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The Age of Obama: Anno Domini 2

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Abstract: *In the real world, as opposed to what French President Nicolas Sarkozy calls President Barack Obama's "virtual world," America faces the reality of Iran's intransigence and aggressiveness; China's headlong pursuit of its own national, regional, and global interests; Russia's determination to regain its Near Abroad; the Arab states' refusal to accept any kind of a reasonable settlement of the kind that Israel has already offered under several governments; Syria's designs on Lebanon; and Hugo Chávez's designs on the weaker countries in Latin America. President Obama's foreign policy agenda of gradual American retreat will have inexorable consequences: When erstwhile allies see the American umbrella being withdrawn, they will have to accommodate themselves to those from whom we were protecting them. If Obama proves impervious to empirical evidence and experience, all these accommodations, the weakening of alliances, the strengthening of centers of adversarial power in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Caracas, and elsewhere will continue until we are awakened by some cataclysm.*

Perhaps I should have subtitled my address "How do you celebrate the first anniversary of the Second Coming?"—a conundrum that has confounded theologians for centuries.

Six months ago, when I was thinking of my subject for this address, President Obama was halfway on his trajectory—downward trajectory—from divinity to mortality. But now that we've arrived at the last day of his first year at precisely the point where the magic has

Talking Points

- President Obama's foreign policy agenda is one of gradual retreat. When allies see the American umbrella being withdrawn, they will have to accommodate themselves to those from whom we were protecting them.
- Such a policy cannot deal effectively with Iran's intransigence and aggressiveness; China's headlong pursuit of its own national, regional, and global interests; Russia's determination to regain its Near Abroad; the Arab states' refusal to accept any reasonable settlement of the kind that Israel has offered under several governments; Syria's designs on Lebanon; and Hugo Chávez's designs on the weaker countries in Latin America.
- If President Obama proves impervious to empirical evidence and experience, all these accommodations, the weakening of alliances, the strengthening of centers of adversarial power in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Caracas, and elsewhere will continue until some cataclysm wakes us up.

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worn off and the charisma grown cold, where Massachusetts—bluest of blue—is even *thinking* of electing an obscure Republican to the U.S. Senate seat traditionally reserved for the Kennedy family and its functionaries, where Obama's approval rating is down to 46 percent, and where his disapproval rating is the highest ever a year after a President's election, there's no real need for me to trace and explain this remarkable fall.

So instead of talking about where Obama's domestic agenda has brought him, I propose to speak about where his foreign policy agenda has brought us.

When a President's recognition of evil or rejection of pacifism jumps out at us as something startling and novel, that tells us much—none of it good—about the woolly internationalism Obama has been operating under.

After a year of fairly steady criticism from the right, the Obama foreign policy received a second look—and a wave of rather favorable consideration—after his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in Oslo, in which he acknowledged the existence of evil, the importance of America in sustaining peace, and the occasional necessity to wage war. This led to some enthusiastic talk about a new Obama Doctrine variously described as a kind of Christian realism, Niebuhrian tragic-mindedness, or a fusion of realism and idealism.

I hate to rain on this parade, but I find it hard to join the general swooning over this newfound foreign policy sophistication. It's good that we have a President who says publicly that Gandhi would not have done very well against Hitler, but is this really a great philosophical advance? For a President of the United States? It's the kind of issue that you dispose of in your first bull session in the freshman dorm.

Pacifism is a serious subject for sweet adolescence, or a way of life for certain eccentric sects who, it must be noted, survive because they live among non-eccentric people who *reject* pacifism and fight to keep those little sects alive and free.

And yes, Obama did offer a defense of war. But he had just announced a 30,000-troop deployment in Afghanistan—a war that was a legacy obligation he had inherited and himself declared a “vital national interest”—and nonetheless he so agonized about providing his generals with an adequate troop level that it took three months of very public wrestling with both his conscience and his Vice President before he came to that decision.

What else can the leader of any serious nation do but defend the necessity of war? How can a man who ran for commander in chief do otherwise? What leader of a serious nation even *raises* pacifism as a serious foreign policy issue?

Indeed, when a President's recognition of evil or rejection of pacifism jumps out at us as something startling and novel, that tells us much—none of it good—about the baseline from which he is operating: the woolly internationalism Obama has been operating under during his first year in office.

And remember: After this brief foray into the obvious—defending the necessity of war, affirming America's role in protecting the world order—Obama felt compelled to spend the second half of his Nobel speech returning to the liberal internationalist themes that had garnered him that fatuous prize from that overdressed, underemployed jury in the first place.

A Fancied Entity

And what is that baseline? What is the essence of Obama's foreign policy?

There are many places where it can be found—the Cairo speech, the other legs of the apology tour—but the essence was succinctly expressed in his centerpiece address to the U.N. General Assembly in which he laid out his understanding of what animates the international system: “In an era when our destiny is shared, power is no longer a zero-sum game. No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation. No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed.” And “alignments of nations rooted in the cleavages of a long-gone Cold War” “make no sense in an interconnected world.”

Where does one begin? Power is no longer a zero-sum game? Tell that to the demonstrators in the streets of Tehran. Tell that to the Tamil Tigers or to the newly liberated Baltic states.

At the heart of Obama's internationalist fantasy is the notion that a "community of nations" with its common norms is ultimately determinative of the course of history.

No nation *should* try to dominate another? Perhaps, but that's merely adolescent utopianism. The world is a Hobbesian state of nature in which the struggle for domination is the very essence of international life.

No nation *can* dominate another? This is simple nonsense. How can a man of such intelligence—and a president of the United States—even allow himself to utter these words?

But most disturbing is the notion that what he called "the cleavages of a long-gone Cold War" are obsolete and senseless. These cleavages were actually the dividing line between free and unfree, between democratic and Communist, between the West and an Evil Empire that had stamped out the face of freedom in half of Europe and in an archipelago of far-flung colonies from Vietnam to Cuba to Nicaragua.

This was no accidental dividing line. Yet in place of this so-called cleavage, Obama wants to bring about a new 21st-century world of universal understanding and accommodation. And for that, the U.S. is to be the facilitator, the healer, the interlocutor, the moral example—led, of course, by the man floating above it all, "a fellow citizen of the world," as he called himself in Berlin.

Indeed, it was in Berlin, in that unforgettably bizarre setting, that candidate Obama offered the best insight into how he sees the world when he asserted that the Berlin Wall came down because "there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one."

As one? If anything, the world stood as two: those who for decades strove relentlessly to bring down the wall and those who for those same

decades strove to maintain it—that is, those who put it up in the first place. The wall came down not because of any *kumbaya* coming together of people, but because the United States, acting often unilaterally, but certainly with only a few allies, at very high cost in two hot wars (Korea and Vietnam) and one Cold War that carried the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, persisted in fighting relentlessly to contain and bring down the Soviet empire.

Only someone who could actually think that the Cold War was won by some common exertion of common humanity in the service of common universal norms could actually believe that those fictional forces hold the key to security and peace in the world today. But Obama does. At the heart of this internationalist fantasy is the very notion that a "community of nations" with its common norms is ultimately determinative of the course of history.

Common norms? The Taliban and we have very different visions of the good. So do, for example, the Arabs of northern Sudan and the Christian and animist Sudanese of the South who have been in near-perpetual civil war for decades. To say nothing of North and South in this country in the 1860s.

And even if people share the same aspirations, harmony does not necessarily follow: Resources, riches, land, and power are not infinite; peoples strive to gain what others have. Again, this is elementary. Clashes of values and the struggle for primacy constitute a constant in human history that accounts for that other constant—conflict and war.

It is to this fancied entity, to earn its approbation and support, that Obama offers such ostentatious demonstrations of virtue as closing Guantanamo and abjuring harsh interrogation of terrorist masterminds.

Yet, against all this, at the center of Obama's world is what he incessantly calls the "international community." He calls on it to "stand up" to North Korea; to restrain Iran's nuclear ambitions; to bring about his ultimate dream of universal nuclear disarmament. And it is to this fancied entity, to earn its approbation and support, that Obama offers such ostentatious demonstrations of virtue as closing

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A Naïve Universalism

The international community lies at the center of the Obama foreign policy. Unfortunately, it is a fiction. There is no such thing. Different countries have different histories, geographies, necessities, and interests. There's no natural, inherent, or enduring international community. What community of interest is there between, say, the United States, Iran, Zimbabwe, and Burma?

The international community is a Hobbesian state of nature with no universally recognized norms. Anarchy is kept in check not by some bureaucracy on the East River, not by some inchoate expression of world opinion, not by parchment promises adorned with disingenuous signatures, but by the will and the power of the Great Powers and, most important in our time, the one remaining superpower: namely, the United States.

One highly revealing analysis of Obama foreign policy, relying on leaks from inside the White House, spoke about how Obama's approach to foreign policy owed much to his experience as a community organizer—the idea of listening, understanding, working cooperatively, and seeking common ends.

This is all well and good, but a community organizer in Chicago operates within the rubric and under the protection of a very elaborate, very secure, highly regulated, and consensual domestic society known as the United States. What holds civil society together is a supreme central authority, the sanctity of contracts, and the goodwill and civility and decency of individual members.

What stability we do have is owed to the overwhelming power and deterrent threat of a superpower like the United States that defines international stability as a national interest.

The international arena lacks all these things: What keeps it from degenerating into a war of all against all is not central authority, not the phony security of treaties, not the best of goodwill among

the more civilized nations. What stability we do have is owed to the overwhelming power and deterrent threat of a superpower like the United States that defines international stability as a national interest.

We seem almost congenitally devoted to this “international community” fiction, making ritual obeisance to its many manifestations: the United Nations, its various bodies such as the U.N. Human

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Rights Council, and, most recently, the Copenhagen climate change conference, which demonstrated spectacularly the fatuousness of such international structures—the lack of common purpose, common interest, common governance.

Yet the failure of these universalist institutions and paper agreements seems to leave no lasting impression. Did we learn nothing from the Kellogg–Briand Pact, whose signatories included Germany and Japan, that abolished war forever—an absurdity that won U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg the 1929 Nobel Peace Prize?

Sound familiar? But at least Kellogg got it for an *actually signed* useless treaty. Obama got his Nobel for *merely imagined* useless treaties, most notably the one Obama has been insisting on from Prague to Turtle Bay on universal nuclear disarmament.

The depths of Obama's naïve universalism can be seen in his pursuit of this deeply unserious goal, the most dramatic instance of which, as Nicolas Sarkozy will not easily forget, occurred on September 24, one day after Obama's speech to the General Assembly, when he ostentatiously presided over the Security Council, the first time an American President had ever done so.

At the time, unknown to the world, Obama had knowledge that the Iranians had built a secret uranium enrichment facility near Qom. France and Britain were urging him to use that dramatic setting to stun the world with that revelation and thus be in a position to call for powerful immediate action.

Not only did Obama refuse, but Sarkozy was forced to scrap any mention of Qom in *his* speech. Obama only revealed the news a day later in Pittsburgh.

Why did he forgo the opportunity? Because, explained White House officials, Obama did not want anything at that Security Council meeting to get in the way of his dream of a nuclear-free world. He did not want to “dilute” his disarmament resolution by “diverting to Iran.”

Iran as a diversion? It’s the most important security issue on the planet. A diversion from the fantasy of universal nuclear disarmament?

Sarkozy was sitting at that same Council table and could hardly contain himself. With Obama at the chair, Sarkozy pointedly observed: “President Obama has even said ‘I dream of a world without [nuclear weapons].’ Yet before our very eyes, two countries are currently doing the exact opposite.” Sarkozy also informed the President that “we live in a real world, not a virtual world.”

A Pernicious Internationalism

Now, this critique of liberal internationalism does not mean that we reject all treaties or all notions of communities of nations. You can, of course, have transnational agreements between like-minded nations that do share norms and for whom, therefore, these agreements are real. A commercial treaty between rule-of-law nations such as Canada and the United States or the various agreements underlying the European Union have near the power of domestic law, as does a common defense pact among NATO nations.

But *universal* treaties necessarily include all states—democratic and tyrannical, compliant and congenitally noncompliant. Such agreements will not be adhered to by rogue states, who will cheat as suits their larger purposes, rendering the treaty not just useless, but worse than useless. For example, alleged violations of the nonproliferation treaties are referred to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), a procedure that invariably leads to complacency (to say nothing of endless delay) because they give the *illusion* of enforcement.

These kinds of agreements are almost never enforced. Indeed, the one act of enforcement in

recent times—the removal of the rogue regime of Saddam Hussein after a decade of serial violations of Security Council resolutions demanding disarmament—has been so widely denounced around the world that Obama has spent much of his first year apologizing for it.

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As for the community of nations, this doesn’t mean there are no communities. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan did not lack for a sense of community, and that was a community of *free* nations. These communities have a reality. They have their own norms and ideals and policies—and some, like NATO, even a security apparatus to back it up.

Which makes Obama’s internationalism particularly pernicious because, as he stated at the United Nations, true universality involves denigrating these ideological sub-communities as mere “cleavages” based on such archaic divisions as those that characterized “a long-gone Cold War.”

He says so rather directly in that U.N. speech: “No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed.” Isn’t that what NATO is about? Isn’t that a group of nations claiming exclusivity for themselves and intent on enforcing norms that they believe in? What were NATO’s rescue of Kosovo and Bosnia about if not NATO elevating itself above other nations and groups of people to declare that genocide would not be countenanced in the Balkans—and that NATO would act unilaterally even without the assent of the “international community” as expressed through the United Nations or Security Council?

Accommodating America’s Enemies

This homage to internationalism and denigration not only of nationalism and individual sovereignty, but of the commonality and special relations among the community of free nations has a very practical impact on American foreign policy. It is already

being felt by friend and foe, ally and adversary. If our ultimate aim is to earn our place as a good international citizen, we must abandon any signs of arrogance, any act of prideful self-assertion, and begin to constrict and constrain our often irresponsible power and act as one among many. To do that, we must undertake two things: first, the expiation of past sins and then outreach and accommodation.

The expiation has been engaged in relentlessly throughout this past year. That's the apology tour:

- For President Eisenhower's role in a 1953 coup in Iran.
- For the first use of the atomic bomb.
- For our own racism and mistreatment of Native Americans.
- For allegedly disparaging and disrespecting Europe by not recognizing its leading role in the world. (Might that be because it's lived parasitically under American protection for 60 years?)
- And we must apologize most of all for showing insufficient respect and understanding of the Muslim world.

This from a leader of a nation that has conducted five military campaigns over the past 20 years to defend defenseless Muslim populations and deliver them from their oppressors: Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and then Iraq under Saddam.

Then, after the atonement—after the catharsis of confession—comes reconciliation, the extended hand to the clenched fist.

We have now had a year of this as well. What is clear is that reconciliation, resetting relations, starting from scratch with adversaries has consequences. Why? Because these conflicts didn't come from nowhere. They did not arise capriciously. They had their roots in a clash of values and interests, and we had our allies in these clashes. That is why starting the world anew—pressing the reset buttons all around the world—has consequences, not least of all on our allies.

Resetting relations with Russia and caving in on missile defense meant betraying the Czech Republic and Poland, who had taken risks in joining us in this defensive venture. It meant once again leaving them wondering about American reliability and

about their own post-Cold War independence—and whether they were now returning to the limbo where their sovereignty is constrained by the *diktat* of Moscow.

Hence Obama's four-day bowing and scraping to China—after refusing to meet with the Dalai Lama and without so much as a gesture on behalf of human rights—and insisting on elevating China gratuitously to almost superpower status. At one point in the visit, Obama even suggested a *Chinese* interest in stability in the *Indian* subcontinent—a suggestion very badly received in India and part of a pattern of giving short shrift to India, China's regional rival and our natural ally in the region with a common language, common tradition, common democracy, and common enemy in radical Islam. The Indians had to settle for the consolation prize of a White House state dinner—and almost without even the *Salahis*.

Other consequences? The relentless pressure on Israel over the non-issue of settlements to create gratuitous daylight between the United States and Israel precisely to gain favor with the Palestinians and more recalcitrant Arab states.

Hence the comedy of errors in Honduras, where Obama reflexively backed a Hugo Chávez wannabe and ally while opposing the actions of nearly every democratic institution in the country which acted to depose the would-be dictator under Article 239 of the Honduran constitution.

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Hence Lebanon's demonstrations of fealty to Syria, ostracized by the Bush Administration for its role in the Hariri assassination, now enjoying a rapprochement with the Obama Administration, which is offering conciliation and the return of the U.S. ambassador. The pro-Western and pro-independence Lebanese know how to read wind direction: Hence the recent astonishing visit of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Damascus to bend a knee to President Assad, the man he knows was behind the murder of Hariri's own father, but

now the once-again rising regional power as the Obama Administration resets relations with their Syrian overlord.

Accommodation with enemies is not a free lunch; it has its price.

The basic critique of Obama's foreign policy is not just that it is naïve and unseemly—a stain on America's tradition of supporting democratic forces—but that, worst of all, it's been a failure.

And finally, the pièce de résistance of this policy of expensive accommodation: Iran, where Obama has consistently upheld the legitimacy of the thugish clerical regime, insisted on maintaining good relations, and been slow and even silent in support of the democratic demonstrators in the streets.

The basic critique of this foreign policy is not just that it is naïve and unseemly—a stain on America's tradition of supporting democratic forces—but that, worst of all, it's been a failure. We chose Russia over Eastern Europe, and what do we get in return? Cooperation on Iran? Nothing. And from China? In fact, we received explicit statements that they will oppose sanctions in the Security Council.

What have we gotten for our pressure on Israel? The complete breakdown of negotiations. For 16 years, the Palestinians negotiated with Israel without any settlement freeze—until Obama came to reinvent the world. The Arabs now refuse to negotiate, as they prefer to sit back and let the U.S. extract unilateral concessions from Israel.

Obama's Virtual World

This is only the beginning. In his first year, we've only begun to see the fruits of Obama's internationalism. But the signs are unmistakable. Should this policy continue for the next three years, let alone for the next seven, it will have profound consequences throughout the world.

It would constitute a gradual American retreat—again with the possible exception of Afghanistan, although Obama pointedly insists that within 18 months the retreat from there begins as well—and it will have inexorable consequences, easily stated: When erstwhile allies see the American umbrella being withdrawn, they will have to accommodate themselves to those countries we were protecting them from.

So obvious are these consequences of the disconnect between the real world and what Sarkozy calls Obama's "virtual world" that it is hard for me to believe that the current policy can continue indefinitely, because at some point empirical reality must intervene—the reality of Iranian intransigence and aggressiveness; of China's headlong pursuit of its own national, regional, and global interests; of Russia's determination to regain its Near Abroad; of the Arab states' refusal to accept any kind of a reasonable settlement of the kind that Israel has already offered under several governments; of Syria's designs on Lebanon; of Chávez's designs on the weaker countries in Latin America.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe this kind of illusory foreign policy can persist indefinitely. Perhaps Obama will prove himself impervious to empirical evidence and to experience. In which case, all these accommodations, the weakening of alliances, the strengthening of centers of adversarial power in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Caracas, and elsewhere will continue apace—until some cataclysm wakes us up.

Such are the wages of living in a virtual world. I pray we leave it soon.

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