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President Obama's Inaugural Speech: Tough Road Ahead for U.S. Foreign Policy

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The themes set yesterday by President Barack Obama in his inaugural speech were sobering. Obama called on the nation to enter a new era of responsibility to deal with a long list of hardships and challenges facing Americans at home and abroad. In spite of his oration's optimistic conclusion, the speech reflected a dark and troubled view of the world. The state of U.S. foreign policy was recently described by CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour as "the inbox from hell," and though his language was rather more elevated, Obama seemed to agree with that characterization:

Every so often, the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms. . . . That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. . . . Less measurable, but no less profound, is a sapping of confidence across our land, a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, that the next generation must lower its sights.

If outgoing President George W. Bush cringed inwardly at the dire characterization of the world and the country he left to his successor, he had class enough not to show it. The fact is that though no one doubts that times are tough around the world—as economies slow down and Islamist fundamental-

ism remains a major threat—Presidents before Obama have faced difficult times, indeed far more difficult than those currently facing our nation: Bush himself saw his presidency turned upside down by the attacks of September 11; Ronald Reagan came into office following the humiliation of the Iranian hostage crisis and with the threat of the expanding Soviet empire staring him in the face; Richard Nixon inherited the Vietnam War; and Harry Truman had to see World War II to its conclusion with atomic weapons. Those were indeed raging storms, far more worthy of the name than the clouds under which Obama's presidency begins.

The world Obama inherits today is clearly complex, but thanks to the tireless efforts of his predecessor, far less dangerous than the impression created yesterday. Indeed, Obama owes a debt of gratitude to Bush for the tough decisions he has taken to keep this country safe and the sacrifices he made in political capital and personal popularity to do so. Bush may be vilified, even booed by the crowd of Obama supporters on the Mall yesterday, but he kept each and every one of them safe from terrorist attacks for seven years. Indeed, it will be interesting to see whether Obama will keep in place

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the national security policies of President Bush that kept the nation safe. Obama of course questioned those very policies during the campaign and indeed in his speech yesterday, postulating a false dichotomy between our safety and our ideals.

What is more, Bush himself inherited a considerably more dangerous situation from President Clinton (who was smiling beatifically during the ceremony sitting next to his wife, the incoming U.S. secretary of state). It was the Clinton Administration's failure to deal with the challenges of Islamist terrorism in the 1990s that left this nation vulnerable to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

As much as Obama sought to distance himself from the Bush foreign policy, certain facts on the ground may create more similarity between the two than might be expected. Obama emphasized alliance building in the war against this "far-reaching network of violence and hatred" (yes he used the word *war*), international cooperation, and foreign aid. All of these initiatives have counterparts in the Bush foreign policy. Obama also pledged to leave Iraq to the responsibility of the Iraqis and fight for a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. These themes are essentially identical to Bush foreign policy.

Most memorably, though, Obama promised to reach out to America's foes around the globe: "To

those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." This appeal appears to be an echo of Obama's campaign promise to sit down without preconditions to talk to leaders of countries such as Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea. In Iran, the leadership is reportedly keeping an open mind on the expected approach of the new American President, even while the country's nuclear program is moving full speed ahead, with some estimates positing that a successful test may be only one year away. Attempts to persuade Iran to halt its drive for nuclear weapons have failed miserably so far, no matter what the international means of persuasion.

In the days ahead, Obama's foreign policy will take shape. There is no doubt that philosophically, Obama differs from his predecessor. Yet how far world events will allow the Obama foreign policy to diverge from that of the Bush years remains to be seen.

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