

Who Is This Guy?

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One year into his first term, we pretty much knew where a new President was located on the classical ideological axes of American foreign policy: internationalism vs. nationalism, *realpolitik* (Nixon, George H.W. Bush) vs. *idealpolitik* (Jimmy Carter). Within internationalism, there has always been an additional distinction: exemplarism vs. interventionism. Would America shine by example and thus bring democracy and human rights to the world by just being there (the Founding Fathers, Bill Clinton), or would it seek to impose it in one way or another (Wilson, George W. Bush)?

We used to have a fairly good sense early on where on these axes past Presidents were situated, give or take a few feet. But we don't know where Barack Obama is. Is he an internationalist? Yes, he likes multilateralism and cooperation. But he is also a nationalist in the sense that he spends most of his energy in and on America: with health care and cultural politics like gay rights.

Is he an idealist? Surely, a man who has been preaching "change" must believe in the malleability of human affairs. But then note the absence of any human rights or democracy

rhetoric, which has been a classic of U.S. policy through the ages. That makes him at best a closet idealist.

So he is a realist? Well, yes and no. Yes, because he has not reneged on using American power, be it in Iraq or Afghanistan. Nor has he much touched the defense budget. But then, he may be neither a nationalist nor a realist. Deep in his heart, one surmises, he wants to end America's military engagements and certainly avoid brazen displays of American muscle. He does not talk the language of power the way Kennedy did once he realized that he was up against a global challenge flung down by Nikita Khrushchev. He does not draw lines in the sand like Truman in Europe or Johnson in Vietnam. Nor does he celebrate America as the "indispensable nation." He has not launched an arms race like Ronald Reagan, nor blessed a National Security Strategy, as did George W. in 2002, which sought to enshrine American hegemony, if need be, by preventive war.

Instead, Obama preaches the policy of the "reset button" while reaching out to bitter foes like Iran, Cuba or Venezuela with soothing, almost apologetic words. A realist would always emphasize conflict in the affairs of nation; Obama seems to believe in the power of therapy—politics as psychiatry—as if all conflicts were unreal and rooted in misunderstanding or cultural insensitivity. If he were a "real" realist, Obama would devote more attention to allies and friends. You don't find much "NATO" in his perorations.

Above all, Barack Obama does not demonstrate what all his predecessors have: a faith in American exceptionalism. His actions betray the opposite. His guiding lights are multilateralism and institutionalism, which is the pursuit of interests in collective settings where America is one shareholder among many. Obama, we might speculate, is the first American President to shift from "light unto the nations" to "one among the nations." This, no doubt, is why Europeans like him so much: He seems to act and talk like one of them, as if the United States were one of the large powers in the European Union.

But then, he certainly is not willing to give the rest of the world a veto power over American

actions. He lets the dollar slide to reduce America's deficits—to the chagrin of its key trading partners. He doesn't let anybody else cramp his style in the Middle East, where his Administration waded in early on to solve the insoluble. It would have been nice to get the world's biggest economies to stimulate massively in the wake of the fall of the House of Lehman, but since they dithered, the United States went off on its own.

So who is Barack Obama? The simple answer is: We don't know, at least not yet. A more complicated answer is: He is not like any of his predecessors in the White House; we don't know "where he is at" in the larger scheme of American ideology and identity. But does it matter?

It does matter because statecraft is about choice, and choice is about national character and power. It is about grasping the nettle and showing one's mettle. Obama, after his first year, is deliciously—or vexingly—indistinct. He "triangulates" like Clinton, but doesn't say so. On the other hand, Clinton seemed to know where he was going; if it took some tacking, so be it. But Obama's is the policy of flux: Let's see what happens. Let's see if the Iranians come around. Let's see if Islamicism can be killed with kindness. If the Europeans don't want to step up in Afghanistan, we won't press them too hard. This is less like pragmatism and more like testing the winds. It is like triangulation without keel, chart and compass.

As any skipper knows, you can't sail a ship that way. In the world of politics, there are two problems. At home, the nation that fell for "change" might get disenchanted with a leader of such vague identity. Abroad, somebody will test his mettle—the way Kennedy was tested in Cuba, Johnson in Vietnam, Nixon in the Yom Kippur War (by Arabs and Soviets), Carter in Afghanistan and Iran, Reagan first by Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe and then, under Gorbachev, by Soviet weakness. Bush Sr. was tested by the collapse of the Soviet empire; he passed the ordeal brilliantly by reunifying Germany and the Continent.

Clinton is the odd man out in this sequence. His two terms were the halcyon years of

American power. After forty years of bipolarity, the United States was the last man standing, facing no challenger as far as the eye could see. Bush Jr. was not so lucky; he was a tragic figure who showed *too much* character, by taking on the Taliban and then Saddam, failing in the second instance to husband American strength for a rainier day.

Obama seems to have too little character (in the sense of a distinct persona). That is acceptable as long as no serious challenger arises. But one will, and then we will learn who this President really is. Let it not be said about Barack Obama that his greatest achievement was managing America's not-so-graceful decline from power and preeminence. 🍷

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