

Obama's Failure to Lead

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In recent days, President Barack Obama has been stressing that his national-security record will help him get reelected. In a January interview with *Time* magazine, in his State of the Union address, and elsewhere, he not only recalls, with justifiable pride, the killing of Osama bin Laden, but also claims credit for “restor[ing] American leadership in the world.”

In common parlance, leadership abroad means something along the lines of identifying the U.S. national interest and enlisting foreign partners to join us in achieving it. What Mr. Obama means, however, is more or less the opposite.

Before entering office in 2009, Mr. Obama and his administration's top foreign-policy intellectuals wrote extensively in favor of a less assertive, less militarily capable, less independent United States. This prescription fit their characterization of America's post-World War II history as a story of bullying, selfishness, militarism, and violations of the rights of others.

In a 2003 article in *The New Republic*, Harvard lecturer Samantha Power referred to American pride in our freedoms of speech, religion, voting, and assembly — then explained that “much anti-Americanism derives from the role U.S. political, economic, and military power has played in denying such freedoms to others.” She advocated “instituting a doctrine of the *mea culpa*” and drew a parallel between America's actions and those of the Nazis: “When [German Chancellor] Willie Brandt went down on one knee in the Warsaw ghetto, his gesture was gratifying to World War II survivors, but it was also ennobling and cathartic for Germany. Would such an approach be futile for the United States?” Amazingly, the comment caused no flap in 2003 — or in 2009, when President Obama appointed Ms. Power to the National Security Council.

In the academic circles Mr. Obama inhabited before entering politics, historical, classic American leadership is criticized for being arrogant and overreaching. In a recent Woodrow Wilson Center essay, Princeton's Anne-Marie Slaughter, who served as the State Department's director of policy planning from 2009 to 2011, summarized a progressive understanding of leadership as follows: “The U.S. should stop trying to dominate and direct global events. The best we can do is to build our capital so that we can influence events as they arise.”

President Obama often speaks of leadership, as all politicians do, but he inclines to the progressive foreign-policy school's definition. For him, it involves embracing constraints and subordinating U.S. interests to the permission of multilateral bodies, as he did when he waited for the approval of the Arab League and United Nations before supporting the anti-Qaddafi rebellion in Libya.

Mr. Obama explained to *Time* that he favors “an American leadership that recognizes the rise of countries like China and India and Brazil. It's a U.S. leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources, capacity.” Knowing one's own limitations is good and can help advance one's interests. But that's different from shackling oneself or deciding to act only with lots of company. If leadership means joining the crowd, that's an Orwellian inversion of vocabulary. When an anonymous administration official told *The New Yorker* last year that Mr. Obama aspired to “lead from behind,” he caused embarrassment by exposing the president's sleight of tongue.

What about the president's leadership on Iran, our chief foreign-policy challenge? Mr. Obama came into office thinking that U.S.–Iranian “tension” reflected not Iran's fanatical Khomeinist ideology but its justifiable resentment of America. In his

2009 Cairo speech, he effectively apologized: “For many years, Iran has defined itself in part by its opposition to my country, and there is indeed a tumultuous history between us. In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government.”

Days later, when ordinary Iranians rose up in the largest protests ever to challenge the Khomeinist regime — and regime forces murdered dissidents in plain view — President Obama remained passive. His response was consistent with the sense of guilt he voiced in his Cairo speech, and with the view that America lacks moral authority to act as leader of the free world. He had committed himself to “engagement” with Iran’s rulers and evidently feared offending them.

With the popular revolt crushed and Tehran’s nuclear efforts continuing, President Obama’s Iran policy focuses now on tightening sanctions. He boasts of more international support for that project than ever before, and many Europeans do in fact support tougher sanctions. But Russia, China, and Turkey continue to oppose them despite American “resets” and pleas.

In any event, sanctions are not an end in themselves. President Obama hopes sanctions will pressure Iran to resume diplomacy. But to what end? There is no realistic prospect that Iran’s leaders can be negotiated out of their determination to obtain nuclear weapons.

President Obama’s idea of leadership has proven barren also in other spheres. China makes aggressive territorial claims, invests in a major military build-up and refuses help on crucial issues such as North Korea and Iran. The Obama administration has made major cuts in the U.S. defense budget without first persuading our NATO allies to increase their defense spending commensurately. The president delivered a major speech on the Arab Spring in May that proposed no diplomatic initiatives. France and Britain, not the United States, led the belated action to oppose Qaddafi. Today the Arab League and Turkey, not the United States, are the principal outside powers influencing events in Syria. President Obama’s quarrels with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu have produced no progress toward Palestinian-Israeli peace, while bringing U.S.-Israeli relations to their lowest point in many years.

Mr. Obama has grounds to claim credit for killing bin Laden. But that did not alter the direction of American national-security policy. Renouncing American leadership does.

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