

Conclusion & Implications

Handwritten by Barack Obama on a draft of his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech was a note that read:

“Moral imagination, spheres of identity, but also move beyond cheap lazy pronouncements” (Obama in Samuels, 2016)

This encapsulates the reality of Obama’s own identity which he envisaged for America’s postcolonial generation. His profound reassessment of possibilities for US foreign policy and its use-of-force moral code regarding humanitarian intervention derived from a “post-imperial intellectual attitude” (Said, 1993: 18) seeded by the complexity of Obama’s historiography. Bush’s America had become synonymous with war, torture and forcible regime change. His worldview — monocultural, static, dehistoricized and decontextualized from the violent truth of empire — had failed to make sense of the postcolonial rupture in relations between the US and the Middle East. Consequently, the full context of the War on Terror would always remain elusive, and thus so would peace.

And yet, while Bush’s actions may have stood incompatible with traditional values of US identity, it was nonetheless an aggressive continuance of historic US foreign policy whose linearity perpetuated unending cycles of racial hierarchy, power inequities and violence. Obama would reject this hegemonic dysfunction and redefine US identity through a reflexive accounting of Western imperial historical truth. Empowered by knowledge unlocked by his own intimacy with the core-periphery, Obama understood firsthand how things came to be the way they are in the world, and

sought modes to reshape them for the future. For him, humanitarian intervention is a short term solution that band aids symptoms of unrest but fails to remedy the cause. While the urge to do something in the face of atrocity is a rational impulse, intervention is never apolitical, stifles self-determination and fosters prolonged insecurity rather than the rapid peace it seeks. To secure a genuinely safer future for America and the world beyond would require pragmatic realignment of the American imaginary away from the unnecessary violence of intervention. Through a “smart” power strategy that de-emphasized militarized compulsions in favor of diplomacy, multilateralism and global socioeconomic development, Obama pursued a non-interventionist agenda through idiosyncratic analysis of what could work rather than through any prescriptive ideological zeal.

However, even for a president so committed to a multilateral, non-interventionist transformation of US foreign policy culture, the domestic and international challenges of translating rhetorical activism into political action are formidable. While Obama’s approach is contrapuntal, the difficulty arises in the calcified culture of subsuming, presuppositional modes that pervade the US political architecture and the international diplomatic bureaucracy. Altering the monoculture of linear thinking or neutralizing the destructive force of tribalism requires the magnitude and self-reflection in social action that is beyond one man. Hence, Obama’s efforts represent the beginning of a conversation that can only progress through critical massing of changing attitudes.

As it is, the perception that Obama’s non-interventionism is indicative of US disengagement from world affairs is a partial observation. It acknowledges US military withdrawal from the Middle East, but discounts increased US diplomacy and