

European issues

n°265

29th January 2013

A Second Chance for Barack Obama: a Sarajevo Moment

Abstract :

Simon Serfaty

Barack's Obama re-election in November 2012 was convincing. Yet, the ambivalence shown by many of his most loyal supporters – with less enthusiastic crowds, a smaller margin of victory, and a less serene tone than four years ago – point to the disappointment of a large part of American public opinion. Still, Obama learned a great deal over the past four years. And what he learned augurs well for his ability to assert his place in history with the audacity which he had initially claimed [1].

It is in this non-partisan context that his triumph should be examined. At this particularly difficult time it will be good to count on the experience of an outgoing president, rather than be at the mercy of a newcomer whose untested ideas often depend on rigid advisors – a “new Bush administration,” it was already said about a hypothetical Romney administration during the presidential campaign. Jimmy Carter in January 1977, Ronald Reagan in 1981, and Bill Clinton in 1993 all denied their predecessors a second term in office; but each also found it difficult to adapt to a world that was not consistent with their campaign rhetoric: Carter, the moralist, who promised to renew his country's moral superiority – as “a right of birth” – which the Soviet Union could not hope to match or challenge; Reagan, a realist who rebelled against the humiliation felt by middle America in the recent past, and wanted to bring about the collapse of its adversary – the “empire of evil” – which he despised; and Clinton, the pragmatist, who hoped to return to the fundamentals – “the economy, stupid” -- and believed he could somehow put the world aside.

The dynamics of change in U.S. foreign policy are not governed by the schedule of presidential elections: Jealous of its prerogatives, and always eager to surprise, History moves to its own clock. In the area of major affairs especially, changes do not occur from one American administration to the next but within the same administration. Thus, Dwight D. Eisenhower's foreign policy began to emerge during the last two years of the Truman administration, after the Korean

War had forced Truman to give his vision the global dimension which he had previously rejected. Similarly, Eisenhower's policies, too, were carried over into the Kennedy administration, whose agenda was overwhelmed by the legacy left by Kennedy's predecessor. Later, Reagan's drift away from detente continued Carter's own adjustments late in his presidency in response to the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. But Reagan's second presidential term soon became an era of détente and disarmament – with Reagan ending his presidency as the leading architect for a peaceful end to the Cold War, which was ultimately completed by George H.W. Bush.

More recently, changes from Bush to Bush after the general elections of November 2004 were more significant than those from Bush to Obama after the latter's election. Thus, the departure of the American forces at a date which only the Iraqi government could make certain was for the most part negotiated by President Bush in 2008, and a military pivot towards the war in Afghanistan, meant to ensure a “decent interval” before an American withdrawal promised for 2014 can also be attributed to an outgoing President Bush no less than an incoming President Obama. The same applies to the return of multilateralism, announced by George W. Bush when he turned to a 5+1 group (namely, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) to end the nuclear stalemate with Iran, and then confirmed by his endorsement of a G20 that was hastily convened in November 2008 as the result of a French initiative and while the financial crisis was at its worst.

1. This essay was initially inspired by the remarks made during a seminar on “the American Presidential elections” organised by Julian Fernandez in Lille on October 25 & 26, 2012. A shorter version of this essay was published under the title “Une seconde chance pour Barack Obama” Revue de Défense Nationale January 2013. This is an adaptation of a French text published in Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2013, Springer, 2013.

In 2012, therefore, the consequences of Mitt Romney's victory on American foreign policy should have been played down. "Neither angel nor beast" – Pascal's expression applied to both candidates. In any case, at election time only one American voter in twenty made of foreign policy a priority issue. As the presidential campaign was drawing to a close, it was increasingly difficult to distinguish one candidate from the other: as Obama failed to assimilate his rival with "George W," he toughened up his own tone, on Iran for example; and as Romney, too, was unable to reduce the outgoing President to a caricature of Carter, he adopted many of his opponent's positions, including on the question of troops withdrawal from Afghanistan. One wonders what difference Romney's victory would have made, notwithstanding his immense unpopularity in Europe and elsewhere.

Re-elected, Barack Obama is starting a *mano a mano* with History: from now on, this is his only rival and his last ambition. This condition is not unusual: it is during their second mandate that American presidents have an opportunity to ensure their status as statesmen. Consider Truman and even Nixon – but not Eisenhower, whose reputation was already well established before his first election – and consider, too, Clinton's late achievements in the Middle East, where he hoped to find absolution for a presidency marred by his personal indiscretions. In comparison with his predecessors, who became what they did not want to be (harder in Carter's case, softer as far as Reagan is concerned) Obama's second mandate offers him a second chance to become what he had hoped to be, and thus justify, however belatedly, a prematurely granted Nobel Prize.

TEETHING PROBLEMS

That Barack Obama came to power in difficult conditions is well acknowledged. Suffice it to point to the totality of the crisis that awaited him from the moment he was elected and even before he entered office: America's declining confidence in its own government, and the world's in America. In 1933 Franklin D Roosevelt was able at least to choose between reviving the American economy and restoring a world order that appea-

red increasingly at risk after the election of Adolf Hitler in January of that year; his "New Deal" was a project to bring society out of the Great Depression of the 1930's while letting Europe succumb to its suicidal tendencies. In 1969 it was the opposite for Nixon: bogged down in the Vietnam War, which was going from bad to worse, and exposed to growing Soviet pressures that gained from widespread perceptions of a decline in American power, Nixon chose to make the world his priority, like his former rival, John Kennedy, had wanted to do in 1961.

Lacking the luxury of choice between the national and the international, Obama was welcomed in 2008 as the providential leader – the "great magician" who, having rid the country of the universally unpopular George W Bush, would put everything right by simply entering the stage. He would end wars, including religious wars, negotiate with adversaries, bridge inequalities, and save the environment – all of this and more. In short, he would help America dream again and restore his nation as the model it was meant to be to the world.

Unrealistic expectations guarantee widespread disappointments. Obama read like a fictional character. In France, he could have been assimilated initially to Dr Rieux, a character created by Albert Camus to put an end to "the plague," but he soon turned out to be more like Meursault, "the stranger" who kept his distance from those who, like France's Nicolas Sarkozy, wanted to be his "pal." In the United States, Obama was giving visibility to Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" - Ellison the noted black American author, successor to Richard Wright and the predecessor of James Baldwin: a man who remained "invisible" because he lacked the audacity to live out his "infinite potential." Surely, such resignation did not apply to Barack, who was given at birth the "baraka" that was to enable him to achieve his ambitions. Boasting "brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins of every race spread across three continents" Obama declared himself "a citizen of the world" – more, therefore, than just an American citizen which he was nonetheless proud to be in a world that had forgotten how to love the America that he intended to restore [2].

2. Simon Serfaty, « Obama peut-il réussir ? » *Politique Internationale*, no. 127 (Spring 2010), p. 287-299.

Obama has been unique in that he was both the most thoughtful and the least prepared president in the country's modern history. Aware of his relative inexperience – he had hesitated before announcing his candidacy in 2007 – he acted with extreme prudence after his election rather than with the audacity which he continued to assert in his speeches. His first goal was to avoid an early error, like Kennedy in the Bay of Pigs in the spring of 1961 and even George W Bush after the events of 11th September 2001 – situations for which neither president was responsible but which were to define their respective presidencies: Kennedy's when the Cuban missile crisis threatened the country's survival in the fall 1962, and Bush's when a bad and worsening war in Iraq threatened to ruin it after March 2003. In September 2009 Barack Obama's inaction while demonstrations shook Teheran is one example, among others, of the wait-and-see approach he favoured during his first year in office. The "new beginning" he had promised might come later provided that there was no "false start" along the way of a "second chance" during another term in office.

To be sure, Obama restored his country's international image – a brand name that his predecessor had tarnished during the previous eight years. Abroad, Obama has been loved for who he is and represents, in spite of what he does or does not do: a "European President" in Europe where 75% of the citizens would have voted for him (and only 8% for Romney according to pre-election polls; [3] but also the "first world president" because of his African father and childhood in Asia. This is again a character born out of fiction – Henry de Montherlant's "universal man," an identity which would be confusing if it were not for the fact that a vote for Obama and the image he embodies proved to be a vote for America and the image it represents.

Even given this distinction, Obama's difficult apprenticeship since 2009 recalls that of Jimmy Carter. Hell is paved with good intentions – in this case, with a predilection for the desirable over the doable. In 2009, the newly elected President Obama said what he was going to do – in Strasbourg, in Cairo, in Prague, in New York, in Stockholm and elsewhere – but in the end he did not do much of what he had said – abolishing nuclear

weapons, bringing peace to the Middle East, building a new partnership with Europe, a new start with Russia, reforming the multilateral institutions, and more. Killing Osama Ben Laden is not the sum of a grand foreign policy as Vice-President Joseph Biden pretended during the presidential campaign; nor is ending a war or two enough to put an end to all wars, as Obama has claimed as well.

On the whole, Obama, who had hoped to be a transformational president, may have been too timid. In the Middle East especially, after a visionary speech in Cairo in the Spring 2009, where he was received with unprecedented public enthusiasm, he remained surprisingly passive. During and since the "Arab Spring," past his eloquent words of approval he acted cautiously: "leading from behind," whether behind the French-initiated, UN-sponsored intervention in Libya in the spring 2011; or after Israel's military action in Gaza in the fall 2012, when the new regime in Egypt appeared to lead; or while awaiting a difficult end point in Syria, where Obama, mistrustful and hesitant, has preferred not to get involved. The same sense of some unfinished business follows Obama's anti-nuclear speech in Prague in the spring 2009, or repeated promises of a "re-set" in U.S. relations with Russia, or over relations such notable adversaries as Iran and North Korea, where offers of a renewed dialogue were not met. In short, beyond the two wars inherited from his predecessor Obama has been taken into "the world as it is" and become "a realist in spite of himself, comforted by a good conscience that reminds him that the end justifies the means. [4]

THE NEW OBAMA

"Yes I can," Obama pledged throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, with reference to his ability to be elected; "Yes, I must," a matured Obama now insists as reflective of his determination to act. Like Bill Clinton after his re-election in November 1996, when he preferred Madeleine Albright, the first woman to be appointed Secretary of State, over Richard Holbrooke, deemed too abrasive – but also like George W. Bush after his re-election in November

3. *The German Marshall Fund, Transatlantic Trends, Key Findings, 2012, pp. 3 et and 28. In France the preference for Obama reached 89% (and 87% in Germany).*

4. *Simon Serfaty, "The Limits of Audacity", The Washington Quarterly (Autumn 2009); Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist", The New Yorker, May 2, 2011, p. 44-55.*

2004, who replaced Colin Powell with the loyal "Condi" Rice – Obama would have preferred his protégée Susan E Rice to Senator John Kerry in replacement of outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The first presidential term made room for "a team of rivals" – but the second term calls for "a band of brothers." with whom the outgoing President can build a legacy in his own name.

During much of the past year, Governor Romney attacked his rival as a prophet of decline who did not respect his country's exceptional nature and character. In fact, of course, Obama represents the best of American exceptionalism: in 2009, his Nobel Prize should have been awarded to the American Union for overcoming its history of racism and electing Obama as its first African American president. In so doing, the United States gave the rest of the world a lesson in democracy. Rather than doubting or denigrating American power, Obama appreciates the facts of, and the need for an American superiority which he wants to preserve in toto, and which he views as vital to the emerging world order. But Obama also acknowledges the limits of the nation's power in a time of austerity, as well as an erosion of national will in a time of retrenchment. Even a nation without peers cannot act for long without allies: by instinct since his first inauguration, and out of experience since, Obama is all the more prepared to acknowledge a post-American order as he does not perceive anything that is fundamentally anti-American in any such order. Indeed, the reverse may well be true as it is rather America's partners that seem least prepared to adapt to a downgrading of American power – in Europe to serve as a counterpart to its own weaknesses, and in Asia to act as a counterweight to a surging China.

In a changing world, a multitude of states, institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) form a zero-polar structure in which even a preponderant power like the United States cannot act alone: allies and partners are required, but and they have to be not only willing but also capable, not only capable but also relevant, not only relevant but also compatible. By his own admission, Obama does not have for Europe "that special spark" which would help him feel at home there – since he grew up elsewhere and dreamt of other things, in Africa and Asia. With the European Union (EU) bogged down in institutional debates that Obama does not really understand, and with the states of Europe burdened by the relative mediocrity of its leaders with whom Obama does not spontaneously feel at ease, Europe does not look like a safe bet in comparison with other regions with which he can identify

more easily and towards which he would rather turn. At least for the time being, however, a new strategy that would suggest a switch to Asia remains a long term speculation, relative to Europe which continues to pay high dividends on the strategic investments the United States made after World War II and throughout the Cold War.

No less than his predecessors, Obama will continue to offer a right of first refusal to the states of Europe and their Union (in which Great Britain would hopefully remain, and which Turkey might possibly join): completing Europe is a requirement to reforming the Alliance. There is little new in the American preference for a united Europe as its privileged partner. This was John F. Kennedy's "Grand Design" in July 1962, when, barely five years after the signature of the Rome Treaties Kennedy envisioned an "Atlantic Community" between his country and a united Europe; Henry Kissinger, too, spoke of this community when he launched the "Year of Europe" in April 1973 by inviting the members of the European Community, which had just completed its first enlargement to three new members (including Great Britain), to do their part in conjunction with their American partner; later, George H.W. Bush invited a newly-united Germany, firmly positioned within the EU established by the Maastricht Treaty, to assume the "co-leadership" of the new world order announced by the end of the Cold War. Finally, a similar commitment was also made by Barack Obama in April 2009, when he pleaded the cause of an enhanced partnership at the European Parliament, which hosted him in Strasbourg on his first official journey to Europe.

By fully accepting the end of the post-Cold War "unipolar moment" and by rejecting an "imperial temptation" to which George W. Bush succumbed at a high cost to him and the nation, Obama has relieved America from the burdens of unilateral action, assumed too readily by his predecessor in the wake of the dramatic events of 9/11. The wars waged since then having shown the difficulties of bypassing and acting without other powers, Obama's America is settling with and among them, beginning with the 33 other members of NATO and the EU, including the 21 European states, which are members of both institutions. Of course this transatlantic G2 faces sizeable competitors from the ascending rest of the world. But too much history (like the 1962 war between China and India) and too little geography (like hundreds of millions of Chinese on the doorstep of an immense, under-populated slice of Russian territory), or conversely too little history and too much geography (as is the case between these three states and Brazil), is impeding a sustainable strate-

gic entente between the rising powers, which would all prefer closer relations with the United States and Europe than with each other.

Putting in place a better multilateral governance, through the United Nations or as part of the G20, for example, and forming coalitions with other states whose commitments reflect their interests and even values, is Obama's preference. Having attacked his predecessor's unilateralism, and not having fully experienced the post-war bipolar structure, the U.S. president can readily adapt to a multipolar world, whose flexibility suits him intellectually, even though he knows little of it historically. [5]

A SARAJEVO MOMENT

The time is over when a small island could conquer and defy the whole world, like "Great" Britain or "Imperial" Japan; over, too, is the time when a state defined exclusively by its military power, like the Soviet Union, could hope to achieve a global hegemony without regard to its regional history; also over is the era when a government could blackmail its partners by denying them access to resources at affordable prices, or equal access to its markets; and surely gone is the time when two countries that knew little or nothing of each other, like the United States and the Soviet Union, could transform the history of those regions, in Eastern and Western Europe, which they occupied, either by invitation or by force. Finally, over, too, is the time when "cultivating one's garden" was a lucrative business and "gaining time" a profitable strategy. These situations belong to a distant past – not only another century but another millennium.

Once again, then, History stands at a crossroads. Admittedly, these moments occur periodically, but the totality of the changes now underway is rare. Unlike 1815 there is no pre-revolutionary world to restore in a European Concert; unlike 1871 there is more than one rising power to manage and absorb; unlike 1919 there are no vanquished powers to punish; unlike 1945 there are no allies to save from each other; unlike 1991, there is no triumph to celebrate; unlike 2001 there is no "axis of evil" to annihilate; and unlike 2008 there does not seem to be a "providential" man to heal the world in want of history.

It is an "American moment" insists Hillary Clinton, and "we have to be everywhere." [6] And everywhere she went – a Secretary of State who wanted to lend an importance and seriousness to all the countries she

visited, including the smallest, and to all the questions she addressed or which she negotiated, from the most traditional to the most innocuous. That was her vision of an integrated world, to be lived in real time and in all its dimensions. But by wanting to be everywhere even Hillary Clinton exhausted herself, gradually realising that her means did not match her energy, her energy did not match her will, and her will did not match her role after she had lost her presidential bid. Similarly, the time is also over for the image of an America which believed that it could be everything at once – policeman, midwife, foreman, banker, surgeon, priest, educator, and more.

Before asserting a post-American structure, extended to a greater number of countries with varying power and influence, there is, however, a region whose stabilisation cannot be left to lagging projects like the European Union or nuisance powers like China and Russia or struggling countries like Turkey. Obama's stated preferences "towards justice," which he asserted in Stockholm in December 2009, will have to wait after all, as will some elusive "pivot" towards Asia. In and beyond 2013, the "American moment" will be played out in the Middle East, and it is there that Obama will have to show his ability to guide the course of History: echoing the previous century when the centre of geopolitical gravity lay in the Balkans, where the long agony of the Habsburg Empire, started in 1815, was about to end in a suicidal war triggered by a relatively minor act of terror.

Making of the Middle East the central region of Barack Obama's second term is not a happy perspective. About to end the two wars directly linked to September 11, and after an "Arab Spring" which shaped a timid democratic opening for the countries involved, America is explicitly tired of this region: barely one American in two, for example, thinks that their country has an interest in arming rebels to bring down the Assad regime in Damascus. [7] After two enormously costly wars that went from bad to worse, the temptation to draw away from this region is understandable; but it now also seems conceivable as the United States seems about to emerge as the world's leading gas and oil producing country (by 2015 and 2017 respectively). Worse yet, here, in the Middle East, is a region where Obama appears to be the most handicapped, openly mistrusted by the Israeli government while parodically remaining compromised in the Arab world. From 1956 in Suez to 2006 in Iraq, it is there, too, that the United States has been most isolated, its leadership most controversial, and its results the most challenged. To an extent, the country's intimacy with the state of Israel has often

5. See Simon Serfaty, "The Folly of Forgetting the West", *Policy Review*, no. 174 (August/September 2012), p. 35-48, and "The West in a World Recast", *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 6 (December 2012-January 2013), p. 29-40.

6. "A conversation with Hillary Clinton," September 8, 2010. Stephanie McCrummen, « The secretary of 1,000 things », *Washington Post*, November 26, 2012.

7. Bruce Stokes, "Americans on Middle East turmoil: Keep us out of it," *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, December 14, 2012.

A Second Chance for Barack Obama: A Sarajevo Moment

been the reason for this condition, presented as the main obstacle to a sustainable structure for the region: 59% of Americans think well of Israel, as opposed to only 34% of the Europeans, and often less or much less elsewhere.

However urgent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains, it is not the most urgent priority in the region. Even more pressing and possibly more decisive is the crisis with Iran – a slow moving missile crisis that is drawing ever closer to its denouement. With an Israeli military strike increasingly likely in 2013 or soon afterwards, time is running out for bilateral negotiations that can satisfy an Israeli ally which the United States can neither abandon nor control. The stakes, however, are too high to ignore the risks of any such conflict, from which no State would be spared, including the United States: for a clash with Iran would precipitate an oil crisis affecting already weakened economies and fragile institutions, political shocks that would worsen existing populist trends, and geopolitical shocks which might cause all kinds of “pivots” between large and smaller powers responding differently to the events in the Gulf. There are echoes of the 1973 oil crisis, but amplified by the many new instabilities that have dominated the entire region since the Arab Spring: with nations in transition like Egypt, which might reappraise their treaties and alliances; rogue states like Syria, which might welcome a regional war as an unexpected rescue from its worsening civil conflict; failing states like Libya, which are sinking into chaos; and even, further away, states like Pakistan, whose nuclear weapons might be seized as security of last resort by Arab states like Saudi Arabia, which lack such capabilities and might seek new guarantees other than from the United States.

In sum, this is a Sarajevo moment: too many states, too many governments, too many groups, and quite simply too many people in the Middle East seem to have or perceive an interest in a conflict among their neighbours or between their rivals, with each conflict a possible catalyst for an explosion elsewhere. Disturbing echoes of the past: one hundred years ago, too, the inability of the heads of State and government to settle any of the “small” conflicts in the Balkans led to a “great” war which turned the first half of the 20th century into a bloodbath. This is also what makes of Obama’s second chance the appointment with History which he had hoped for, and which he cannot postpone. It is in Europe’s interest to help him in this task – for which he could surely use the experience and the capabilities of the European states and their Union – to avoid the threat of war which hangs over the entire region and, should it take place, manage and end the conflict before it runs out of control.

Simon Serfaty

Professor of US foreign Policy at *Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia*. Senior Fellow at the *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, and Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair (Emeritus) in Global Security and Geostrategy at the Center of Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. His most recent books include *La tentation impériale* (Odile Jacob, 2004), *Vital Partnership* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), *Architects of Delusion* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), and, in 2012, *A World Recast: An American Moment in a Post-Western World*.

You can read all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.