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US Foreign Policy after the Presidential Elections: #ComebackKid  
*The Warren and Anita Manshel Lecture in American Foreign Policy*

Tufts University European Center  
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# US Foreign Policy after the Presidential Elections: #ComebackKid

*The Warren and Anita Manshel Lecture in American Foreign Policy*  
*Presented at the Annual Talloires Conference*  
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Allow me to take you offline for a moment where a few things have been going on. I know it's annoying to be distracted from your smart devices. As my fifteen-year old daughter subtly puts it when I try... "Dad... goodbye."

Well, hello everyone. The French, since the surveillance uproar began, have been demanding "*le droit a l'oubli*" —"the right to be forgotten." That is an interesting idea. There is also a right *not* to be forgotten. When memory dies impunity reigns.

A right not to be forgotten for the almost 100,000 Syrian dead in a conflict where the ineffectual huffing and puffing of the United States and its allies has reminded me of my pre-Internet years in Bosnia. For the 2.5 million West Bank Palestinians now in the forty-sixth year of an occupation that humiliates them and corrodes the state of Israel. For a Middle Eastern region where from a shaky Egypt to a combustible Iran the need for effective American diplomacy is pressing. We do not want, we absolutely do not want, a third Middle Eastern war just as we withdraw from Afghanistan. As the post-September 11 years have shown, it is possible to stumble into bloody things that are hard to stumble out of.

Yes, we got Osama bin Laden—that was a huge. But the disappointment in Germany of which Ben spoke last night is not limited to Germany. There has been about President Barack Obama a dissonance. On the one hand, the soaring rhetoric of this man precociously presented with a Nobel Peace Prize—about bending the arc of the world's affairs toward justice. More prosaically, he has spoken of closing Guantanamo, restoring due process, adjusting the balance

between security-driven surveillance and personal freedoms, curtailing drone warfare, and limiting the bulked-up powers of the executive.

On the other, we have seen the maintenance of precisely those powers concentrated in the White House by his predecessor: increased drone warfare; the dispatch of more forces to Afghanistan with dubious results; the surveillance programs that have Europeans up in arms; and the prolongation of Guantanamo's life.

Why this inconsistency between words and actions? Because the last thing Obama can afford to be seen as is an angry black man taking on the military and security establishment in the name of his liberal ideals? Because fighting terrorism is so intractable that painful compromises must be made? Or because in reality Obama's liberalism is no more than a veneer and he is at heart a tough pragmatist, a lawyer always looking for middle ground, a man onto whom many ideals were projected by his supporters, but who in reality, carries little of that fuzzy baggage?

Perhaps all of the above in some degree: We will see. Lame-duckness is a liberating condition. Will Obama's United States now better align means and objectives in an effective way? In nobody's world, in the cacophony we have discussed, setting an agenda is arduous work. I believe we need more of four things: leadership, diplomacy (unfashionable word, Thierry, thank you for reminding me of it), consistency, and courage. But first perhaps we should ask if a power like the United States that is past the apogee of its dominance still has the vigor and treasure to exert a strong foreign policy.

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The American century is over and no one has staked a convincing claim to this one. There is talk of a post-American world (Fareed Zakaria), of a non-American world (Parag Khanna), of the "dispensable nation" (Vali Nasr). Gideon Rachman urges the United States to be up-front about its relative decline and difficulties, like a child confessing to having spent all her allowance. Charles Krauthammer counters that "declinism" is a choice—and the wrong one. There is, it seems, little

clarity for all the information buzzing around the world's hyper-connected networks.

Surprise is always possible. The two major liberating events of my lifetime—the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Arab Spring—were foreseen by nobody. Macmillan said, “Events, dear boy, events,” when asked what worried him most as a politician—the same may be said of a columnist. You just never know how stupid you may look in the light of them.

So I proceed with trepidation. Having done the heavy global lifting for many decades now, perhaps the United States should pass the torch and focus on itself.

Since September 11, the nation has lived through two wars without victory in Iraq and Afghanistan fought at a cost of well over a trillion dollars, the devastating financial meltdown of 2008, and a faltering recovery with a low job harvest. It has watched the rise of the rest, and particularly China, whose economy will be larger than America's within about a decade. The power shift to Asia is indisputable. So is the power dilution at the expense of governments inherent in all our cyber-chat here. High debt and political polarization eat away at US national will. For all President Obama's effort to restore America's image post-Iraq, plenty of people still love to hate the USA, whether for its drone strikes, or the Utah big-data facility, or just out of the unfocused quasi-adolescent angst that produced the Boston bombers. Americans, with reason, are tired of war and nation-building. The unipolar moment of the 1990s is long gone. With George Washington many ask, “*Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground?*”

Yet there is another story. This limping power still accounts for well over a third of world military expenditure, is the only nation capable of projecting military force globally, and maintains the garrisons that constitute the framework of an enduring Pax Americana that the world is now reluctant to acknowledge. In per-capita terms, China's economy remains a fraction of the size of the US economy and will for a long time. American universities are a magnet to global talent, as are the technology companies, whose names are embedded in the world's imagination. In a networked world the networks are principally

American. Creative churn produces innovation in fields like bio- and nanotechnology at a faster pace than elsewhere. Demography favors America over most other developed nations with their declining population (1.5 million in Germany went missing recently, by the way, pouf, just vanished!) US energy self-sufficiency is less than a generation away, a dramatic shift. The soft power of Hollywood shows no sign of abating. Anti-Americanism can easily be overstated: Many middle-class Europeans and Arabs will close a diatribe against American “imperialists” with a question like, “Oh, by the way, can you help me get my daughter into Harvard?” Not least, a dozen years into the Great Disorientation that followed September 11, America’s political system remains resilient. The war on terror that President Obama has now promised to end skewed America’s checks and balances—in some ways the country has been living in an undeclared State of Emergency—but did not destroy them.

So if I had to choose a hashtag for the United States, I think I’d go with “Comebackkid” rather than “Yesterdaysnews.” Sure, I am a naturalized American. I chose America. Perhaps my spectacles are therefore rose-tinted. But I think not. No nation has ever been as hardwired to self-renewal. That admirable French motto, “*Plutôt mourir que changer*” — “Rather die than change” — does not work in Silicon Valley. Foreign policy depends fundamentally on domestic power. On that basis, in my view, America’s world role is not about to fade. The country will not retreat into a shell. Indeed it cannot: Its economy is inextricably tied to China and the world. There is no more “foreign ground,” in Washington’s words. But what will America *do* right here in the real world?

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I sat recently with Salaam Fayyad, the outgoing Palestinian prime minister in Ramallah. Ill-served brave Fayyad, a Palestinian leader with a preference for action over rhetoric, for the future over the *Nakba*, a man hung out to dry by the Israelis and by Obama and by his own Fatah movement, and just hated by Hamas.

He spoke to me about Secretary of State John Kerry's attempts to revive Israeli-Palestinian talks on that ever-receding thing: a two-state solution. "It's a high-risk strategy," Fayyad said. "The idea seems to be to get the parties easing into negotiations encouraged by economic investments. But how can this work if there is no new design, no new idea? This seems to be a recipe for Barcelona-type football, tiki-taki, running the clock down. How reassured can I be about a mega-project for tourism on the Dead Sea when north of there are Bedouins who have no water? What about settler violence, evictions, demolitions, the endless violations by Israel of our right to life? There is nothing to underpin this US strategy, so I think it will crash. The question Obama needs to ask Netanyahu is: What do you *mean* by a Palestinian state? A state of leftovers is not going to do it. Perhaps Netanyahu believes Israelis have a contract with God Almighty who gave them the land, but there happen to be 4.4 million people on this land who want to exercise their right to self-determination and statehood, so perhaps we can adjust the divine contract a little."

The Palestinian national movement is cripplingly split. It is undermined by division over objectives: two states at the 1967 borders give or take agreed land swaps (achievable); or the 1948 borders (a pipe dream); or, the same thing put another way, one state (that is, the eradication of the state of Israel). Yes, Palestinians have made a lot of mistakes. Still I understand Fayyad's anger. US policy since 2008 has been a hopeless muddle, bereft of those things I mentioned earlier: leadership, diplomacy, consistency, and courage.

Obama started in Cairo in 2009 by saying "the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable," and "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements....It is time for these settlements to stop." In a sense he was stating the obvious: There cannot be a Palestinian state if the land for it keeps eroding. Obama ended his term vetoing his own words on settlements in a resolution at the United Nations. Outmaneuvered by Netanyahu (and his twenty-nine standing ovations in Congress), he surrendered principle to political calculation with an election looming. This was not a happy episode in American foreign policy.

In his second term, he has started on the opposite tack. He went to Jerusalem. He reassured Israel: the United States had its back and Palestinians must recognize that it is a “Jewish state.” Settlements were now “counterproductive” rather than illegitimate. He made a speech that, in theory, could be a prelude to demanding some tough choices from Israel in the interests of peace. But, as Fayyad intimated, without leadership, diplomacy, consistency, and courage it is a safe bet that Netanyahu will kick the can down the road. With per-capita GNP in the West Bank at \$1,500 and in Israel at over \$35,000—and remember those places are no further apart than Brooklyn and Midtown—the prime minister has the means to tough it out.

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I have mentioned diplomacy a couple of times. It is an almost quaint word. So let us remind ourselves of what it involves. Effective diplomacy—the kind that produced Nixon’s breakthrough with China, an end to the Cold War on American terms, or the [Dayton peace accord](#) in Bosnia—requires patience, persistence, empathy, discretion, boldness, and a willingness to talk to the enemy.

Our Internet Age is, however, one of impatience, changeableness, palaver, small-mindedness, and an unwillingness to talk to bad guys. The space for realist statesmanship of the kind that produced the Bosnian peace in 1995 has diminished. The late Richard Holbrooke’s realpolitik was not for the squeamish—but at Dayton nobody was tweeting.

There are other reasons for diplomacy’s demise. The United States has lost its dominant position without any other nation rising to take its place. America acts as a cautious boss, alternately encouraging others to take the lead and worrying about loss of authority. (The US decision to send *small arms* to Syrian rebels has come more than two years into the conflict—an appalling abdication, in my view. Perhaps with Samantha Power at the UN we may do a little better.)

Violence, of the kind diplomacy once resolved, has shifted. It occurs less between states than within them or with terrorists. As a result, the military and the C.I.A. have taken the lead in dealing with

countries like Pakistan. On Capitol Hill, diplomacy is a word shunned because of its wimpy associations—trade-offs, compromise, pliancy, concessions, and the like. Many representatives prefer beating the post-September 11 drums of confrontation, toughness, and inflexibility.

I think it is possible to imagine a new era of diplomacy in Obama's second term. Outside Burma, he has had no major breakthrough (although I would call the US decision to engage fully with the Moslem Brotherhood a breakthrough, if a belated one.) But he will have to have the courage to tell Congress that diplomacy is not conducted with friends. It is conducted with the likes of the Taliban, the ayatollahs, and Hamas. It involves accepting that in order to get what you want you have to give something. The central question is: *What do I want to get out of my rival and what do I have to give to get it?* Or, put the way Nixon put it in seeking common ground with Communist China: *What do we want, what do they want, and what do we both want?*

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This brings me to Iran. As I speak a moderate cleric Hassan Rowhani has triumphed in the presidential election. I was in Tehran four years ago and will never forget the millions of brave Iranians, many of them women, marching to demand a fair count of the vote. They encountered brutal repression. The Green Movement did not disappear. It was forced underground. Rowhani has won because the reformist sentiment of 2009 still prevails. Iranians are proud; many are highly educated. Their median age is twenty-seven. They want a modern state connected to the world; they do not want to be pariahs.

Sanctions will not bring them to the table. Coercion will not bring them to the table. Independence from the West—Khomeini's "bullying powers" —stands at the ideological core of the Islamic Republic. The nuclear program (like the nationalization of the oil industry for Mossadegh) is the most potent expression of that *Weltanschauung*. This will not change with a Rowhani presidency—and Ali Khamenei is still the supreme leader.

But Ahmadinejad, by virtue of what he said about the Holocaust and other matters, was an obstacle to everything. Diplomacy with Iran

has not been seriously explored. It would require commitment and subtlety. As the Persians says, “Not everything round is a walnut.”

Obama wrote to the leaders of Turkey and Brazil in 2010 appealing for help. They duly reached the outlines of a deal with Tehran along the lines the president had suggested, only for the United States to declare it inadequate the next day and rush for tougher sanctions.

This was not a happy moment in American foreign policy: It displayed inconsistency and wavering leadership, as well as suggesting that the United States is not serious about working with the emergent powers.

War with Iran, that third war I mentioned, is unthinkable, its potential consequences devastating. Avoiding it will require asking those tough questions I outlined. As with Israel-Palestine the basic architecture of a deal is known to everyone, as are the concessions needed from both sides. But will Obama lead rather than calculate, look to his legacy rather than be a prisoner of Congressional histrionics?

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A couple of quick observations: Perhaps the most important foreign-policy words Obama has uttered are these four sentences pronounced last month: “Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue. But this war, like all wars, must end. That’s what history advises. That’s what our democracy demands.”

Yes, the President’s authority to wage war wherever and whenever he pleases, accorded in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attack, must be repealed. Obama quoted James Madison: “No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.” America’s authority is tied to its moral stature as a state of laws committed to freedom: Flying US robots dropping bombs out of diverse skies on scattered nations undermines that authority over time.

The war on a noun must end to strengthen American foreign policy in the second term. Perhaps that’s what “pivot to Asia” really means. Otherwise it means nothing.

A second point: It has become fashionable to refer to the “so-called” Arab Spring or trash the epithet itself. This is wrong-headed.

From Benghazi to Cairo, from Tunis to Sana, a furious debate is engaged—between Islamists and liberals, the military and civil society, men and women. The Arab world has unfrozen itself. Was that ever going to be a smooth process? No. Our digital reflexes leave us ill-prepared for generational change. Yet that is the nature of change. Even in Germany, after 1989, it took twenty years to integrate the East and even then many were disappointed: As one revolutionary put it, “We dreamed of paradise and woke up in North Rhine Westphalia.” Forget paradise. The United States must remain deeply committed to the deepening of the new Arab openness, its framing within institutions, and the preservation of democracy. This is a strategic imperative. The ousted Arab despotisms were jihadi factories. The new is not yet born—thanks, Jim—but it is better than the old.

And it tells me that there is only one conclusion to the Syrian nightmare: the departure of the Assad family after more than forty years of brutal rule.



Here’s a story about America in the world.

The leader of the world seventeenth-largest economy wants to build a mall over a city park. He’s a skillful ruler with more than a decade at the top, used to getting his way. But like anyone he can make mistakes. People are fond of the park called Gezi; they have memories of it, a place not yet swept away in an old city hell-bent on modernization. Such attachments are irrational but no less strong for that.

The park lovers gather, they chant, they *occupy*. They tweet with the hashtag “DirenGezi” —Resist Gezi! The leader has befriended an oligarch, favored him with the usual lucrative networks, and this oligarch owns as a sideline a popular chain of steak restaurants. The tweet goes out, “DirenEntrecote” —Resist Entrecote!

The Twitter-coordinated protest spreads. Now it is about more than a park. It is about the autocratic turn of this conservative leader who is giving himself the airs of a Sultan. The quasi-Sultan—he hates the

comparison—gets irritable. He calls the protesters alcoholics—immoral apostates who even kiss on the subway. Cue the hashtag *Kissons subway*: Couples on the Ankara and Istanbul subways all kiss at the same moment. The president is furious at this affront to Islam, as he sees it. He is confronted by a movement that does not even have a leader. Its slogan might be something as vague as “Enough is Enough!” Yet it fans out like sailboats on the Bosphorus on a sunny morning.

The pattern in Turkey is familiar by now: Small spark, large conflagration; vertical rigid state power, flat nimble protest movement; stern authority, impish youth; force of the state, flexibility of Facebook; agitated leader, leaderless uprising; stern warnings, humorous ripostes. The analogy with the Arab Spring is inexact, Turkey is a democracy. But its echoes are everywhere, not least in the element of surprise. In a world where word spreads instantaneously, movements develop fast. Fidel Castro spent years in the Sierra Maestra preparing his Revolution. Twitter has dispensed with all that. Never has agility in foreign policy been at such a premium.

I said this was a story about America in the world. Well, no, it’s principally about Turkey. But as with Germany, so with Turkey: the United States is thereabouts, a NATO ally, providing a form of security that allows for the slow evolution of democracy, first an overseen democracy and with time a more vigorous and independent one. At least that is my hopeful view.

The United States remains the great offsetting power. Without its presence in Asia, China could not have risen so peacefully. We forget these major foreign-policy contributions too easily.

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W.G. Sebald, the great German writer, once wrote: “Whenever one is imaging a bright future, the next disaster is just around the corner.” This is true. The phrase may, however, be inverted, “Whenever one is imaging the next disaster, a bright future is just around the corner.” I am certain that belief animates the brave Foreign Service officers of the United States.

None was braver than my friend, the late Chris Stevens, killed in Benghazi. I see him in his hotel room— “the impromptu embassy” — during the war, living out of a suitcase, wide smile on his face, exuding wisdom on Libya and the Arab world in general, cracking jokes as gunfire crackled around the city, working hard to help get the forces opposed to Qaddafi organized, respectful and knowledgeable of the local culture, appalled by the decades-long abuses of the regime, animated by a love of freedom, a true American public servant.

I like to think he embodies the best of American foreign policy— courageous, consistent, diplomatic, and unafraid to lead, the very qualities the Obama Administration has yet to summon.

Obama was not at his best in handling Stevens’ death (the Republicans were even further from their best). The president might do worse than inspire himself now through Stevens’ example. As Lewis Carroll wrote, “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”