



THE OBAMA DOCTRINE AND THE LESSONS OF IRAQ

By Dominic Tierney

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The Obama Doctrine is like the Holy Grail. People have searched for it all over the world. The Internet is full of theories about what it looks like. Skeptics have doubted whether it even exists. The quest for the Obama Doctrine reveals a president with the wisdom to resist doctrinaire thinking. But at the same time, Obama's focus on avoiding the mistakes of Iraq could itself prove dangerously rigid.

One of the reasons that the Obama Doctrine has seemed elusive is that the concept of a "presidential doctrine" is used to mean different things. In one sense, it refers to a tradition where each president gets to issue a single binding pronouncement—amounting to one of the Ten Commandments of American foreign policy. Back in the nineteenth century, the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed: *thou shalt not colonize the Western Hemisphere*. More recently, the Truman Doctrine held: *thou shalt resist communist insurgency*. And the Bush Doctrine declared: *thou shalt be with us, not with the terrorists*.

In this sense, there is no Obama Doctrine. The president has declined to issue such a commandment and isn't in any hurry to do so. Back in 2008, Obama said he was "not going to be as doctrinaire as the Bush Doctrine, because the world is complicated."¹

Obama should be applauded for questioning the value of rigid doctrines. Simplistic proclamations can become a straightjacket that constrains a president's options. This is especially true when we live in a complex world with diffuse threats, as we do today. The Arab Spring, for example, with its distinct local dynamics, requires flexibility, and even inconsistency. We don't need the same strategy in Libya and in Syria.

Presidential doctrines have a poor record. The Truman Doctrine, for example, encouraged a universal definition of U.S. national interests during the Cold War that helped draw the United States into Vietnam. Other nations have copied many American innovations, but they haven't copied the presidential doctrine. Bismarck didn't have a doctrine. Neither did Churchill. As creative diplomats, these leaders wanted flexibility in their foreign policy.

The idea of a presidential doctrine can also be used in a looser way: to refer to a president's core foreign policy beliefs. After 9/11, for example, the Bush Doctrine outlined a positive transformational agenda with four major elements. First, the world was gravely threatening because an alliance of terrorists and rogue states could inflict incalculable harm on the United States. Second, the spread of democracy—even at the point of a bayonet—would undermine terrorism and serve American interests. Third, the United States would act unilaterally when necessary. Fourth, the United States would protect its position of unchallenged primacy.

In this looser sense, the Obama Doctrine does exist. For sure, Obama has continued and even enhanced the use of several Bush-era tools such as drone strikes. But overall, the Obama Doctrine is designed less to revolutionize the international system than to correct past errors.

Obama is not, after all, a foreign policy president. His main goal upon election was to solve the financial crisis and pursue his domestic agenda. In their bestselling account of the 2008 election, *Game Change*, John Heilemann and Mark Halperin

¹ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2011/03/23/134781423/complex-libya-offers-no-simple-answers-so-obama-has-none>

captured Obama's thinking as he courted Hillary Clinton to be secretary of state: "the economy is a much bigger mess than we'd ever imagined it would be, and I'm gonna be focused on that for the next two years. So I need someone as big as you to do this job."² It's striking to compare the relative caution of Obama's foreign policy agenda with the expansiveness of his domestic goals.

Obama has dialed down all aspects of the Bush Doctrine. Obama's rhetoric is less militant and crusading on the importance of democratization, less apocalyptic on the potential threats that exist, less enamored by the allure of unilateralism, and less aggressive in asserting primacy through military spending.

Look closer, and a central dynamic animating the Obama Doctrine is negative: rejecting the Iraq War. Here it's useful to take a step back and think about how leaders learn from history. It's commonplace for presidents to draw analogies with the past, for example, referring to appeasement in the 1930s, the Vietnam War, or U.S. intervention in Somalia in the 1990s. Sometimes these historical allusions are just rhetoric, designed to decorate a speech. But they can also powerfully shape how presidents think.

Interestingly, leaders don't learn from all of history. Instead, they make analogies with past failures more than successes and they usually focus on recent events. This means that the key source of learning is the last big failure. For the post-World War II generation, the major lesson of history was "don't appease." Then, after the 1960s, a new and powerful historical lesson emerged, "no more Vietnams." In the wake of 18 American combat deaths in the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993—immortalized by the movie *Black Hawk Down*—the lesson was "no more Somalias."

For Obama, the most powerful lesson of history seems to be "no more Iraqs." It's hard to find any aspect of the Obama Doctrine that is not directly influenced by the Iraq War. First, Obama has highlighted what Michael Doran calls an "extrication narrative" based on a responsible withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Middle East—especially Iraq. Second, compared to Bush, Obama is more restrained about using force, and more concerned by the potential for unintended consequences. Third, when force is employed, Obama favors precise and surgical operations, including Special Forces raids and drone strikes. Fourth, Obama supports multilateral military operations, especially if there is a large-scale commitment. Fifth, Obama is averse to Iraq-style nation-building. The Pentagon's 2012 strategic guidance document, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership" stated bluntly that: "U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations."³

The 2011 U.S. intervention in Libya exemplified these five aspects of the Obama Doctrine and represented in many ways the "anti-Iraq War." Unlike with Iraq, the Arab League and the UN Security Council supported the Libyan mission. The United States played a relatively secondary role. Nation-building by American forces was rejected out of hand.

In addition, as a sixth point, the president has sought to shift America's diplomatic and military attention away from the Middle East toward a rising China. The Pentagon's strategic guidance declared: "We will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region." This represents not just a change in regional focus but also in adversary: from asymmetric insurgents toward traditional great power rivals. In November 2011, Obama announced that 2,500 U.S. Marines would be deployed to Australia. Symbolically, they'll be about as far away from Iraq as possible.

There are exceptions where Obama acted in ways that echoed the Iraq War. Most importantly, the president escalated U.S. forces in Afghanistan and adopted a counter-insurgency strategy that is similar in some respects to the "surge" of American troops in Iraq. But the president is now looking to wind down the Afghanistan War and add a new chapter to the extrication narrative.

In part, the centrality of "no more Iraqs" to the Obama Doctrine reflects broader strategic and cultural forces. The cost of the Iraq War in blood and treasure (5,000 dead and \$700 billion expended), as well as pressures from the financial crisis and the rise of China, would have forced any president to absorb the lessons of Iraq. Indeed, Obama's thinking is part of a wider backlash against the Iraq War in American society, which political scientist John Mueller called the "Iraq Syndrome."⁴ In November 2011, for example, approval for the war in Iraq hit an all-time low of 29 percent.⁵

At the same time, however, Obama may be particularly attuned to the lessons of Iraq. After all, the Iraq War was central to his political rise. Obama's opposition to the conflict was a major reason why he defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic primary. (Hillary voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq, and she refused to apologize for this vote even when she became a critic of the war.) Obama once said that he was not against all wars—just a "dumb war" like Iraq.

² John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clinton, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 435.

³ http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf

⁴ <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61196/john-mueller/the-iraq-syndrome>

⁵ See <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm> and <http://www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>.

Is it helpful to focus so heavily on the lessons of Iraq? There is, of course, much we can learn from the Iraq War. For one thing, regime change can unleash unpredictable forces. This is a critical lesson because Americans often see war in its purest form as a moralistic crusade to topple tyrants. Another related lesson is the risk of overconfidence. The champions of the invasion promised that stabilizing Iraq would be straightforward but these hopes proved to be wide of the mark. Indeed, the failure to plan effectively for the post-war occupation was one of the avoidable catastrophes of recent U.S. foreign policy.

Iraq also reveals that when an administration is set on war, and controls the intelligence data, there can be a lack of scrutiny from the media and Congress about the strategic consequences of using force. The true debate only came later—when the American boots were already on the ground.

But the danger of the “no more Iraqs” syndrome is that it promotes exactly the kind of doctrinaire thinking that the president has promised to resist.

Someone attacked by a dog when he is young may develop a healthy wariness of dogs: once bitten, twice shy. Or he may exhibit an incapacitating life-long phobia. And the same is true with Iraq. We can either become suitably wary of the perils of regime change, or we can develop a harmful phobia against anything resembling the Iraq War.

As the saying goes, those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. But political scientist Robert Jervis once noted that those who remember the past and learn from it sometimes make the opposite mistakes.⁶ No one should forget the lessons of appeasement from the 1930s. But after World War II, American presidents overlearned these lessons and saw every threat as the second incarnation of Hitler—which must never be appeased. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson announced that he was sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam because “we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression.”⁷

Today, we’re in danger of overlearning the lessons of Iraq. First, the grave costs in trying to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan have produced a powerful backlash in the United States against the whole idea of nation-building. A tempting lesson from Iraq is: let’s never nation-build again. Some go even further and believe that the U.S. military shouldn’t prepare for stabilization missions. If the military can’t do it, the military won’t be asked to do it.

One problem is that Iraq is an exceptional case. If we put the Vietnam War to the side because the United States was simultaneously fighting both an insurgency (the Vietcong) and a state (North Vietnam), Iraq is the single most costly counter-insurgency or nation-building mission in American history. Most nation-building missions incur far fewer casualties. When the United States helped to stabilize Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, for example, there were zero U.S. deaths. We therefore need to consider the experience of nation-building in Iraq as part of a broader sample of cases.

The truth is that the United States is almost certain to carry out stabilization missions in the future. For all roads, it seems, lead to nation-building, from wars for regime change like World War II, Afghanistan, or Iraq, to humanitarian interventions like Somalia, to peacekeeping missions like Bosnia and Kosovo. The answer is to make sure that the U.S. military is highly trained at nation-building—and then employ this tool with great discretion.

Second, memories of the flawed intelligence on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq may be powerfully shaping how the United States assesses the state of Iran’s nuclear program today. Afraid of repeating the error of threat inflation, the U.S. intelligence community has become far more skeptical about reaching conclusions about Iran’s capabilities. The upside is that improved safeguards and a heavy dose of caution may produce a more accurate viewpoint. Paul Pillar, a former C.I.A. analyst, believes that current intelligence reports are based on the facts. But he added: “Because intelligence officials are human beings, one cannot rule out the possibility of the tendency to overcompensate for past errors.”⁸ Correcting for previous threat inflation, without overcorrecting and downplaying menacing data, is a very delicate task.

A third prominent lesson of Iraq is to use force multilaterally, in order to share the burdens of war and gain legitimacy. But the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 revealed the challenges of multilateral warfare, with too many cooks threatening to spoil the broth.

Napoleon once said, “If I must make war, I prefer it to be against a coalition.” The reason is that multilateral military campaigns can be cumbersome and ineffective, and may suffer from a lack of leadership. In Libya, many NATO allies had tight restrictions over what their militaries would do. The UK, France, the United States and Canada, carried out most of the airstrikes. Meanwhile, Spain, the Netherlands, and Turkey wouldn’t allow their aircraft to engage in ground attacks.

⁶ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁷ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 179.

⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/world/middleeast/assessing-iran-but-thinking-about-iraq.html?_r=1

According to the *New York Times*, a NATO report “concluded that the allies struggled to share crucial target information, lacked specialized planners and analysts, and overly relied on the United States for reconnaissance and refueling aircraft.”⁹ Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates described NATO’s incapacity in Libya (and Afghanistan) as a wake-up call, fearing “the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the trans-Atlantic alliance.”¹⁰

Of course, Qaddafi was eventually overthrown. But these alliance problems could be dangerous in a more difficult or prolonged operation.

In summary, Obama should be credited for rejecting doctrinaire diplomacy. But the Iraq War was such a negative experience for the United States that the idea of “no more Iraqs” could become an *idée fixe* or a dangerously dogmatic position. We must learn from Iraq but we can’t let a single case blot out the sun.

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⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/world/africa/nato-sees-flaws-in-air-campaign-against-qaddafi.html>

¹⁰ http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202_162-20070467.html