

Evaluating the President's Foreign Policy

This month's Intelligence Squared U.S. debate: "Does Obama's Foreign Policy Spell America's Decline?"

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The story of Barack Obama's presidency to this point has mostly been written in domestic and economic policy. But he came to office promising to change American policy and rhetoric toward the rest of the world, especially America's historic adversaries in Asia and the Mideast. There is no disputing that he has done that, but at what costs, and to what ends? This month's Intelligence Squared U.S. debate was on the proposition "Obama's Foreign Policy Spells America's Decline." The debaters for the motion were Dan Senor, who served in a variety of foreign-policy posts in the Bush administration, including as chief spokesman for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq; and Mort Zuckerman, CEO of Boston Properties and chairman and editor in chief of *U.S. News & World Report*. Arguing against the motion were retired general Wesley Clark, whose last military post was as Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces in Europe; and Bernard-Henri Lévy, a French journalist, author, and diplomat. The moderator was John Donvan of ABC News. Edited excerpts from the debate:



Dan Senor: At least since World War II there has been a bipartisan commitment to certain principles about America's role in the world: that America will stand by democratic allies, no matter what, will stand by dissidents fighting for freedom and human rights around the world. That America will consult with its allies before it panders to its adversaries, and America will have a military budget to back up those principles and stand by its friends. And I am concerned about a realignment in American foreign policy that backs away from those principles.

You are seeing a strategic decision by this administration to send a message to our allies not to count on us, because we're reaching out to new "friends." Look at where we are today: Iran is closer to having a nuclear bomb than a year ago, despite pleading from our Arab allies and from Israel. Leaders in eastern and central Europe were caught off guard when President Obama unilaterally revoked our missile defense agreement [with those countries] in an effort to reach out to Russia. Lech Walesa said this just shows you can't count on the Americans. Lech Walesa! Former [British] Prime Minister Gordon Brown made five requests for a one-on-one meeting with President Obama, and couldn't get them to answer the phone.

So I would say that American alliances are in major jeopardy around the world. The message has been clear that it's a good time to be an adversary of America and a crummy time to be friend and historic ally of America.

Wesley Clark: Barack Obama began in a deep hole. It started with 9/11 when the [Bush] administration didn't pay enough attention to terrorism, then went into a war in Afghanistan that didn't target the correct enemy. The easy victory in Iraq turned into a drawn-out insurgency. In the process we lost friends and allies. So Barack Obama has started trying to make more friends and fewer enemies in the world. He's reached out a hand of friendship to the Islamic world. His speech in Cairo was incredibly well received. He received a Nobel Peace Prize based on the atmosphere he projected. At the same time he has kept our military strong, he's doubled down in Afghanistan, he's stuck by the commitments America made in Iraq and stayed very tough on homeland security. What you have is a president who is experienced in the world, who looks at the other side as well as to his own feelings, who is running a pragmatic, nonideological policy, and someone who has shown he's tough and means what he says.

Mort Zuckerman: Let me say that when President Obama came into office, there was a quiet sigh of relief around the world. He wasn't George Bush. The expectations were exceedingly high. Most countries distrust the United States less than they distrust one another, so they look to Washington for leadership and to support them against regional threats.

My sense, however, is that President Obama is uncomfortable with this role for the United States. He seems to almost feel there is nothing special about America's role in the world. He has too much well-intentioned belief in the power of rhetoric, and too little appreciation of reality. Many of the leaders of the Arab world, particularly the Sunni leaders, fear an expansionist Iran bent on developing nuclear weapons. As a leader of a major Arab country said to me, Obama said if people extend a hand to us, we will shake that hand, but you can't deal with Iran by shaking their hands. You have to show you can use a fist. And so when they had an uprising in the streets of Iran, there was no sense that [the administration] was on the side of freedom.

Obama gave a speech saying, wouldn't it be nice if the world did not have nuclear weapons, as if they could just be banished from the Earth, in some alternative universe. And [French president] Sarkozy said there are two countries right here doing the opposite, referring to North Korea and Iran. Sarkozy said it was fine to talk about a nuclear-free future but we also have to worry about the present and the real world. You have to admit that the world is upside down when the French president sounds stronger than America's.

Bernard-Henri Lévy: One of the criticisms of Barack Obama is that he gives too many speeches. That's because he understands that public opinion is a new actor on the world stage. It's not just world leaders he talks to; he addresses world opinion directly, as he did in Cairo. The other criticism is that he is too ready to recognize the rise of new powers such as Russia and China, and the consequent diminution of American influence. But who spells America's decline here? Those who still believe in the world of yesterday, frozen in old schemes, or those who try to understand the new world that is coming, and to maintain the rank of America in this new world? I have read that Barack Obama is [abandoning] this old creed of American exceptionalism, because he apologized for torture. I believe that to apologize means you believe in your values, and in their superiority. Only dictators never apologize.

Zuckerman: I would ask, do you think Obama's speeches are influencing political decisions in the parts of the world we want to influence? Are we getting through to the leadership because Obama gives speeches?

John Donovan: So you do not think he is respected?

Zuckerman: I think he is respected. I don't think he is effective.

Clark: I think he is effective. I think he's built a base of understanding for America's values and for his vision. Most of us would agree that the greatest threat we face is a nuclear weapon in the hands of terrorists, and that's what Obama is focusing on.

Senor: Speeches and charisma are nice. People around the world like us. I just think they have limited value in foreign affairs. Nations don't make major decisions about their security because President Obama gives a speech.

Lévy: You know, the best way to help your friends is to disarm their enemies, and the speech in Cairo had a concrete effect, in calling forth the moderates in Islam to isolate the fanatics of Al Qaeda. This has had concrete effects on the ground.

Senor: It was a great speech, it was very moving, but Hamas is stronger today than it was a year ago. Syria is reported to be sending Katyusha rockets to Lebanon for Hizbullah. Iran is nowhere near slowing their nuclear weapons program. At the end of the day, the moderates need to know we will stand with them. We had an opportunity in Iran, one year ago a bona fide dissident movement [began]. They were saying, where was America? Our president was silent.

Clark: In the first place, much of the inspiration for that movement came from the words of Barack Obama. Second, it's interesting you want to ask what's the benefit of a speech, because we learned in the previous administration that harsh rhetoric doesn't help. It appeals to Americans, but it doesn't change foreign affairs. It's what [Iranian president] Ahmadinejad wants. It consolidates his grip on power when we call him names. I would like to believe that America could cause a revolt in Iran, but we have been talking about a change in regime through six administrations and it hasn't happened yet.

Senor: When you have a situation where leaders around the world, historic allies are calling us naïve and questioning our commitment, that will spell American decline. I agree that George W. Bush was extremely unpopular around the world. He got much bigger crowds opposing him in foreign countries than Barack Obama gets supporting him. But one thing President Bush did have is deep relationships with leaders Aznar in Spain, Harper in Canada, Howard in Australia, Blair in the U.K., Sharon in Israel.

Clark: And Putin in Russia.

As in all Intelligence Squared U.S. debates, the audience was polled twice, at the start and close, and the team that changed the most minds was declared the winner. Before the debate, 23 percent agreed that Obama's foreign policy spelled America's decline, 45 percent disagreed, and 32 percent were undecided. Afterward, the vote was 34 percent for, 58 percent against, and 8 percent undecided. The team against the motion was the winner.

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