The Obama doctrine

A president at odds with the Washington playbook

When Howard Dean, a candidate for the Democratic nomination in the 2004 presidential election, passed through London in February he quipped: ‘I just want to say how much I like talking in Europe. I know everyone in Europe believes that the Americans are always acting without thinking, and it’s true, so it’s wonderful to come to a place where they think without acting.’

But do US presidents act without thinking? And what do they really think of their European and other allies? The answers can be found in a long article in *The Atlantic* magazine by Jeffrey Goldberg based on a series of interviews with a reflective Barack Obama as he approaches the end of his second term.

Here is a summary of key elements of Obama’s thinking on foreign policy drawn from Goldberg’s interviews:

- Obama came to power to challenge views of who is an enemy and who an ally. Hence his desire to improve ties with Iran and Cuba. He once called the Saudis a ‘so-called ally’ and privately questions why Pakistan is an ally. He has said, ‘You can gauge the success of a society by how it treats its women.’
- ‘Free-riders aggravate me’. He wants to change the attitude of allies — in Europe and the Middle East — ‘pushing us to act but then showing an unwillingness to put any skin in the game’. He notably told David Cameron, ‘You have to pay your share’ by spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence. His decision to play down US involvement in the removal of Col Gaddafi in Libya was designed to encourage the Europeans and Arabs to pull their weight.

- Europe is a source of global stability that requires, to Obama’s occasional annoyance, American hand-holding.
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- The Middle East is no longer so important to American interests, and even if it were, there is little an American president can do to make it a better place. It swallows energy which would be more profitably devoted to Asia, Africa and Latin America. ‘If... the only thing we’re doing is figuring out how to destroy or cordon off the malicious, nihilistic, violent parts of humanity, then we’re missing the boat.’
- Obama disdains the Washington foreign policy establishment because it makes a fetish of purchasing credibility with the use of force. He is proud of defying the ‘Washington playbook’ by refusing to attack Syria in 2013 over its use of chemical weapons.

- He is riled by what he calls the ‘mythologies’ of Ronald Reagan’s toughness, pointing out he pulled US troops out of Beirut after a bomb attack, invaded Grenada (population 110,000) for no strategic purpose, and waged a clandestine campaign to unseat Daniel Ortega, who is still president of Nicaragua today. His signal achievement came from negotiating with Mikhail Gorbachev, not dropping bombs.

- ‘Multilateralism regulates hubris’. Sharing leadership with other countries is a way to check America’s unruly impulses, particularly in countries which have experienced past US intervention, such as Iran or Central America.

- Americans are too prone to panic about the threat of terrorism, Obama believes. At the risk of appearing Spockian — emotionally disengaged — he tells his staff that fewer Americans die from terrorism than from handguns or car accidents.

- ‘Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to domination by Russia no matter what we do.’ Ukraine is a core Russian interest, but not an American one.

- Climate change is a potential existential threat to the entire world if we don’t do something about it.’ It is, however, ‘a political problem perfectly designed to repel government intervention’.

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