁸⁷ The threads of Obama's identity might each be loose when pulled individually, but when pulled together they form a strong bond between Obama and a world beyond the confines of a merely 'national' life. Specifically, in terms of this chapter, and threading the needle of the Pivot and drones, it is in the vortex of cosmopolitanism and a re-orientation to the Asia-Pacific – away from the European trappings of old, and the failed Middle East campaigns of yesterday – that Obama located the intellectual credibility to pursue a core platform of re-orienting American power towards the very notion of America the *Pacific* power.

In many respects, the "first Pacific President" stood as a representation of America's own Pacific ascendancy. He reflected the nation's tensions and paradoxes in its approach to the region. Obama's America in the Asia-Pacific stood simultaneously as both the *new*: the Pivot towards the region, the fresh sense of energy for approaching and being in the region it had neglected for too long. Yet it also stood as the *old*: the America that had *always* been a power in the region, or at least as long as it had stretched what Bruce Cumings called its 'Archipelago of Empire' into the region.⁸⁸⁸ The America that had always been a Pacific nation as it brutalized and colonized those same paradise islands of Obama's birth. A Pacific nation as it extended its empire through Alaska, the Philippines, Guam, the Northern Marianas Islands, Wake Island, and American Samoa. A Pacific nation with a military that still resides in vast numbers in South Korea and Japan. That is the picture of a relationship based on force and economic exploitation. As often is the story of American foreign policy writ large. As such, we see how these two policy initiatives that shape this chapter - the Pivot to Asia and the drone programme - worked in tandem but they also worked in tension.

In key respects, drone warfare is an inevitable consequence of America's vast military reach. The 'archipelago of empire' allows what is on its face a 'light footprint' approach as the U.S. can deploy its technology quickly and readily without the long draw-up of troops. But the footprint is not so light for those trampled underfoot. The omnipresence of that military reach fuels fears abroad of America's ability to perpetuate bombings that cause the suffering of innocents. The omnipresence of American power looms large, always on the horizon, able to exact violence on those unlucky enough to be in its path.⁸⁸⁹

This omnipresence also fuels domestic fears of descent into fighting a 'forever war.' In 2009 Cumings wrote that the U.S. ran "a territorial empire – the archipelago of somewhere between 737 and 860

⁸⁸⁷ Milne, *Worldmaking*. p. 508

⁸⁸⁸ Cumings, *Dominion*. pp. 388-423

⁸⁸⁹ Chamayou, *Drone Theory*. p. 45

overseas military installations around the world, with American military personnel operating in 153 countries.”⁸⁹⁰ In 2015, sociologist David Vine put the figure at “nearly 800 bases in more than 70 countries and territories abroad.”⁸⁹¹ In his book *Dirty Wars*, Jeremy Scahill makes the case that there existed a continual pull of a mindset that held “the world is a battlefield,” from Republican to Democratic administrations.⁸⁹² On this front, for the drone campaign specifically, the U.S. operates a string of outposts and installations in countries such as Djibouti, Seychelles, and Niger to name just three of the ten in Africa alone.⁸⁹³ Daniel Immerwahr, in his insightful book *How to Hide an Empire* notes the persistence and centrality of empire in the American experience. He terms its most recent form, a ‘pointillist empire’ where “small dots on the map,” representing its military bases around the world, are the “foundation” of that empire today.⁸⁹⁴ And furthermore, drones, Immerwahr suggests, “carried pointillist warfare to its logical endpoint.”⁸⁹⁵

The Pivot to Asia carried goals of aiding American prosperity – but there was also a significant element factored around the rise of China as a competitor. Indeed Charles Edel notes that within the administration “there was a high amount of attention paid to China as a rising power.”⁸⁹⁶ The vast military presence in Japan, South Korea, and under Obama, the installation of a base in Darwin in Northern Australia as well, serve to emphasize the implicit role an enduring American military presence is expected to play in checking any perceived challenges to its Pacific hegemony. Even America’s benign search for prosperity in the region is also guarded by the Navy’s defence of shipping lanes. Whichever way it is considered, America’s “Pacific Century” and America as a Pacific power, is inextricably linked to its military power in the region.

Cummings suggests that the “military instillations around the world persist and perdure; they have an eternal writ all of their own” their permanence “predictable” and “ineradicable.”⁸⁹⁷ Crucially, he quoted a 1970 Senate Foreign Relations Committee statement as saying “once an American overseas base is established it takes on a life of its own.”⁸⁹⁸ Cummings’ own take on that was to remark with respect to this “archipelago of empire” that, somewhat fatalistically, “it exists, therefore it persists.”⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁹⁰ Cummings, *Dominion*. p. 393

⁸⁹¹ D. Vine, "Where in the World Is the U.S. Military?," *Politico Magazine* 2015.

⁸⁹² Scahill, *Dirty Wars*. p. xxiii

⁸⁹³ Scahill, *The Assassination Complex*. pp. 88-89

⁸⁹⁴ D. Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019). p. 390

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 384

⁸⁹⁶ Edel, "Telephone Interview with Charles Edel."

⁸⁹⁷ Cummings, *Dominion*. p. 423

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

===

It bears returning to Cumings' discussion of American military might in the Hawaiian islands. There is a powerful irony in siting aspects of Obama's ideational background with its development in such a hub of American power. But we must consider the notion that, in part, the development of Obama's ideational perspective in such a place helped shape an overarching conception of how that power should be calibrated. It was a focus away from the strife of the Middle East and the trappings of ground wars, and towards economic opportunity in a part of the world he felt an affinity to, and by extension felt the United States held its own affinity to.

The tragic pragmatism this thesis has previously examined once more played a role in informing a nuanced and complex approach to questions of using American force in balance with its less militaristic concerns. It informed a circumspect approach to exacting acts of violence whilst not outright precluding their necessity. But critics such as Jeremy Scahill push back on the notion that Obama's approach resembled a "smarter" form of war.⁹⁰⁰ Indeed, we must be wary of arguments that found any necessity in knowingly committing violence against civilians, and indeed in perpetuating a vast empire of military installations which provide the temptation of constantly escalating any manner of violent contretemps in any corner of the world.

The drone programme was steadily shaped, designed, and systematized in such a manner that was aimed at streamlining America's military output to the most efficient scheme possible to achieve victory in its war against al Qaeda, but also to prevent that effort from detracting from and overtaking the priorities of engagement that Obama advanced. A vital aspect of Obama's approach to the use of "every element of American power" was the balance it struck once more between the necessary and the chosen. It was the balance between the power of engagement and the power of violence, and seeking to treat the appropriate direction of each of these as the profound task of every President.

At the National Defense University, Obama argued that "Groups like AQAP must be dealt with, but in the years to come, not every collection of thugs that labels themselves al Qaeda will pose a credible threat to the United States." He re-formulated this profound task, conceding that "unless we discipline our thinking, our definitions, our actions, we may be drawn into more wars we don't

⁹⁰⁰ Scahill, *Dirty Wars*. p. xxiii

need to fight, or continue to grant Presidents unbound powers more suited for traditional armed conflicts between nation states.”⁹⁰¹

Chamayou suggests that this might be a struggle that has already been lost. “The partisans of the drone as a privileged weapon of ‘antiterrorism’ promise a war without losses or defeats,” but “what they fail to mention is that it will also be a war without victory.” As such, he warns, “the scenario that looms before us is one of infinite violence, with no possible exit; the paradox of an untouchable power waging interminable wars toward perpetual war.”⁹⁰² This is an important point. It reflects the prospect of a “forever war” that is maligned and feared by so many, especially on the left of U.S. politics. But further to this, if we return to Obama’s concession that neither he, nor any president “can promise the total defeat of terror” nor to “erase the evil that lies in the hearts of some human beings,” nor to prevent “every danger to our open society,” Obama, perhaps unwittingly, provokes a question of what the ultimate aim could possibly be of drone warfare? What is the U.S. achieving through it?

Chamayou persuasively argues that “the dronization of the armed forces” lowers the threshold of recourse to violence, and as such allows it more readily to become the “default option” for foreign policy.”⁹⁰³ The availability of drone technology indelibly raises the prospects of its utilization. The “low cost” of its use has a profound impact on the wielder of such technology’s decision-making, and thus prompts a pattern of behaviour which, whilst being less risky for themselves, is riskier for others. It is, Chamayou suggests, a “moral hazard - a situation in which being able to act without bearing the costs of the consequences relieves agents of responsibility for their decisions.”⁹⁰⁴ This is a poignant reminder that such technology would also be conferred upon Obama’s successors, as they assume the seat of the figures inured to the risk of such military actions. To what ends might such violence be turned in the future? What wars will they service?⁹⁰⁵

It is worth considering, nevertheless, how in his book *Drone Theory* Chamayou never quite addresses the purpose, or ends, to which drones were directed. As such, he elides that there was a reason such “manhunts” were taking place. We must consider that this is where we can separate his philosophical investigation into the drone as a tool, as a process, as a means – from actors such as Obama who are confronted (to a greater or lesser degree) with *real* threats, or real imperatives to take actions aimed at defeating a specific enemy. The notion that there are very real threats to America’s security *out there* held a firm grasp over Obama’s decision making, and indeed on the

⁹⁰¹ The Obama White House, “National Defense University Speech.”

⁹⁰² Chamayou, *Drone Theory*. pp. 71-72

⁹⁰³ Ibid. p. 188

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 189

⁹⁰⁵ Scahill, *Dirty Wars*. p. 517

wider consciousness of his administration. In recognizing this, we are presented with a sense of *means* being subsumed by *ends*.

It is necessary to emphasize that not only did the logic of the Pivot and the importance of the Asia-Pacific become canonized in the thought of Obama and his team, it was accompanied by an acceptance and continued adherence to the logic of the war on terror and its precepts that necessitated it. How to do so alongside other priorities was to be the pressing consideration of the Obama administration. This was an important part of the logic which drove the administration's advocacy of strong counterterrorist measures, where Obama saw the dangers posed by the attempted Detroit bombing, and leaned frequently into the notion of Commander-in-Chief, the protector of the nation. Pre-emption became the only means under this conceptualization – the idea of responding to an “actual attack” was unthinkable. Keeping it that way animated the approach. The fears of being labelled soft on terrorism, nevertheless reflected a reality that any Obama agenda would be threatened by the success of such an attack.⁹⁰⁶ The reported mantra of “no bombs on my watch” hung as a spectre.

In key respects the Pivot reflected an all-encompassing American hegemony, one which finds a natural place for American interests in far-flung places the world over, and which unquestioningly placed American interests as congruent with those of another continent, a wider region - in the Asia-Pacific specifically. It was a vision which, whilst being mindful of curating humility in America's approach to leadership, was still premised upon the existence of that leadership. It fit into a broader picture of where America found its interests. The argument for turning wasted attention from failed wars in the Middle East to that which *really* mattered. The utilization of drones to accomplish this represented an important signal of how the pursuit of American primacy need not be compromised under Obama's vision, but instead required an alternative understanding. Helpfully, Chamayou suggests “in the history of military empires, for many years ‘projecting power’ meant ‘sending in troops.’ But it is precisely that equation that now has to be dismantled.”⁹⁰⁷

This new paradigm poses significant questions, however. Especially concerning the use of drones: how was the administration able to justify its process of targeted killings? What of the innocent civilians at the mercy of such legalistic mechanisms? How could the extension of that reach of American air power be justified as it stretched into lands not actually part of a recognized battlefield? But also, how could the U.S. justify its turn to another part of the world and its implicit assumption of some form of hegemonic weight to throw around? What of the imperial legacy of the

⁹⁰⁶ Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 95

⁹⁰⁷ Chamayou, *Drone Theory*.

United States in the Asia-Pacific? All these questions tied in to the tangled web of how Obama saw the world and America's place within it. But he also faced up to questions of how he saw himself in the world.

Barack Hussein Obama II, who was "raised as an Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child," who benefitted "a multiplicity of cultures that all fed [him]" was charged with navigating what it meant to wield American power in such a world that he felt pulled on him from multiple directions, but also which he felt called on America, as a "neighbour" to Indonesia, as a Pacific power, but also as a *superpower* with vast and solemn duties incumbent upon it.⁹⁰⁸ The "first Pacific president" with eyes on the future to be unlocked "across a vast ocean" to the west nevertheless had to wrestle with settling the old accounts of the world left behind, Atlanticist concerns, and the near perpetual pull of Middle Eastern strife. This necessitated a complicated tight-rope walk of seeking to *pivot* to Asia, seeking to *rebalance* America's priorities towards those that were of most concern, whilst all the while seeking to never fall off-balance, to never fall victim to a world which still threatened to exact its evil upon those not vigilant enough to keep it at bay.

This stands as a broader representation of what Obama's foreign policy as a whole tried to accomplish. It was rooted in the search for the steady calibration of what truly mattered to America's ever-sprawling sense of self and its own sense of interests; a pragmatic process of experimentalism, searching for what *works*. Whether he succeeded moreover - whilst not necessarily being a pressing concern for this thesis - is indelibly tied to the consequences of his choices. The consequentialism of pragmatism stands as both method, but also as means of judgment.

The degree to which Obama accomplished this strategic search for the appropriate re-calibration of America's output of its power might necessitate the testament of time in its assessment. The large sweep of history which has been captured by the post-9/11 wars stands as a poignant reminder of the depth of the well from which Obama sought to extricate the nation. To the extent that U.S. forces remain in Afghanistan, and returned to Iraq to confront ISIS, the effort was a failure.⁹⁰⁹ The Middle East remains an anchor which the U.S. cannot raise. But by the same token, those conflicts have not been joined by new ground force entanglements in the region. This is a success. So too is the cultivation of multilateral and bilateral relationships in the Asia-Pacific, and the means by which

⁹⁰⁸ Mendell, *Obama*. p. 32

⁹⁰⁹ The Obama White House, "Statement by the President," news release, August 7, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president.>; "Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate," news release, June 14, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/16/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-and-president-pro-te>.

the policy was a valuable signal of intention for serious engagement in a region that will remain important in shaping U.S. interests and prospects.

What it meant morally and philosophically, however, stands as a different, and in some respects much larger question which carries a much smaller scope for escaping unanswered, as it carries with it inherent, broader questions about the assumptions which lay at the core of Obama's thought, and its place in the wider story of American foreign policy. Thus, it is a question which must necessarily be contended with in the ensuing, concluding chapter.

At its heart, in conceptualizing and accepting Obama's circumspect approach to the world, to matters of war and violence, peace and diplomacy, the question is "what difference did it make?" What difference did it make to those under fire from unseen drone strikes? To those in a state that has collapsed from an international intervention? To those in a country ravaged by violence absent an international intervention? To a country that would soon be governed by a figure most unlike Obama?

In considering broader questions about the legacy and morality of Obama's foreign policy, it will be beneficial to view the Pivot to Asia and the drone programme as inextricably linked. They each reflected a fundamental reality of a war-weary nation seeking a route out from deeper commitments to a region that had brought little but trauma to its collective psyche. Drones offered an expedient means of continuing a fight against lasting enemies. But they nevertheless also functioned to enable a broader desire to direct American attentions elsewhere. The moral costs of the programme at least in the first instance, were justified by the clamour to emerge out from the yoke of previous foreign policy mistakes.

Conclusion

How we have come this far

On 5 August 2015 Obama spoke at the American University in Washington to advocate for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - the Iranian nuclear deal. He urged the public to contact their members of Congress and “remind them who we are.” It was a plea to the American people to support an American foreign policy that prioritised diplomacy and that used its status as “the most powerful nation on Earth” to “try to bind nations together in a system of international law.”⁹¹⁰

The Iran deal was the signature achievement of Obama’s foreign policy. It was the careful calibration of multilateral diplomacy aimed at the achievement of a distinct goal – the removal of an Iranian nuclear threat – therefore avoiding an Iraq-style conflagration. The desired outcome was accomplished, the administration suggested, in a manner that could bring a lasting solution. It was an act of overcoming historical enmity with Iran to achieve a common goal with other nations as well, pushing aside ideological impediments, finding common solutions that could work for all and yield desired consequences. This was the idealized vision of Obama’s foreign policy, its banner success, the triumph of his worldview taken to its idealized ends. And crucially, in Obama’s recasting of what American foreign policy was, it was a vivid representation of what he believed America stood for on the world stage. Along with the Paris Climate Accords, Michael Kimmage writes that the Iran deal served as “proof that an international society could be used to address policy challenges on a par with global warming and nuclear proliferation.”⁹¹¹ This gave vigour to his claim that “through the liberal international order and by seeking to scale back military action, President Obama reoriented American foreign policy.”⁹¹²

A competing vision nevertheless persists of an America that still conducted itself in a more forthright manner, more in keeping with the post-war expectations of superpowerdom. This vision still sees America as an immense power whose every action (and inaction) carries with it significant implications. It is the United States that proclaims the importance of institutions in shaping an international order, whilst also being the entity most responsible for shaping those institutions. Obama understood this. His foreign policy, in accordance, stands as a record of trying to walk the

⁹¹⁰ "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal," news release, August 5, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁹¹¹ Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy*. p. 287

⁹¹² *Ibid.* p. 286

line between the two worlds of American possibility: between primacy and tempering the logic which holds shaping the world to be of American provenance.

This concluding chapter will consider what remains from Obama's foreign policy presidency. This is not as such a concern about *legacy* but, in an Obamian sense, what remains will be the clearest reflection of his intellectual dispositions, borne out by his search for policy outcomes and modes of thinking which could stand the tests of time. They are a reflection of what a foreign policy influenced by philosophical pragmatism could look like. What Obama's foreign policy ultimately meant not only prompts some fraught moral questions but also the continual contemplation of what American foreign policy should stand to represent, and what America's appropriate place is in the world. Ultimately, for an intellectual history of Obama, it is a matter of 'last things' and things that last.

===

This thesis has primarily discussed challenges to America's security and its use of power. America's commitments, obligations, threats, and follies – historical and contemporary - confronted Obama at every turn, and thus necessitated consideration of his foreign policy as he encountered the world "as it is."⁹¹³ Obama rationalized the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through the prism of choice and necessity. The president drew up this architecture to delineate where ideological abstraction must necessarily give way to grounded reality. The catastrophe of the Iraq war left an indelible mark not only on Obama, but also U.S. foreign policy writ large. It problematized ideology as being a suitable driver of the direction of American power. Impugned by Obama as being based "not on reason but on passion," the Iraq War was based on a flight of fancy which he argued ought to be roundly rejected in favour of basing decisions upon conceptions matched firmly to the realities on the ground. For Obama, this meant an evaluation of what constituted a national security threat. In his role as Commander-in-Chief, Obama took seriously the notion that he was responsible for maintaining U.S. national security. The question of what constituted a security threat provoked an important challenge, and the imperatives of counterterrorism carried a vast spectrum of possibilities that each demanded varying commitment of U.S. force. Charlie Savage's astute observation that in assessing Obama's foreign policy "the marks were ambiguous and inextricably entangled in whether the observer thought particular counterterrorism policies were necessary or bad ideas," is invaluable

⁹¹³ The Obama White House, "Nobel Address." ; Rhodes, *The World as It Is*.

in this respect.⁹¹⁴ It is a useful indication of an inconsistency we can find at the core of Obama's foreign policy. He was animated by an aversion to abstract ideology as a driver of policy. Yet the very concept of 'necessity' was flawed in this respect. It relied itself on ideological assumptions that determined what constituted a 'necessary' use of American power. The Obama administration broadly continued the Bush administration's conception of the war on terror, changing it only in name and some tactical senses. This did not necessarily have to be the case. It was a choice made by Obama and the administration.⁹¹⁵

Savage's observation is particularly pertinent in evaluating the drone programme's place in Obama's foreign policy. Considerations of its effectiveness as a means of counterterrorism were matched by considerations of its effectiveness in enabling a rebalance of U.S. attention from the wider Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. But its necessity went unquestioned in the Obama White House, as did the necessity of redirecting diplomatic, economic, and military focus towards the Asia-Pacific region. Obama and his administration partook in an ideological project that shaped U.S. engagement in the region as being not only necessary for its future, but also a natural corollary to its past. This was to be achieved "with every element of American power," a notion that encompassed the spectrum from its use of drones to multilateral diplomacy.

In the invocation of power and the willingness to yield it for America's benefit, Obama's foreign policy was not completely free of notions of American hegemony, and even *empire*. Nevertheless, his identity as a figure distant from the old world Atlanticism of his predecessors, aided by a cosmopolitanism that put him at ease with a plethora of identities, ideas, and cultural perspectives, was in some respects a salve to these worst instincts of American empire. His openness to the world and to the plights of those less fortunate, though, sometimes jarred with the realities of wielding that American power. In Libya and Syria, Obama was confronted with crises of conflicting demands on how, when, and where that power is appropriately used. Ultimately, his ambivalence over the appropriate course of action in Libya is a reminder that designations of wars of 'necessity' and 'choice' are complicated by interactions with moral concerns. 'Necessity' and a threat to U.S. national security did not animate American involvement in Libya. Instead it was the realization of a multilateral initiative in the UN that compelled action to stop an oncoming slaughter. The same idealized scenario never materialized in Syria. Instead, the tragedy continued. Obama's pride in not entangling the U.S. in Syria portrayed an unwillingness to follow abstraction unthinkingly.

⁹¹⁴ Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 695

⁹¹⁵ T. McCrisken, "Ten Years On: Obama's War on Terrorism in Rhetoric and Practice," *International Affairs* Vol. 87, no. 4 (2011).

In light of moral considerations, however, Obama's pride over his inaction in Syria appears callous. Likewise, the drone programme was a cruel and unyielding expression of willingness to kill civilians, to utilize the might of American military to terrorize people offering minimal threat to the hegemonic power. The continuation of the Afghanistan war through a review process that served only to emphasize the president's reticence before pushing ahead with a surge was similarly troubling, as was, ultimately, the intervention in Libya with no plan for what came after, premised as it was on an ambivalence that found it to be a "51-49" decision. These were all examples that prompt questions about the morality of Obama's approach to foreign policy. At its most unsettling it demonstrated a flippant disregard for human life, be it civilians in countries afflicted by drone strikes and military action, or American soldiers sent into war. The criticisms of the moral outcomes of Obama's foreign policy bring necessary focus to the larger questions of what American power is *for* and how it is used. Could those resources that are directed at a seemingly unending prosecution of war instead be directed to causes of peace and economic justice?

Obama sought to recast American primacy so that it was pursued in a manner more appropriate for the needs and interests of the United States, often deeming appeals for more active measures as unwarranted. Obama nevertheless professed his firm belief in not shying away from exercising that power through a vast range of means. In this respect, Obama answered those critics who held him in disrepute for his presiding over American decline, and for being unwilling to use American force.

In their book *America Between the Wars* Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier examine the ideational climate of the 1990s as the end of the Cold War prompted a search for a new sense of direction in U.S. foreign policy.⁹¹⁶ Ultimately, they suggest that this search for a replacement of Cold War doctrine is not only elusive, but also illusory. "No single expression illuminated America's purpose after the Cold War. And it was folly to believe one could" Chollet and Goldgeier write.⁹¹⁷ Obama understood this in a manner that his critics from the foreign policy establishment did not. His dismissal of doctrine, his affirmed sense of being "comfortable with complexity," and his determination that "I don't even need a George Kennan right now" were red meat for those whose understandings of foreign policy were based on rigid displays of doctrinal certainty.⁹¹⁸ It was precisely this judicious understanding of what constituted a more well-reasoned direction of foreign policy that meant he nevertheless was a caring custodian of American primacy.

⁹¹⁶ D. Chollet, and Goldgeier, J., *America between the Wars from 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

⁹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 315

⁹¹⁸ Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama".

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Stephen Wertheim is less equivocal in identifying what has driven policy in the post-Cold War decades.⁹¹⁹ Advocating the necessity of American military retrenchment, he argues that after the Cold War the U.S. erred in adopting grand strategy that was premised upon the maintenance of overwhelming military superiority, which ultimately became an end in itself, and damaged its relationship with the rest of the world.⁹²⁰ Obama was plainly complicit in that raw attempt to maintain American primacy. He never made any claims to the contrary. Together, Wertheim and Samuel Moyn note that “Obama won [the] election in part because he ran against the Iraq War.” They argue, however, that once in office “he cemented more than reversed America’s disregard of international constraints on warmaking.”⁹²¹ Here again, we must consider the moral costs of Obama’s foreign policy. For critics such as Moyn, Wertheim, Daniel Bessner, Andrew Bacevich, Emma Ashford, and Thomas Meaney there is an inherent failure in America’s continuing “forever war,” as it detracts from domestic priorities, and incurs enormous costs in civilian life. It draws America in to ever expanding conflict, justified by its military omnipresence. For such critics, Obama’s failure lay in subsuming his foreign policy to the mores of American empire. From this perspective, he offered no change from his predecessors in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, America’s entire foreign policy history could be viewed through the same lens. And Obama happened to be the latest cog in its machine.

Here, however, we might take seriously historian Leo Ribuffo’s notion that “body counts should weigh heavily in retrospective evaluations of international morality and immorality.”⁹²² In such a consideration, the impact of the Iraq war by itself takes Bush’s to levels that any president would be hard-pressed to reach absent another major war.⁹²³ That was, in part, Obama’s purpose. Avoiding embroilment in another such war would, at the very least, preclude that scale of catastrophe. That amount of moral cost was too much to bear again.

In considering the impact of drone strikes – the most vivid expression of ‘forever war’ - Obama’s 563 strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen dwarfed Bush’s 57. Here, Obama’s estimated civilian death

⁹¹⁹ S. Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy," *Foreign Affairs* March/April (2020).

⁹²⁰ Ibid.

⁹²¹ S. Moyn, and Wertheim, S., "The Infinity War," news release, 13 December, 2019, <https://quincyinst.org/2019/12/13/the-infinity-war/>.

⁹²² L. Ribuffo, "Moral Judgments and the Cold War: Reflections on Reinhold Niebuhr, William Appleman Williams, and John Lewis Gaddis," in *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, ed. E. Schrecker (New York: The New Press, 2004). p. 63

⁹²³ Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones".

toll in these countries of between 384 and 807 is sizeable.⁹²⁴ Such figures nevertheless provide risk of falling into the ghoulish trap of comparing casualties, and worse, the spectacle of referring to comparatively small numbers as *merely* so many deaths. We risk erasing the sanctity of each and every human life. But for the president - the scale of whose decisions are unmatched in world affairs - numbers of dead might necessarily serve as a barometer. We are coaxed by such logic into finding success in the smaller numbers wrought by drone warfare compared to conventional warfare. Obama had acknowledged the value of the finding presidential triumph in avoiding “costly error.”⁹²⁵ For him, none could be more costly than another Vietnam, another Iraq.

As noted in the introduction of this thesis, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen suggests that it is not the duty of the intellectual historian to impugn the morality of the subject at hand. But she also offers further useful counsel on the means by which intellectual history can help us understand how moral positions are assumed:

*One of the primary aims of intellectual history is to understand the ideas undergirding competing moral viewpoints... It seeks to comprehend the factors that shape historical actors' intellectual options, and to see how their moral horizons and habits of thought played decisive roles both internally in their acts of intellectual volition and externally in their actions in the world.*⁹²⁶

It is thus a necessary task to consider the ‘moral horizons’ and ‘habits of thought’ through which Obama made those decisions that drew opprobrium. It is a consideration of the way in which the morality of his thought was bound. Whilst not necessarily passing judgment on moral content, it is important to consider the context and mode by which Obama constructed and justified his foreign policy choices that would carry moral consequences.

Building upon the work of James Kloppenberg, this thesis has proposed that philosophical pragmatism offers a means of sorting through the contradictions of Obama’s foreign policy. In effect, these apparent contradictions in Obama’s thought can be *smoothed over* by the incorporation of philosophical pragmatism into understandings thereof. But how did this pragmatism shape Obama’s “moral horizons?” The foreign policy dilemmas discussed in this thesis were reflections of Obama grappling with *imperfection* in America’s way of being in the world. And the imperfection of the

⁹²⁴ J. Purkiss, and Serle, J., "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes Than Bush," (2017), <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>.

⁹²⁵ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 277

⁹²⁶ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History*. p. 78

world as it confronted America. These were dilemmas that did not necessarily lend themselves to processes of experimentation, nor ongoing perfection.

Political offices carry their own imperatives and none more-so than the presidency. The office carries responsibility over the twin poles of the might of American power and the pressing fear that such might could slip away or be challenged if not handled correctly. This animates the dilemmas that confront all presidents. But an intellectual biography of Obama suggests there is something notable in the consciousness of his own humility in contending with these imperfections. The worldview he brought to bear was one grounded in the appreciation of the difficulty of the task at hand, and the importance of not presuming to carry a silver bullet in seeking a remedy. Obama reclaimed a vision of American primacy rooted in epistemic humility. It could be a nation which exercised more power through previously neglected avenues of diplomacy and multilateralism. A nation that did not equate having the biggest hammer with an impetus to use it, nor with every problem being a nail to hit.

However, Obama's commitment as Commander-in-Chief to protecting the security of the country under his charge was unwavering. It formed the basis of many decisions that many of us will remain deeply uncomfortable with. His philosophical pragmatism, his 'tragic' sense of history, and his certainty of action amounting only to that which could justify a 'moral wager,' was reflective of a worldview that did not hide from the threats posed to America's national security. That was an imperative, of 'necessity,' which captured Obama's willingness to deploy American military force. While he told the audience in his Nobel address that "inaction tears at our conscience" he nevertheless also stated that even "those of us with the best intentions" would at times "fail to right the wrongs before us." He rooted this in the notion that humankind is fallible, that humans "make mistakes, and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil." But "recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason" can also prompt a call to force. Obama greets those two imposters of action and inaction just the same. The difference between them for him is minimal, his intellectual and moral humility dictates considerations that right and wrong courses of action are sometimes separated only by the choice that picks between them. This invocation of Reinhold Niebuhr is crucial in understanding Obama's moral framework. Niebuhr invites a mode of thinking that rests upon humility, but also acknowledges the tragedy inherent in a world of human sin.

Pragmatism offers the facilitation of a deliberative and experimental process that enables the pursuit of progress. This was borne out in Obama's determination towards diplomatic consensus. But it is the debt he paid to "tragic pragmatism" that provides significant insight into his use of

American power, and the moral consequences it provokes. The modes by which such decisions were justified can be refracted through a process that reckons with that difficulty of choosing between complicated options.

In his *Dissent* article, 'The Obamanauts,' political scientist Corey Robin's most withering critique of Obama addresses the president's 'moral minimalism.' Robin impugns a "smallness" in Obama's approach which came from "the idiom of bare life, the wariness of deep foundations that had come to characterize liberalism." Here we might recognize the aversion to dogma that lies at the core of philosophical pragmatism, but for Robin it betrayed a weakness, a failing, where "in retrospect, it seems obvious that such a smallness of vision could never withstand the largeness of the [political] right."⁹²⁷

But Robin himself acknowledges that for Obama, "opposing largeness with smallness was the point."⁹²⁸ This is something that Cass Sunstein – a friend and colleague of Obama from his days of teaching at the University of Chicago - also reflected, but in a more deliberate sense. Sunstein wrote in *The New Republic* in January 2008, of Obama the "visionary minimalist."⁹²⁹ Sunstein's version of minimalism carries a more explicit legalistic definition than Robin's, yet its moral intention is redolent. In a legal sense, Sunstein wrote that minimalists "like consensus and favour incompletely theorized agreements -- that is, agreements about how to settle a particular dispute in the midst of disagreement or uncertainty about the fundamental questions that underlie it." As such "Like all minimalists," Obama believed "that real change usually requires consensus, learning, and accommodation." Sunstein suggested that "minimalists are fearful of those who are gripped by abstractions, simple ideologies, and large-scale theories." They "respect traditions, and they do not believe that long-standing practices should be altered lightly or without a careful analysis that includes many voices." Crucially, such 'minimalism' does not preclude willingness to "think big and to endorse significant departures from the status quo" but instead it emphasizes that such change requires a process of "accommodating, learning from, and bringing on board a variety of different perspectives." Sunstein suggested that, for Obama, this meant "reconciliation is change, and it is also what makes change possible." This minimalism accords with "the art of the possible," it is grounded in core pragmatist tenets, and acts as a vision of progress, for it holds that "real transformations require a degree of consensus."⁹³⁰

⁹²⁷ Robin, "The Obamanauts".

⁹²⁸ Ibid.

⁹²⁹ C. R. Sunstein, "The Visionary Minimalist," *The New Republic* 30 January (2008), <https://newrepublic.com/article/62229/the-visionary-minimalist>.

⁹³⁰ Ibid.

In a May 2007 profile of Obama in the *New Yorker* titled 'The Conciliator,' Larissa MacFarquhar examined the nascent presidential candidate's propensity towards seeking middle ground between opposing perspectives.⁹³¹ Sunstein told MacFarquhar of what he perceived was Obama's reluctance to push against people's deep moral convictions. MacFarquhar wrote "this is not, Sunstein believes, due only to pragmatism; it also stems from a sense that there is something worthy of respect in a strong and widespread moral feeling, even if it's wrong." Sunstein noted John Rawls' notions of "civic toleration as a *modus vivendi*, a way that we can live together," but crucially, he likened Obama's thinking to that of a legendary federal judge and legal scholar: "I think with Obama it's more like Learned Hand when he said, 'The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.'" Sunstein maintained that Obama took that notion "really seriously."⁹³² This assessment of Obama is congruent with ideas that this thesis has circled back to time and again. Hand's notion of the "spirit which is not too sure that it is right" is a conduit for Menand's notion of tolerance being the key value of the early pragmatists, for the promise of a conception "designed to make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs." And yet it also captured the Lincolnian tragic pragmatism that Obama exhibited in office when violence appeared inescapable.

Obama's debts to Lincoln are manifold and none more so than in his moral framework for making difficult choices. He emphasized value in Lincoln's character - which he also tied to "the American character" - "that aspect which makes tough choices, and speaks the truth when least convenient, and acts while still admitting doubt."⁹³³ This notion has been born out in this thesis as being one predicated on the gamble represented by taking 'moral wagers.' His moral horizons therefore contained multitudes. They carried a reluctance to rely on a presumption of certainty. Each drone strike was a wager that its necessity outweighed the moral costs that would trail behind. The drone programme itself a wager on the necessity of maintaining counterterrorism efforts, whilst also wagering on the imperative to remove ground forces from the Middle East. It was a wager that America's future lay in the Asia-Pacific, and any means to help it achieve that future was a cost worth bearing. The same embrace of 'moral wagers' animated his approach to Afghanistan. And all formed part of the same Niebuhrian humility of acting despite being conscious of the frailties and limitations of human knowledge. The same embrace nevertheless of the notion that even in taking

⁹³¹ L. MacFarquhar, "The Conciliator," *The New Yorker* May 7 Issue (2007), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/07/the-conciliator>.

⁹³² Ibid.

⁹³³ Obama Obama Speeches, "Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Remarks by Senator Barack Obama".

action, you must be wary of the presumption that it is the right course. Sunstein, for his part, suggested that Obama was notable as being a political figure who “knows he might be wrong.”⁹³⁴

This is a means of approaching the world that might strike us as deeply unsatisfying in our attempts to conceptualize a foreign policy framework. It is especially poignant when considered through the lens of what solace those on the receiving end of American power might gain from such an approach being taken. What difference does it make if the decision to order a drone strike was a difficult one for the president? The consequences of the decision taken even “while admitting doubt” have a disproportionate material impact on those on the ground. It is in this doubt - in this *minimalism* – that we find opportunity for better outcomes to arise.

Libya and Syria stand as two sides of a coin through this concept. At its core, the solace in such an approach lies in the representation of what it is not. It is not the blind dogmatism of Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush. Nor even what he castigated as an unthinking foreign policy conventional wisdom common to all the post-Cold War presidents. It is, instead, an elevation of basing foreign policy decisions on firmer grounds. Matching means to ends, realizing limitations, being humble in what American power can and *should* do in the world.

But was this good enough? In a sense this conception of what was better for the United States in terms of its involvement in the world had narrow moral implications. This, for some, was too narrow a concept. It relied on the same tired logic of numbers of dead American troops, American strategic interest, and counterterrorism strategies born of the imperatives of *national security*. These were each concerns of American power that have wrought pain and misery not only internationally but also domestically; a stain on the moral conscience of the nation.

Advocates of American retrenchment, such as those figures noted above, now notably represented in the think-tank sphere by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, emphasize that remedy for the dilemmas of American power lay in restraint and in ending the dominance of militarism in U.S. foreign policy.⁹³⁵ There is a concerted effort to mainstream these ideas and cut into the assumptions of the Washington foreign policy establishment. Future presidents, particularly Democrat candidates to succeed Obama, might hope to attend to foreign policy in a manner consistent with this higher aspiration for morality. David Milne and Christopher McKnight Nichols note, however, that “previous form suggests that they may well respond in similar ways,” to Obama. They add vitally, “the burdens of office have a way of sullyng the purest-sounding pre-presidential

⁹³⁴ MacFarquhar, "The Conciliator".

⁹³⁵ Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, "Quincyinst.Org," <https://quincyinst.org/>.

intentions.”⁹³⁶ The reality is stark. Biases of American history have tended towards the same way of doing things because those methods have matched what has long been perceived as the overriding need of American primacy. As such, it will be difficult to know what it means to have an adequately ‘retrenchist’ foreign policy until we see it. Scepticism must remain over whether it can be vastly different from what Obama tried. The vagaries of holding office will always perform the most exacting of ‘purity’ tests.

Writing in 2004, Leo Ribuffo warned that “liberals” who directed protests at Bush needed “to learn the fundamental Niebuhrian lesson that foreign policy does involve hard choices that cannot be resolved on the basis of reflexive denunciations of American imperialism, earnest pleas to give peace a chance (when war is opposed), or equally earnest pleas for “humanitarian intervention” (when war is favoured).”⁹³⁷ This serves as an important reminder - to both those who critique use of American power and those who charge it should be used *more* - that foreign policy choices are difficult and not made lightly. They each carry a universe of moral and material implications. The philosophical pragmatism of Obama’s foreign policy embodies the very essence of learning this lesson. Obama’s worldview is one that at its core is grounded in an awareness of the fallibility that inhibits human efforts to shape the world around them. It also recognizes the difficult moral choices that confront those who make decisions in foreign policy. Extending Kloppenberg’s engagement with Obama as a thinker to the realm of foreign policy has enabled us to see the means by which Obama drew these connections, and the imperative he thus accorded them in shaping his own decisions.

In this respect, pragmatism offers perhaps the cleanest insight into how foreign policy that is grounded in ‘responsibility’ can be achieved when accounting for the exigencies of crises that throw the best laid plans for restraint into peril. “Don’t do stupid shit” is but one visage of “responsible” statecraft. Obama carried aims for rebalancing U.S. foreign policy, tailoring it towards the priorities of rebuilding the nation at home. But the significance of the ideas and modes of thinking which pragmatism put forth in Obama were significant. They helped formulate a view of the world in which Obama carried no grand ideological project, save the pursuit of progress. It was a way of operating in the world absent dogmatism, rejecting abstraction and absolutes. It is thus here that we find the answer to the key question that animated this thesis, of what it would mean to carry philosophical pragmatism into foreign policy.

⁹³⁶ D. Milne, and Nichols, C. M., "Obama's Foreign Policy Is Winning the 2020 Democratic Primary," *Foreign Policy* 22 January (2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/22/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-barack-obama-foreign-policy-winning-the-2020-democratic-primary/>

⁹³⁷ Ribuffo, "Moral Judgments and the Cold War: Reflections on Reinhold Niebuhr, William Appleman Williams, and John Lewis Gaddis." p. 69

The pressing concern for Obama's approach then, was whether indeed it could gain purchase in the long term, and to what degree it would stand up to the variances of an American politics that was about to be turned upside down.

===

On 9 November 2016, the day after the shocking election of Donald Trump, Obama held a press conference in the White House's Rose Garden. He prosaically offered assurances of a smooth transition, noting the peaceful transition of power as one of the hallmarks of American democracy. But in recognizing the despondency that many in the country felt upon Trump's election he meditated once more on the nature of American history. He reached back deep into his intellectual roots to note that:

*Sometimes you lose an argument. Sometimes you lose an election. The path that this country has taken has never been a straight line. We zig and zag, and sometimes we move in ways that some people think is forward and others think is moving back. And that's okay.*⁹³⁸

He emphasized the importance that Americans "all go forward, with a presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens -- because that presumption of good faith is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy." His belief in centring "fair-minded words" was on show again. The notion that disagreement can be held with humility that accepts alternative views are valid. "That's how this country has moved forward for 240 years" he said in the Rose Garden. "It's how we've pushed boundaries and promoted freedom around the world. That's how we've expanded the rights of our founding to reach all of our citizens. It's how we have come this far."⁹³⁹

A couple of months previous, facing up to the end of his presidency, Obama welcomed historian Doris Kearns Goodwin into the White House for an intimate but broad ranging discussion about his time in office, his legacy, and his wider sense of place in American presidential history.⁹⁴⁰ Reflecting on his temperament and its suitability for office, he told Goodwin "there is a writer's sensibility in me sometimes, where I step back. But I do think that I am generally optimistic. I see tragedy and

⁹³⁸ M. Garunay, "President Obama Speaks on the Results of the Election: "We Are Americans First", " news release, 9 November, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/11/09/president-obama-speaks-results-election>.

⁹³⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁰ Goodwin, "Barack Obama and Doris Kearns Goodwin: The Ultimate Exit Interview".

comedy and pain and irony and all that stuff. But in the end I think life is fascinating, and I think people are more good than bad, and I think that the possibilities of progress are real.” He suggested that “this basic optimism and capacity to take the long view on things” had served him well in the Oval Office.⁹⁴¹

In an early-presidency trip to Cairo, after his famous speech – an “opening” to the Muslim world – Obama and his staff visited the pyramids at Giza. “They’re elemental in ways that are hard to describe” Obama told Goodwin of the ancient tombs. He recalled thinking to himself that, in the time of the pyramid’s construction, there were people who thought they were important figures, and “there was the equivalent of cable news and television and newspapers and Twitter and people anguishing over their relative popularity or position at any given time” but crucially, now “it’s all just covered in dust and sand. And all that people know [today] are the pyramids.” This thought left a profound impact on Obama. He carried with him “that perspective, which tells me that my particular worries on any given day—how I’m doing in the polls or what somebody is saying about me ... for good or for ill—isn’t particularly relevant.” Crucially, he maintained “What is relevant is: What am I building that lasts?”⁹⁴²

In the United States he hoped that “what we’re building are not just pyramids, are not icons to one pharaoh.” Instead “what we’re building is a culture and a way of living together that we can look back on and say, [This] was good, was inclusive, was kind, was innovative, was able to fulfil the dreams of as many people as possible.”⁹⁴³ This part of his temperament, he thought, had served him well. But it also serves us well in contemplating an intellectual history of Obama. This sense of a “long view” is a familiar theme in Obama’s intellectual make-up and the history thereof.

Martin Luther King Jr’s testament that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice” adorned the carpet in Obama’s Oval Office, while Derek Chollet’s *The Long Game* reflected a sense of the deep hold such a perspective carried within the administration and reflections on it thereafter.⁹⁴⁴ Obama’s pragmatism was indebted to its own teleology. It carried an inherent *telos* of progress. Pragmatism helps in the movement toward progress, through its dedication to ideas that *work* and that will, as such, *last*.

Paramount for Obama was the notion of perfection and its ensuing progress but, specifically, progress pursued on grounds that could withstand the tests of time, the vicissitudes of an imperfect

⁹⁴¹ Ibid.

⁹⁴² Ibid.

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁴ V. Jarrett, *Finding My Voice: My Journey to the West Wing and the Path Forward*, Large Print Edition ed. (New York: Random House Large Print, 2019). p. 413; Chollet, *The Long Game*.

world. This was reflected in the solemnity with which Obama carried the dual contentions that the world was imperfect, yet nevertheless could be perfected. The world that confronted Obama as president appeared to fray at its seams, as the culture wars reanimated itself into wide scale dissatisfaction with the manner in which societies were organized and how conflicting identity interests could be met. This culminated in the triumph of the Brexit campaign and the election of a string of right-wing populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies. Obama nevertheless gave the appearance of being sanguine about this turn of events. On 16 November 2016, two weeks after Trump's victory, Obama gave a speech in Athens intended to be an affirmation of the lasting value of the idea of democracy forged in that very place.⁹⁴⁵ Crucially though, it was not only about democracy, but also the idea that "to have meaning, principles must be enshrined in laws and protected by institutions, and advanced through civic participation." And whilst "across the millennia that followed, different views of power and governance have often prevailed" he argued that "through all this history, the flame first lit here in Athens never died."⁹⁴⁶

In grounding the value and functioning of democracy in the practises that upheld it, he reinforced a facet of his worldview that has become apparent throughout this thesis: Obama was an institutionalist to his core. This was explicitly reflected by Ben Rhodes, who wrote Obama is "at his core an institutionalist, someone who believes progress is more sustainable if it is husbanded by laws, institutions, and - if need be - force."⁹⁴⁷ Institutions for Obama offered the most effective mode of instigating progress. They accorded with his faith in that process of deliberation and experimentalism that formed the basis of his understanding of America and the world. Crucially, that firm belief in institutions is sited in notions that those institutions themselves have withstood the processes and challenges of time. They are *what works*, they are eminently *possible*, they ably contend with the world *as it is*. In his speech discussing the Iran deal, Obama admirably quoted John F. Kennedy. The thirty-fifth president argued for a "practical" and "attainable" peace during the Cold War, through American leadership, "based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions -- on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements." Obama had cited that same evolution of human institutions in his Nobel address. They were a means by which the world could "concretely" pursue mediation between the determination towards peace and the sometime necessity of war.⁹⁴⁸

In an interview with the author, Michael Kimmage, a historian who worked on the Policy Planning Staff in John Kerry's State Department suggested that Obama's worldview in this respect reflected a

⁹⁴⁵ The Obama White House, "Athens Speech."

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁷ Rhodes, *The World as It Is*. p. 48

⁹⁴⁸ The Obama White House, "Iran Deal Speech."

view that “there is a right way to do politics...the right kind of institutionalism.”⁹⁴⁹ Kimmage noted that Obama is a universalist, but in “a specific way” - through a particular means of “technocratic universalism.” This for Kimmage is a universalism that avoids “the dilemmas of culture and civilization.”⁹⁵⁰ This notion reflects Obama reaching for a universalism that is attainable, one that he could readily advocate in speeches in Cairo, Accra, Yangon, and Athens. Obama found means by which ideals can be shared across and between cultures through institutions and their processes that work in a functional manner. Once again the “lawyerliness” Savage and Fishman observed in Obama’s approach to matters of national security comes to the fore.⁹⁵¹

In Athens, Obama re-affirmed the principle he had expressed in the aftermath of Trump’s election, that “progress follows a winding path -- sometimes forward, sometimes back.” This time he conditioned this on the proviso that “as long as we retain our faith in democracy, as long as we retain our faith in the people, as long as we don’t waver from those central principles that ensure a lively, open debate, then our future will be okay, because it remains the most effective form of government ever devised by man.”⁹⁵² In this sense we return to one of pragmatism’s core facets as established by William James, that “it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method.”⁹⁵³ As a method of governance, Obama maintained that democracy “is better than the alternatives because it allows us to peacefully work through our differences and move closer to our ideals.” He reified its promise as a means of yielding progress, as it “allows us to test new ideas and... to correct for mistakes.” And he emphasized that “any action by a President, or any result of an election, or any legislation that has proven flawed can be corrected through the process of democracy.”⁹⁵⁴ “Moving closer to our ideals” is Sunstein’s vision of minimalism at work.⁹⁵⁵ Testing new ideas and correcting mistakes is the experimentalism of James and Dewey. Together it is Obama’s own eminent belief in *perfection* as a process.

In the international setting, Obama’s belief in America’s outsized role in shaping the order of liberal institutionalism might prompt critiques of a self-interested projection of American hegemony. But vitally, Obama emphasized the importance of recognizing the stubborn reality that “history does not move in a straight line.” He conceded that “progress is never a guarantee.” Instead, he warned that it “has to be earned by every generation.”⁹⁵⁶ The continual shoring up of democracy and the

⁹⁴⁹ M. Kimmage, interview by J. Middleton, 15 March, 2019.

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁵¹ Savage, *Power Wars*. p. 65

⁹⁵² The Obama White House, "Athens Speech."

⁹⁵³ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. p. 28

⁹⁵⁴ The Obama White House, "Athens Speech."

⁹⁵⁵ Sunstein, "The Visionary Minimalist".

⁹⁵⁶ The Obama White House, "Athens Speech."

institutions that reinforce it were a mode of 'earning' that progress. More so than any alternatives, he believed they channelled the necessary humility, a sense of fallibility, imperfection, and pragmatism into the pursuit of the *better* alternative. *They* were the methods that would allow for perfection. For Obama, the United States could be a protagonist in pursuing these methods through liberal institutionalism.

===

This thesis has sought to demonstrate that one's intellectual starting point *matters*. The way you see the world matters a great deal to the means by which you confront it. The epistemology that shapes the way you view the world carries its own implications. With this in mind, given the topics discussed and their emphasis on America's war-making and the attendant criticisms that have subsequently come to define a lot of retrospective attitudes to the administration, to consign Obama's approach to foreign policy as congruent with the imperialist U.S. foreign policy machine misses something. To accept such a perspective resigns us to a hopeless structural rendering of history in which its actors' agency is subsumed to forces which lay beyond reach of their control. But the very essence of pragmatism is to push back against that vision of history. Pragmatism takes at its very core the perspective that truth is *made*. Not merely made by one all-powerful, omniscient force, but instead made by the careful synthesizing of understanding, a palimpsest of meaning, added piece by piece until steadily, over time, a consensus emerges of a perspective that is shared through its usefulness to all those who have shaped it.

Given this, it mattered that Obama's approach itself was predicated upon this vision of history. His belief in the steady march of progress, based on careful deliberation and experimentation mapped itself on to a foreign policy approach premised upon a conscious detachment from ideological pre-occupations and dogmatic pursuits.

Future studies can examine in closer detail the decisions that were made, discern further distinct ideological choices, and draw firmer lines between the ideas Obama held and their transformation into policy choices. Such studies can uncover the degree to which Obama's philosophically pragmatist instincts were born out in memos, policy discussions, and in broader engagement with people within the administration's own awareness of Obama's philosophical predilections. A future Obama memoir will be a crucial source for interrogation as, if it demonstrates a similar degree of thoughtful examination of philosophical ideas to his previous volumes with an added context of his

presidency, it will stand as a serious addition not only to the genre of presidential memoirs but also to meditations on America's philosophical moment.

In conversation with Goodwin, Obama made clear that he viewed his approach to politics and the world, as much as anything, as one that could be emulated in the future. It was something that could be aspired to, an approach to the world that could outlast him. He saw persisting value in this approach to the world precisely because it was one premised on that indelible travel towards that which would work, because it is in the site of such mutual understanding and common goals that progress could be located.

At the close of his 2006 speech at the Sojourners conference, Obama shared with the attendees that he said a prayer every night, one he felt he shared with a lot of Americans. It was one of "a hope that we can live with one another in a way that reconciles the beliefs of each with the good of all."⁹⁵⁷ In a sentence he captured the essence of the universal and the particular, the orthodox and the progressive, and the space for pragmatism to bind them together. The reconciliation of varying modes of thought without compromising them. It was a recognition of the importance of plurality of experience in the American life. A notion that America and its enduring success is itself predicated on a constant effort to allow differing ideas to come together and to find a way of working in a manner that benefits the whole society. It envisions a broad community of inquiry aimed at achieving something that works for as many people as possible, before it no longer works as well, and can be replaced by something new. For Obama "it's a prayer worth praying, and a conversation worth having in this country in the months and years to come."⁹⁵⁸ A return to this notion of a conversation again highlights Obama's commitment to the process of building up new visions of society in a deliberative manner. Communication between and across plural understandings of truth would be emphasized. The continual bridging through words and deeds of seemingly intractable divides pursued. This was an approach that Obama sought throughout his two terms in office to bring to bear on his foreign policy. It was a mindset which readily expanded to a worldview.

The world America confronted was one that carried its share of imperfections, but the foreign policy of Obama's America shared those imperfections as well. The tragic pragmatism he brought to bear on matters of war stood as an example of his seeing that imperfection and being aware of the limitations held in confronting it. Susan Rice reflects in her memoir that "Obama was by nature a pragmatist," yet, crucially, "his pragmatism neither rendered him cold nor tempered his high

⁹⁵⁷ Sojourners, "Obama's Sojourners Speech".

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid.

aspirations for America's capacity to do better at home and abroad."⁹⁵⁹ Philosophical pragmatism more broadly captured the idea that those limitations need not confine the pursuit of progress. Instead it helped shape a worldview that saw hope in the embrace of what William James called "the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth."⁹⁶⁰ Democracy - held so precious by Obama - acts as a forum for those ideas to play out, for processes of experimentalism and deliberation to test those possibilities and consequences in a search for consensus that will last.

Obama believed that in those moments of recognition between different experiences, worldviews, and perspectives is "where the perfection begins." This was his vision of how America could progress. But he also carried it into his vision of what America's foreign policy should be as it contended with the rest of the world. It was a worldview that resisted the path of ideological abstraction. "Dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth" promised only violence, war, and ruin. Instead, his vision affirmed the value of a steady process of confronting the world *as it was*. It cultivated the possibilities of diplomacy and engaging in a search for common ground solutions to the problems that beset the foreign policy realm. This vision did not just build a pyramid to stand as an icon to Obama. Instead it built something to *last*. Something to stand testament to the pursuit of perfection and where that pursuit will continue.

⁹⁵⁹ Rice, *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For*. p. 19

⁹⁶⁰ James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. p. 27

Bibliography

Published Primary Documents

- Congress.gov. "Public Law 107-40-Sept. 18, 2001." Congress,
<https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>
- Ikenberry, G. J., and Slaughter, A. . "Forging a World of Liberty under Law: Us National Security in the 21st Century / Final Paper of the Princeton Project on National Security." Princeton: The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 2006.
- Koh, H. H. "The Obama Administration and International Law." news release, 25 March, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>.
- NPR. "Transcript: Barack Obama's Speech on Race." *NPR* 18 March (2008). Published electronically 18 March 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>.
- . "Transcript: Obama's Speech against the Iraq War." *NPR* 20 January (2009). Published electronically 20 January 2009. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469>.
- Obama Speeches. "Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Remarks by Senator Barack Obama." Obamaspeeches.com, <http://obamaspeeches.com/012-Abraham-Lincoln-Presidential-Library-and-Museum-Obama-Speech.htm>.
- Obama, B. "Why Organize?: Problems and Promise in the Inner City." *Illinois Issues*, 1988.
- . "President Obama's Farewell Address: Full Video and Text." *The New York Times*, January 10 2017.
- PBS Newshour. "Barack Obama's Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention." *PBS Newshour* 27 July(2004). Published electronically 27 July 2004.
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics-july-dec04-obama-keynote-dnc/>.
- Phillips, M. "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address." news release, 21 January 2009,
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.
- Project For The New American Century. "Statement of Principles."
<https://web.archive.org/web/20050205041635/http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>.
- Sojourners. "Transcript: Obama's 2006 Sojourners/Call to Renewal Address on Faith and Politics." Sojourners,
<https://sojo.net/articles/transcript-obamas-2006-sojournerscall-renewal-address-faith-and-politics>.
- The American Presidency Project. "Press Release - Obama Discusses New Judgment We Need to Change Our Foreign Policy at Forum in Des Moines." *The American Presidency Project*, 18 December (2007).
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=93299>.
- The George W. Bush White House. "President Bush and Iraq Prime Minister Maliki Sign the Strategic Framework Agreement and Security Agreement." news release, December 14, 2008,
<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/12/20081214-2.html?fbclid=IwAR130GPH8SI0r164fIGximXBGCSe3qll-zM1q8SKKVM-K7aSiiEliq100NU>.
- The Obama White House. "National Security Strategy 2015." 2015.
- . "Remarks by President Obama at Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Athens, Greece." news release, 16 November, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/11/16/remarks-president-obama-stavros-niarchos-foundation-cultural-center>.
- . "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Yangon." news release, November 19, 2012,
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/19/remarks-president-obama-university-yangon>.
- . "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament." news release, November 17, 2011,
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.
- . "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize." news release, December 10, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.
- . "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University." news release, May 23, 2013,
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

- . "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony." news release, May 28 2014, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.
- . "Remarks by the President at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta." news release, November 10, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/10/remarks-president-university-indonesia-jakarta-indonesia>.
- . "Remarks by the President at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention." news release, 17 August, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-veterans-foreign-wars-convention>.
- . "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria." news release, September 10, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>.
- . "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan." news release, December 01 2009, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.
- . "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address." news release, January 24, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.
- . "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning." news release, June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.
- . "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan." news release, March 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.
- . "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal." news release, August 5, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>.
- . "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan." news release, 22 June, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>.
- . "Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament." news release, July 11, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-ghanaian-parliament>.
- . "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps." news release, August 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.
- . "Statement by the President." news release, August 7, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>.
- . "Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia." news release, January 14, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/14/statement-president-events-tunisia>.
- . "Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate." news release, June 14, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/16/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-and-president-pro-te>.

Memoirs

- Bader, J. A. *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012.
- Biden, J. *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. London: Pan Books, 2018.
- Burns, W. J. *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal*. London: Hurst & Company, 2019.
- Clinton, H. R. *Hard Choices*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2014.
- Gates, R. M. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. London: WH Allen, 2014.
- Jarrett, V. *Finding My Voice: My Journey to the West Wing and the Path Forward*. Large Print Edition ed. New York: Random House Large Print, 2019.
- Litt, D. *Thanks, Obama: My Hopey, Changey White House Years*. New York: Harper Collins, 2017.

Mastramonaco, A., with Oyler, L. *Who Thought This Was a Good Idea?: And Other Questions You Should Have Answers to When You Work in the White House*. London: Little, Brown, 2017.

Obama, B. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008.

———. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007.

Obama, M. *Becoming*. London: Viking, 2018.

Pfeiffer, D. *Yes We (Still) Can: Politics in the Age of Obama, Twitter and Trump*. London: Biteback, 2018.

Plouffe, D. *The Audacity to Win: How Obama Won and How We Can Beat the Party of Limbaugh, Beck, and Palin*. London: Penguin, 2010.

Power, S. *The Education of an Idealist*. London: William Collins, 2019.

Rhodes, B. *The World as It Is: Inside the Obama White House*. London: The Bodley Head, 2018.

Rice, S. *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019.

Interviews

Edel, C. "Telephone Interview with Charles Edel." By J. Middleton (13 December 2017).

Fishman, E. "Telephone Interview with Edward Fishman." By J. Middleton (7 May 2019).

Kimmage, M. "Telephone Interview with Michael Kimmage." By J. Middleton (15 March 2019).

Secondary Sources

Books

Abrams, B. *Obama: An Oral History 2009-2017*. New York: Little A, 2018.

Alter, J. *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Anderson, P. *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*. London: Verso, 2015.

Appiah, K. A. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: W.W. Norton, 2007.

Beck, U. *The Cosmopolitan Vision*. Translated by C. Cronin. Cambridge: Polity, 2006.

Bernstein, R., J. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

———. "Community in the Pragmatic Tradition." In *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, edited by M. Dickstein, 141-56. London: Duke University Press, 1998.

Bloom, A. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Brands, H. W. *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Brands, H., and Edel, C. *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*. London: Yale University Press, 2019.

Burt, J. *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013.

Campbell, K. M. *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*. New York: Twelve, 2016.

Chait, J. *Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied His Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail*. New York: Custom House, 2017.

Chamayou, G. *Drone Theory*. Translated by J. Lloyd. London: Penguin, 2013.

Chollet, D. *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*. New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

Chollet, D., and Goldgeier, J. *America between the Wars from 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror*. New York: Public Affairs, 2008.

Coates, T. *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015.

Cockburn, A. *Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins*. London: Verso, 2015.

Cummings, B. *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Dewey, J. *The Public and Its Problems*. Athens, OH.: Swallow Press, 1991.

Dueck, C. *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*. New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2015.

Ferejohn, J., and Rosenbluth, F. M. *Forged through Fire: War, Peace, and the Democratic Bargain*. London: Liveright, 2017.

Fukuyama, F. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

- Garrow, D. J. *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama*. London: William Collins, 2017.
- Goodwin, D.K. *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Haass, R. N. . *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*. First Paperback Edition ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.
- Habermas, J. *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Translated by T. McCarthy. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Heilemann, J., and Halperin, M. *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*. London: Harper Perennial, 2010.
- Herring, G. C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Hunt, M. H. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy with a New Afterword by the Author* ed. London: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Hunter, J., D. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- Immerwahr, D. *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States*. London: The Bodley Head, 2019.
- Indyk, M. S., Lieberthal, K. G., and O'Hanlon, M. E. *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012.
- James, W. *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Kagan, R. *The World America Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
- Kaplan, F. *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008.
- Kimmage, M. *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.
- Kloppenber, J. *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Laïdi, Z. *Limited Achievements: Obama's Foreign Policy*. Translated by C. Avery. Series in International Relations and Political Economy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Landler, M. *Alter Egos: Obama's Legacy, Hillary's Promise and the Struggle over American Power*. London: WH Allen, 2016.
- Laskas, J. M. *To Obama, with Love, Joy, Hate and Despair*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Leeman, R. W. *The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.
- Mann, J. *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- . *The Obamians: The Struggle inside the White House to Redefine American Power*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Maraniss, D. *Barack Obama: The Story*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2012.
- Menand, L. *The Metaphysical Club*. London: Flamingo, 2002.
- Mendell, D. *Obama: From Promise to Power*. New York: Amistad, 2007.
- Milne, D. *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2008.
- . *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
- Nasr, V. *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*. New York: Anchor Books, 2013.
- Niebuhr, R. *The Irony of American History: With a New Introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 1952.
- Nye, Jr., J. S. *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era*. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Parmar, I., Miller, L. B., and Ledwidge, M., ed. *Obama and the World: New Directions in US Foreign Policy*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Power, S. *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. London: Harper Perennial, 2007.
- Putnam, H. *Pragmatism: An Open Question*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995.
- Putnam, R., D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Ratner-Rosenhagen, J. *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Rawls, J. *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- . *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Remnick, D. . *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*. London: Picador, 2010.
- Rodgers, D., T. *Age of Fracture*. London: Belknap Press, 2011.
- Rorty, R. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. London: Harvard University Press, 1998.

- . *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980*. Brighton: Harvester, 1982.
- . *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Robin, R. *The Cold World They Made: The Strategic Legacy of Roberta and Albert Wohlstetter*. London: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Romano, C. *America the Philosophical*. New York: Vintage Books, 2013.
- Rothkopf, D. J. *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear*. New York: Public Affairs, 2014.
- Ryan, A. *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. London: W. W. Norton, 1995.
- Sanger, D. E. *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*. New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012.
- Sarson, S. *Barack Obama: American Historian*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Savage, C. *Power Wars: The Relentless Rise of Presidential Authority and Secrecy*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2017.
- Scahill, J. *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2013.
- Scahill, J., and the Staff of The Intercept. *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016.
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. D., ed. *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "a More Perfect Union"*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Singh, R. S. *After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- . *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Stephens, B. *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder*. New York: Sentinel, 2015.
- Tribe, L., H., and Dorf, M., C. *On Reading the Constitution*. London: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Vaïsse, J. *Neoliberalism: The Biography of a Movement*. Translated by A. Goldhammer. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Wang, C. *Obama's Challenge to China: The Pivot to Asia*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Wood, G., S. *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787*. London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Woodward, B. *Obama's Wars*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Book Sections

- Butler, B. E. "Obama's Pragmatism in International Relations: Appropriate or Appropriation?". In *Philosophical Pragmatism and International Relations: Essays for a Bold New World*, edited by S. J. Ralston, 152-68. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013.
- Dickstein, M. "Introduction: Pragmatism Then and Now." In *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, edited by M. Dickstein, 1-18. London: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Greenwald, G. "Afterword: War without End." In *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*, edited by J. Scahill and the Staff of The Intercept, 179-86. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016.
- Hall, S. "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities." In *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, edited by S. Vertovec, and Cohen, R., 25-31. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- MacLean, A. "Liberalism Does Its Thing." In *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, edited by A. O'Connell, B. London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Nichols, C. M. "United States in the World." In *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times*, edited by R. and Hartman Haberski, A., 198-222. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.
- Niebuhr, R.. "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist." In *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, edited by R. M. Brown. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- O'Connell, A., B. "Moving Mountains: Cultural Friction in the Afghanistan War." In *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, edited by A. O'Connell, B. London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- . "Our Latest Longest War." In *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, edited by A. O'Connell, B. London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Ralston, S. J. "Presidential Rhetoric and Pragmatism's Possibilities." In *Philosophical Pragmatism and International Relations: Essays for a Bold New World*, edited by S. J. Ralston, 169-85. Plymouth: Lexington, 2013.

- Ribuffo, L. "Moral Judgments and the Cold War: Reflections on Reinhold Niebuhr, William Appleman Williams, and John Lewis Gaddis." In *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, edited by E. Schrecker, 27-70. New York: The New Press, 2004.
- Scahill, J. "The Drone Legacy." In *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*, edited by J. Scahill and the Staff of The Intercept, 1-12. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016.
- Vertovec, S., and Cohen, R. "Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism." In *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, edited by S. Vertovec, and Cohen, R., 1-24. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Journal Articles

- Bessner, D. "Thinking About the U.S. In the World." *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 5 (2017): 1018-25.
- Burgos, R., A. "Origins of Regime Change: "Ideapolitik" on the Long Road to Baghdad, 1993-2000." *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 221-56.
- Campagna-Pinto, S. T. "Barack Obama and the Habit of Hope." *Anglican Theological Review* Vol. 97, no. 3 (2015): 519-36.
- Carter, A. "The Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security: Building a Principled Security Network." *Foreign Affairs* November/December (2016).
- Carvin, S. "Getting Drones Wrong." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no. 2 (2015): 127-41.
- Christensen, T. J. "Obama and Asia: Confronting the China Challenge." *Foreign Affairs* September/October (2015).
- Drezner, D. W. "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?." *Foreign Affairs* July/August (2011).
- Fukuyama, F. "The End of History?." *The National Interest* No. 16, no. Summer 1989 (1989): 3-18.
- Huntington, S., P. "The Clash of Civilizations?." *Foreign Affairs*, no. Summer 1993 Issue (1993).
- Julian, L. "Niebuhr and Obama." *Policy Review* 1 April (2009). Published electronically 1 April 2009. <https://www.hoover.org/research/niebuhr-and-obama>.
- Krauthammer, C. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990).
- Krieg, A. "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and Us Foreign Policy in the Middle East." *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97-113.
- Kuperman, A. J. "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure." *Foreign Affairs*, no. March/April Issue (2015).
- Lynch, M. "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role." *Foreign Affairs* September/October (2015).
- McCrisken, T. "Justifying Sacrifice: Barack Obama and the Selling and Ending of the War in Afghanistan." *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012): 993-1007.
- . "Ten Years On: Obama's War on Terrorism in Rhetoric and Practice." *International Affairs* Vol. 87, no. 4 (2011): 781-801.
- Milne, D. "Pragmatism or What?: The Future of Us Foreign Policy." *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012): 935-51.
- Rhodes, J., and Hlavacik, M. "Imagining Moral Presidential Speech: Barack Obama's Niebuhrian Nobel." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 3 (November 2015): 471-504.
- Rose, G. "What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On." *Foreign Affairs*, no. September/October Issue (2015).
- Schulden, S. "Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey." *Denver University Law Review* 86 (2009): 807-18.
- Schultz, B. "Obama's Political Philosophy: Pragmatism, Politics, and the University of Chicago." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2009): 127-73.
- Throntveit, T. "Our President, the Pragmatist: How Obama Resurrected a Political Tradition." *Footnote* 6 June (2012). Published electronically 6 June 2012. <http://footnote.co/our-president-the-pragmatist/>.
- Tribe, L. H. "The Curvature of Constitutional Space: What Lawyers Can Learn from Modern Physics." *Harvard Law Review* 103, no. 1 (November 1989 1989): 1-39.
- Wertheim, S. "The Price of Primacy." *Foreign Affairs* March/April (2020).
- . "A Solution from Hell: The United States and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism, 1991-2003." *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, no. 3-4 (2010): 149-72.

News/Magazine Articles

- Al-Jazeera. "Arab States Seek Libya No-Fly Zone." (2011). Published electronically 12 March. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/03/201131218852687848.html>.
- Anderson, J. L. "The Unravelling." *The New Yorker* February 23 & March 2 Issue (2015). Published electronically 16 February 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling>.
- Arango, T., and Schmidt, M., S. "Last Convoy of American Troops Leaves Iraq." *The New York Times* 18 December Issue (2011). Published electronically 18 December 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/19/world/middleeast/last-convoy-of-american-troops-leaves-iraq.html>.
- Asia Society. "Complete Transcript: Thomas Donilon at Asia Society New York." <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/complete-transcript-thomas-donilon-asia-society-new-york> (
- Barr, A. "The GOP's No-Compromise Pledge." *Politico* 28 October (2010). Published electronically 28/10/10. <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/10/the-gops-no-compromise-pledge-044311>.
- BBC News. "President Obama: Libya Aftermath 'Worst Mistake' of Presidency." *BBC* 11 April (2016). Published electronically 11 April 2016. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36013703>.
- . "Underwear Bomber Abdulmutallab Sentenced to Life." *BBC News* 16 February (2012). Published electronically 16 February 2012. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17065130>
- Beauchamp, Z. "16 Years after 9/11, Al-Qaeda Is Back." *Vox* 11 September (2017). Published electronically 11 September 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/11/16288824/al-qaeda-isis-911?fbclid=IwAR3AyljHmTwnNEU5On6IntBuBwOKJuZsr1Huu-7A9KSoZDizaUhU6hUd1f0>.
- Becker, J., and Shane, S. "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall." *The New York Times* 27 February(2016). Published electronically 27 February 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html>.
- . "A New Libya, with 'Very Little Time Left'." *The New York Times* 27 February(2016). Published electronically 27 February 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-isis-hillary-clinton.html>.
- . "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will." *The New York Times* 29 May(2012). Published electronically 29 May 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>.
- Bolton, J. R. "Ditherer in Chief." *Los Angeles Times* 18 October (2009). Published electronically 18 October 2009. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-oct-18-oe-bolton18-story.html>.
- Boot, M. "A President Who Learned Nothing." *Commentary* 6 May (2016). Published electronically 6 May 2016. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/a-president-that-learned-nothing-ben-rhodes-obama/>.
- Brooks, D. "Obama, Gospel and Verse." *The New York Times* 26 April Issue(2007). Published electronically 26 April 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html?mtrref=www.google.co.uk&gwh=F403E90B178C139885B59A708BA20AC8&gwt=pay&assetType=opinion>.
- Butterfield, F. "First Black Elected to Head Harvard's Law Review." *The New York Times* 6 February Issue (1990). <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/06/us/first-black-elected-to-head-harvard-s-law-review.html>.
- CBS News. "Cheney: Stop 'Dithering' over Afghanistan." *CBS News* 21 October (2009). Published electronically 21 October 2009. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cheney-stop-dithering-over-afghanistan/>.
- Clinton, H. R. "America's Pacific Century." *Foreign Policy* 11 October (2011). Published electronically 11 October 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>
- CNN Politics. "Full Script of Obama's Speech." *CNN Politics* 24 July(2008). Published electronically 24 July 2008. <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/24/obama.words/>.
- Coates, T. "My President Was Black." *The Atlantic*, January/February 2017.
- Cole, D. "The Drone Presidency." *The New York Review of Books* August 18 Issue (2016). <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/the-drone-presidency/>.
- Cooper, H. "Some Obama Enemies Are Made Totally of Straw." *The New York Times* 23 May Issue (2009). Published electronically 23 May 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/us/politics/24straw.html>.

- D'Ancona, M. "Jon Favreau Has the World's Best Job." *GQ* 6 December (2012). Published electronically 6 December 2012. <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/gq-comment-jon-favreau-president-barack-obama-speechwriter>.
- Dorning, M. "His Words, the President's Voice." *Chicago Tribune* 8 March Issue(2009). Published electronically 9 March 2009. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-03-08/news/0903070224_1_chief-speechwriter-jon-favreau-barack-obama-president.
- Drummond, T. "Barack Obama's Law Personality." *Los Angeles Times* 19 March (1990). Published electronically 4 September 2008. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/thedailymirror/2008/09/barack-obama-ha.html>.
- Erlanger, S. "Libya's Dark Lesson for Nato." *The New York Times* (2011). Published electronically September 3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/sunday-review/what-libyas-lessons-mean-for-nato.html>.
- Garunay, M. "President Obama Speaks on the Results of the Election: "We Are Americans First"." news release, 9 November, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/11/09/president-obama-speaks-results-election>.
- Goldberg, J. "The Obama Doctrine." *The Atlantic* April Issue (2016). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.
- Goodwin, D. K. "Barack Obama and Doris Kearns Goodwin: The Ultimate Exit Interview." *Vanity Fair* November Issue (2016). Published electronically 21 September 2016. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/09/barack-obama-doris-kearns-goodwin-interview>.
- Gopnik, A. "Liberal-in-Chief." *The New Yorker* May 23 Issue(2016). Published electronically 15 May 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/23/president-obama-speaks-his-mind>.
- Greenwald, G. "Barbara Lee's Lone Vote on Sept. 14, 2001, Was as Prescient as It Was Brave and Heroic." *The Intercept* 11 September (2016). Published electronically 11 September 2016. <https://theintercept.com/2016/09/11/barbara-lees-lone-vote-on-sept-14-2001-was-as-prescient-as-it-was-brave-and-heroic/>.
- Hasan, M., and Sayedahmed, D.,. "How Drones Create Blowback." Video, *The Intercept* 22 January (2018). Published electronically 22 January 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/01/22/blowback-cia-drones-middle-east/>.
- Hawaii Defense Economy. "Defense Personnel in Hawaii." <http://hawaiidefenseeconomy.org/defense-economy-personnel/>.
- Hayes, C. "The Pragmatist." *The Nation* December 29 Issue(2008). Published electronically 10 December 2008. <https://www.thenation.com/article/pragmatist/>.
- Hudson, J. "How the White House 'Kill List' Became the White House 'Disposition Matrix,'." *The Atlantic* 24 October (2012). Published electronically 24 October 2012. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/10/how-white-house-kill-list-became-white-house-disposition-matrix/322180/>.
- Judt, T. "Edge People." *The New York Review of Books*, March 25 Issue, 2010.
- Kagan, R. "Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline." *The New Republic* 11 January (2012). Published electronically 11 January 2012. <https://newrepublic.com/article/99521/america-world-power-declinism>.
- . "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire: What Our Tired Country Still Owes the World." *The New Republic* 26 May (2014). Published electronically 26 May 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/117859/allure-normalcy-what-america-still-owes-world>.
- Kantor, J. "Teaching Law, Testing Ideas, Obama Stood Slightly Apart." *The New York Times* 30 July Issue (2008). Published electronically 30 July 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/us/politics/30law.html>.
- Kaplan, F. "Ct or Coin?" *Slate* 24 March (2009). Published electronically 24 March 2009. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/03/obama-must-choose-this-week-between-two-radically-different-afghanistan-policies.html>.
- . "Obama Lays Siege to His Critics." *Slate* 28 May (2014). Published electronically 28 May 2014. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/05/barack-obamas-west-point-speech-the-president-responds-to-his-foreign-policy-critics.html>.
- . "The Realist: Barack Obama's a Cold Warrior Indeed." *Politico Magazine* March/April (2014). <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/barack-obama-realist-foreign-policy-103861#.UxU1gONdWvh>.
- Kaplan, R. D. "The Coming Anarchy." *The Atlantic* February 1994 Issue (1994). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>.

- Karmanau, Y. "Naval Base in Syria Anchors Russia to Mediterranean." *Navy Times* 26 September (2019). Published electronically 26 September 2019. <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/09/27/naval-base-in-syria-anchors-russia-to-mediterranean/>.
- Kiersz, A. "Here's How Much Land Military Bases Take up in Each State." *Business Insider* 10 November (2014). Published electronically 10 November 2014. <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-land-military-bases-take-up-in-each-state-2014-11?r=US&IR=T>.
- Kolbert, E. "Postscript: Mario Cuomo (1932-2015)." *The New Yorker* 2 January(2015). Published electronically 2 January 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/postscript-mario-cuomo>.
- Korb, L., and Moss, I. "Factor Military Duty into Criticism." *Chicago Tribune* 3 April Issue(2008). Published electronically 3 April 2008. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-04-03/news/0804020775_1_marines-real-patriot-active-duty.
- Lake, E. "Obama's Foreign Policy Guru Is the 'Blob' He Hates." *Bloomberg* 6 May(2016). Published electronically 6 May 2016. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-05-06/obama-s-foreign-policy-guru-is-the-blob-he-hates>.
- Landler, M. "Obama Tells Qaddafi to Quit and Authorizes Refugee Airlifts." *The New York Times* (2011). Published electronically March 3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/world/africa/04president.html>.
- LeVine, M. "The Dangerous Rebranding of John Brennan." *Al Jazeera* 9 February (2013). Published electronically 9 February 2013. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132894728377540.html>.
- Lewis, M. "Obama's Way." *Vanity Fair* October Issue (2012). Published electronically 11 September 2012. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2012/10/michael-lewis-profile-barack-obama>.
- Lizza, R. "The Agitator: Barack Obama's Unlikely Political Education." *The New Republic* 19 March(2007). Published electronically 19 March 2007. <https://newrepublic.com/article/64660/the-agitator>.
- . "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy." *The New Yorker* May 2 Issue(2011). Published electronically 25 April 2011. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.
- MacFarquhar, L. "The Conciliator." *The New Yorker* May 7 Issue(2007). Published electronically 30 April 2007. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/07/the-conciliator>.
- McLaughlin, E. C. "Rev. Wright More Than Sound Bite, Obama's Ex-Pastor." *CNN Politics* 29 April(2008). Published electronically 29 April 2008. <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/29/wright.bio/index.html?iref=nextin>.
- Menand, L. "Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History." *The New Yorker* September 3 Issue(2018). Published electronically 27 August 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>.
- Milne, D., and Nichols, C. M. "Obama's Foreign Policy Is Winning the 2020 Democratic Primary." *Foreign Policy* 22 January(2020). Published electronically 22 January 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/22/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-barack-obama-foreign-policy-winning-the-2020-democratic-primary/>
- Moyn, S., and Wertheim, S. "The Infinity War." news release, 13 December, 2019, <https://quincyinst.org/2019/12/13/the-infinity-war/>.
- Nagourney, A., and Zeleny, J. "Obama Formally Enters Presidential Race." *The New York Times* 11 February Issue (2007). Published electronically 11 February 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/us/politics/11obama.html>.
- Peirce, C., S. "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." *Popular Science Monthly* 12(1878): 286-302. <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p119.html>.
- Pilkington, E., and MacAskill, E. "Obama's Drone War a 'Recruitment Tool' for Isis, Say Us Air Force Whistleblowers." Online Article, *The Guardian* 18 November Issue (2015). Published electronically 18 November 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/18/obama-drone-war-isis-recruitment-tool-air-force-whistleblowers>.
- Purkiss, J., and Serle, J. "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes Than Bush." (2017). Published electronically 17 January. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>.
- Remnick, D. "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama." *The New Yorker* January 27 Issue(2014). Published electronically 20 January. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

- Reston, M. "Obama Tells Veterans Afghanistan Is a 'War of Necessity'." *Los Angeles Times* 18 August Issue(2009). Published electronically 18 August 2009. <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/aug/18/nation/na-obama-vfw18>.
- Ricks, T., E. "A Stunning Profile of Ben Rhodes, the Asshole Who Is the President's Foreign Policy Guru." *Foreign Policy* (2016). Published electronically May 6. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/06/a-stunning-profile-of-ben-rhodes-the-asshole-who-is-the-presidents-foreign-policy-guru/>.
- Robin, C. "The Obamanauts." *Dissent* Fall Issue(2019). <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-obamanauts>.
- Rogin, J. "Obama Embraces Romney Advisor's Theory on 'the Myth of American Decline'." *Foreign Policy* (2012). Published electronically January 26. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/26/obama-embraces-romney-advisors-theory-on-the-myth-of-american-decline/>.
- Ross, D. "How Obama Created a Mideast Vacuum." *Politico Magazine* 10 January (2016). Published electronically 10 January 2016. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/obama-mideast-vacuum-213513>.
- Rothkopf, D. J. "Barack Obama, Alone." *iPolitics* (2013). Published electronically 6 September. <https://ipolitics.ca/2013/09/06/barack-obama-alone/>
- Russell, R. L. "The "No Boots on the Ground" Mantra Is Strategic Foolishness." *War On The Rocks* 17 September(2014). Published electronically 17 September 2014. <https://warontherocks.com/2014/09/the-no-boots-on-the-ground-mantra-is-strategic-foolishness/>.
- Samuels, D. "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru." *The New York Times Magazine* 5 May (2016). Published electronically 5 May 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>.
- Sanger, D. E. "Envoy Meets with Leader of Yemen on Accord." *The New York Times* 11 July Issue (2011). Published electronically 11 July 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/11/world/middleeast/11yemen.html>.
- Simon, B. "How a Slap Sparked Tunisia's Revolution." *CBS News* (2011). Published electronically February 22. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-a-slap-sparked-tunisia-revolution-22-02-2011/>.
- Simon, R. "Obama Beats Hillary over Head with Iraq." *Politico* 31 January(2008). Published electronically 31 January 2008. <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/01/obama-beats-hillary-over-head-with-iraq-008248>.
- Sunstein, C. R. "The Empiricist Strikes Back." *New Republic* 10 September (2008). Published electronically 10 September 2008. <https://newrepublic.com/article/64019/the-empiricist-strikes-back>.
- . "The Visionary Minimalist." *The New Republic* 30 January (2008). Published electronically 30 January 2008. <https://newrepublic.com/article/62229/the-visionary-minimalist>.
- Taylor, K. "Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-Racial Illusion." *The Guardian* 13 January (2017). Published electronically 13 January 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system>.
- The Associated Press. "Roger Boesche, Professor Who Stirred Obama's Interest in Politics, Dies at 69." *The New York Times* 25 May (2017). Published electronically 25 May 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/us/roger-boesche-dead-obama-favorite-professor.html? r=0>.
- The Washington Post. "Senate Roll Call: Iraq Resolution." *The Washington Post* 11 October (2002). http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/senaterollcall_iraq101002.htm.
- Thrush, G. "Obama's Obama." *Politico Magazine* January/February Issue (2016). <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/denis-mcdonough-profile-213488?paginate=false>.
- UChicago News. "Uchicago Hosts Event with President Obama and Young Leaders." *Uchicago News* 24 April (2017). Published electronically 24 April 2017. <https://news.uchicago.edu/multimedia/uchicago-hosts-event-president-obama-and-young-leaders>.
- Vine, D. "Where in the World Is the U.S. Military?" *Politico Magazine*, 2015.
- Vox. "Obama: The Vox Conversation - Part Two: Foreign Policy." <https://www.vox.com/a/barack-obama-interview-vox-conversation/obama-foreign-policy-transcript>.
- Walt, S., M. "Is Barack Obama More of a Realist Than I Am?" *Foreign Policy* (2014). Published electronically August 19 2014. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/19/is-barack-obama-more-of-a-realist-than-i-am/>.

Watt, N. "Nicolas Sarkozy Calls for Air Strikes on Libya If Gaddafi Attacks Civilians." *The Guardian* (2011).
Published electronically 11 March. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/11/nicolas-sarkozy-libya-air-strikes>.

Zengerle, J. "Get Mitch: How the Embattled Senate Minority Leader Explains America's Political Gridlock."
Politico Magazine November Issue (2013). <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/11/get-mitch-mcconnell-099376>.

Web Pages

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. "Quincyinst.Org." <https://quincyinst.org/>.

Sojourners. "Our History." <https://sojo.net/about-us/our-history>.

Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones." Watson Institute, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2019/direct-war-death-toll-2001-801000>.

Podcasts

Axelrod, D. *The Axe Files: Ep. 116 - Cody Keenan*. Podcast audio. The Axe Files. Accessed 10/02/17, 2017.
<http://podcast.cnn.com/the-axe-files-david-axelrod/episode/all/E2PZtocfVZcHEI/1uckf4.html>.