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Barack Obama's Top 10 Apologies: How the President Has Humiliated a Superpower

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A common theme that runs through President Obama's statements is the idea the United States must atone for its past policies, whether it is America's application of the war against Islamist terrorism or its overall foreign policy. At the core of this message is the concept that the U.S. is a flawed nation that must seek redemption by apologizing for its past "sins."

On several occasions, President Obama has sought to apologize for the actions of his own country when addressing a foreign audience—including seven of the 10 apologies listed below. The President has already apologized for his country to nearly 3 billion people across Europe, the Muslim world, and the Americas.

The Obama Administration's strategy of unconditional engagement with America's enemies combined with a relentless penchant for apology-making is a dangerous recipe for failure. The overall effect of this approach has been to weaken American power on the world stage rather than strengthen it.

President Obama's personal approval ratings across much of the world may be sky high, but that has not translated into greater support for U.S.-led initiatives, such as the NATO mission in Afghanistan, which is heavily dependent on American and British troops. The U.S. is increasingly viewed as a soft touch internationally, which has encouraged rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran to accelerate their nuclear and missile programs.

As President Obama embarks this week on his second major overseas tour, which will take him to

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Germany, and France, the world does not need yet another apology from the President. Rather, it is looking for strong and principled leadership from the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. American leadership is not a popularity contest, nor should it be an exercise in self-loathing. Rather, it is about taking tough positions that will be met with hostility in many parts of the globe. Above all, it demands the assertive projection of American power, both to secure the homeland and to protect America's allies.

The following is a list of the 10 most significant apologies by the President of the United States in his first four months of office as they relate to foreign policy and national security issues.

1. Apology to France and Europe ("America Has Shown Arrogance"). Speech by President Obama, Rhenus Sports Arena, Strasbourg, France, April 3, 2009.¹

So we must be honest with ourselves. In recent years we've allowed our Alliance to drift. I know that there have been honest disagreements over policy, but we also know that there's something more that has crept into our relationship. In America, there's a failure to ap-

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preciate Europe's leading role in the world. Instead of celebrating your dynamic union and seeking to partner with you to meet common challenges, there have been times where America has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive.

2. Apology to the Muslim World (“We Have Not Been Perfect”). President Obama, interview with *Al Arabiya*, January 27, 2009.²

My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy. We sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect. But if you look at the track record, as you say, America was not born as a colonial power, and that the same respect and partnership that America had with the Muslim world as recently as 20 or 30 years ago, there's no reason why we can't restore that.

3. Apology to the Summit of the Americas (“At Times We Sought to Dictate Our Terms”). President Obama, address to the Summit of the Americas opening ceremony, Hyatt Regency, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, April 17, 2009.³

All of us must now renew the common stake that we have in one another. I know that promises of partnership have gone unfulfilled in the past, and that trust has to be earned over time. While the United States has done much to promote peace and prosperity in the hemisphere, we have at times been disengaged, and at times we sought to dictate our terms. But I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership. There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect

and common interests and shared values. So I'm here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my administration.

The United States will be willing to acknowledge past errors where those errors have been made.

4. Apology at the G-20 Summit of World Leaders (“Some Restoration of America's Standing in the World”). News conference by President Obama, ExCel Center, London, United Kingdom, April 2, 2009.⁴

I would like to think that with my election and the early decisions that we've made, that you're starting to see some restoration of America's standing in the world. And although, as you know, I always mistrust polls, international polls seem to indicate that you're seeing people more hopeful about America's leadership.

I just think in a world that is as complex as it is, that it is very important for us to be able to forge partnerships as opposed to simply dictating solutions. Just to try to crystallize the example, there's been a lot of comparison here about Bretton Woods. “Oh, well, last time you saw the entire international architecture being remade.” Well, if there's just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy, that's an easier negotiation. But that's not the world we live in, and it shouldn't be the world that we live in.

5. Apology for the War on Terror (“We Went off Course”). President Obama, speech at the National Archives, Washington, D.C., May 21, 2009.⁵

1. The White House, “Remarks by President Obama at Strasbourg Town Hall,” April 3, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-at-Strasbourg-Town-Hall (June 2, 2009).
2. “Obama's Interview with Al Arabiya,” transcript, January 27, 2009, at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65096.html> (June 2, 2009).
3. The White House, “Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony,” April 17, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-the-Summit-of-the-Americas-Opening-Ceremony (June 2, 2009).
4. The White House, “News Conference by President Obama,” April 2, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/News-Conference-by-President-Obama-4-02-09 (June 2, 2009).
5. The White House, “Remarks by the President on National Security,” May 21, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-On-National-Security-5-21-09 (June 2, 2009).

Unfortunately, faced with an uncertain threat, our government made a series of hasty decisions. I believe that many of these decisions were motivated by a sincere desire to protect the American people. But I also believe that all too often our government made decisions based on fear rather than foresight; that all too often our government trimmed facts and evidence to fit ideological predispositions. Instead of strategically applying our power and our principles, too often we set those principles aside as luxuries that we could no longer afford. And during this season of fear, too many of us—Democrats and Republicans, politicians, journalists, and citizens—fell silent.

In other words, we went off course. And this is not my assessment alone. It was an assessment that was shared by the American people who nominated candidates for President from both major parties who, despite our many differences, called for a new approach—one that rejected torture and one that recognized the imperative of closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

6. Apology for Guantanamo in France (“Sacrificing Your Values”). Speech by President Obama, Rhenus Sports Arena, Strasbourg, France, April 3, 2009.⁶

Our two republics were founded in service of these ideals. In America, it is written into our founding documents as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In France: “Liberté”—absolutely—“égalité, fraternité.” Our moral authority is derived from the fact that generations of our citizens have fought and bled to uphold these values in our nations and others. And that’s why we can never sacrifice them for expedience’s sake. That’s why I’ve ordered the closing of the detention center in Guantanamo Bay. That’s why I can stand here today and say without equivocation or excep-

tion that the United States of America does not and will not torture.

In dealing with terrorism, we can’t lose sight of our values and who we are. That’s why I closed Guantanamo. That’s why I made very clear that we will not engage in certain interrogation practices. I don’t believe that there is a contradiction between our security and our values. And when you start sacrificing your values, when you lose yourself, then over the long term that will make you less secure.

7. Apology before the Turkish Parliament (“Our Own Darker Periods in Our History”). Speech by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament, Ankara, Turkey, April 6, 2009.⁷

Every challenge that we face is more easily met if we tend to our own democratic foundation. This work is never over. That’s why, in the United States, we recently ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed. That’s why we prohibited—without exception or equivocation—the use of torture. All of us have to change. And sometimes change is hard.

Another issue that confronts all democracies as they move to the future is how we deal with the past. The United States is still working through some of our own darker periods in our history. Facing the Washington Monument that I spoke of is a memorial of Abraham Lincoln, the man who freed those who were enslaved even after Washington led our Revolution. Our country still struggles with the legacies of slavery and segregation, the past treatment of Native Americans.

Human endeavor is by its nature imperfect. History is often tragic, but unresolved, it can be a heavy weight. Each country must work through its past. And reckoning with the past can help us seize a better future.

8. Apology for U.S. Policy toward the Americas (“The United States Has Not Pursued and

6. The White House, “Remarks by President Obama at Strasbourg Town Hall.”

7. The White House, “Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament,” April 6, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament (June 2, 2009).

Sustained Engagement with Our Neighbors”). Opinion editorial by President Obama: “Choosing a Better Future in the Americas,” April 16, 2009.⁸

Too often, the United States has not pursued and sustained engagement with our neighbors. We have been too easily distracted by other priorities, and have failed to see that our own progress is tied directly to progress throughout the Americas. My Administration is committed to the promise of a new day. We will renew and sustain a broader partnership between the United States and the hemisphere on behalf of our common prosperity and our common security.

9. Apology for the Mistakes of the CIA (“Potentially We’ve Made Some Mistakes”). Remarks by the President to CIA employees, CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia, April 20, 2009.⁹ The remarks followed the controversial decision to release Office of Legal Counsel memoranda detailing CIA enhanced interrogation techniques used against terrorist suspects.

So don’t be discouraged by what’s happened in the last few weeks. Don’t be discouraged that we have to acknowledge potentially we’ve made some mistakes. That’s how we learn. But the fact that we are willing to acknowledge them and then move forward, that is precisely why I am proud to be President of the United States, and that’s why you should be proud to be members of the CIA.

10. Apology for Guantanamo in Washington (“A Rallying Cry for Our Enemies”). President Obama, speech at the National Archives, Washington, D.C., May 21, 2009.¹⁰

There is also no question that Guantanamo set back the moral authority that is America’s strongest currency in the world. Instead of building a durable framework for the struggle against al Qaeda that drew upon our deeply held values and traditions, our government was defending positions that undermined the rule of law. In fact, part of the rationale for establishing Guantanamo in the first place was the misplaced notion that a prison there would be beyond the law—a proposition that the Supreme Court soundly rejected. Meanwhile, instead of serving as a tool to counter terrorism, Guantanamo became a symbol that helped al Qaeda recruit terrorists to its cause. Indeed, the existence of Guantanamo likely created more terrorists around the world than it ever detained.

So the record is clear: Rather than keeping us safer, the prison at Guantanamo has weakened American national security. It is a rallying cry for our enemies.

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8. President Barack Obama, “Choosing a Better Future in the Americas,” April 16, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Op-ed-by-President-Barack-Obama-Choosing-a-Better-Future-in-the-Americas (June 2, 2009).

9. “Remarks by the President to CIA Employees at the CIA Headquarters,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, April 20, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-to-CIA-employees-at-CIA-Headquarters (June 2, 2009).

10. The White House, “Remarks by the President on National Security.”