

# LECTURE

DELIVERED FEBRUARY 22, 2012

No. 1204 | MAY 3, 2012

## The Obama Doctrine at Year Three: An Assessment

*Kim R. Holmes, PhD, Marc A. Thiessen, Clifford D. May, and Helle C. Dale*

### Abstract

*Even before taking office, President Obama began laying out the tenets of a doctrine that would enable his Administration to remake America as one nation among many, with no singular claim to responsibility or exceptionalism. These tenets include a more humble engagement with the world and more reliance on others, as well as treaties and international organizations, to deal with global crises and threats to our security. Has the Obama Doctrine made America and the world more secure? The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan has been accelerated, Iran is dangerously close to possessing nuclear weapons, “leading from behind” has helped to make the outcomes of the “Arab Spring” uncertain, and even America’s allies in Europe worry about the Administration’s “pivot to Asia.”*

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1204>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

**H**ELLE C. DALE: Over a year ago, we asked each other whether there was such a thing as an Obama Doctrine and concluded that yes, there is. Some of the elements that we identified back then, which in fact President Obama had started laying out even before he became President, were things that would enable his Administration to remake America as one nation among many with no claim particularly to being an exceptional nation. Tenets would include a more humble engagement with the world, more reliance on other nations to take action—also known as leading from behind—and reliance on international treaties and international organizations to deal with global crises and threats to U.S. national security.

Has the Obama Doctrine made America more secure? The President is very proud of his foreign policy record. In the State of the Union Address, he declared that “America is back.” Of course, he did so as he was very busy retreating from Afghanistan and Iraq at the same time. Some people will probably not want to agree with him that his foreign policy record is one of the most stellar among all Presidents—one of the other statements that he has made.

### TALKING POINTS

- The Obama Doctrine posits a more humble engagement with the world, more reliance on other nations to take action (“leading from behind”), and reliance on international treaties and organizations to deal with global crises and threats to U.S. national security.
- At least initially, President Obama’s tendency has been to reach out to our enemies and rivals more than to our friends and allies.
- Barack Obama is more ideologically in tune with Europeans’ social, political, and philosophical views of the world—views that decidedly lean to the left of most Americans.
- But currying favor by giving the rest of the world what they want cannot be the premise of American leadership, and it certainly is not the definition of American exceptionalism that most Americans share.

To discuss this today and to look at the record after three years of President Obama in the White House, our first speaker will be Dr. Kim Holmes. He is the Vice President of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies here at The Heritage Foundation and Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies.

Dr. Holmes also oversees the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, the Center for International Trade and Economics, our Asian Studies Center, and the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom. He is the founding editor of The Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom*, now in its 18th edition, which we jointly publish with *The Wall Street Journal*,<sup>1</sup> and co-author, with James Carafano, of The Heritage Foundation's analysis of the Obama Doctrine.<sup>2</sup> He also served as Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations under President George W. Bush.

Our next speaker will be Marc A. Thiessen, a member of the White House Senior Staff under President George W. Bush. He served as a speechwriter for the President and after that as a speechwriter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Before that, Marc spent six years as a spokesman and senior policy adviser to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms. He writes a weekly foreign policy column for *The Washington Post* and recently published a best-selling book, *Courting Disaster*, about U.S. counterterrorism

efforts.<sup>3</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* recently named Marc one of the 100 most influential conservatives in America, and *New York Times* columnist William Safire declared him "the most forceful, serious, articulate news spokesman for hardliners around" who can back up his opinions with facts and can influence the debate.

Our final speaker will be Clifford D. May, who is president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a policy institute focusing on terrorism created immediately following the September 11 attacks on the U.S. He is also chairman of the Policy Committee of the Committee on the Present Danger, an international nonpartisan organization based in Washington composed of leading members of the national security community. In 2008, the *Daily Telegraph* named Cliff May one of the 100 most influential conservatives in America.

—**Helle C. Dale** is Senior Fellow for Public Diplomacy in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for Foreign Policy Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

**DR. KIM R. HOLMES:** When we first started talking about how to describe President Obama's foreign policy, the idea of a doctrine came up. We talked about how you define a doctrine. Usually it is something that is self-avowed, something somebody actually claims, but there is also this idea that it can be defined

by signature characteristics—things Presidents actually say or that objective people can attribute to them.

We came up with a hybrid of both. We tried to stay as close as we could to what President Obama claimed he wanted to achieve. In addition to some of the issues Helle mentioned, there are his early outreach to Iran; his aggressive engagement of rivals and enemies; the Russian "reset" policy in that same engagement vein; and some hard times with Israel, the United Kingdom, and other allies.

At least in that first year and a half or so, his tendency was to reach out to our enemies and rivals more than to our friends and allies. There was also his emphasis on soft power and signing treaties like New START. From campaign statements to the President's practice in his first year or so, his statements and actions added up to what we defined as the Obama Doctrine in our paper in 2010.

Now, three years into this presidency, most of our observations remain true, but there are a number of ways we would like to update our assessment.

---

**PRESIDENT OBAMA HAS BEEN MUGGED BY REALITY IN THREE KEY AREAS: IRAN, RUSSIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM.**

---

First, President Obama has been mugged by reality in three key areas: Iran, Russia, and counterterrorism. He has essentially abandoned his engagement policy toward Iran, mainly because it failed to

---

1. See Terry Miller, Kim R. Holmes, and Edwin J. Feulner, *2012 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 2012), <http://www.heritage.org/index>.

2. See Kim R. Holmes and James Jay Carafano, "Defining the Obama Doctrine, Its Pitfalls, and How to Avoid Them," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2457, September 1, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/08/defining-the-obama-doctrine-its-pitfalls-and-how-to-avoid-them>.

3. See Marc A. Thiessen, *Courting Disaster: How the CIA Kept America Safe and How Barack Obama Is Inviting the Next Attack* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2010).

accomplish its goals. It is clear even to the President that the original premise behind his engagement strategy with Iran is fundamentally flawed. Iran wants nuclear weapons not because we have them. In fact, Iran is trying to gain nuclear weapons for its own purposes, completely independent of whatever President Obama, or President Bush for that matter, may or may not have said. Obama has had to abandon that premise.

President Obama has not, however, abandoned his Russian “reset” policy, at least nominally, although there is less rhetorical support for Vladimir Putin than during the first year or so of the Obama Administration. The Administration has taken a somewhat tougher line toward Russia in negotiations, for example, with NATO over missile defenses. But it still has not abandoned the fundamental idea of a reset: that we must engage this large nuclear power Russia and that, if there is a problem in our relationship, we must be very careful not to provoke the Russians into any kind of counter-reaction. That idea is still there, though not quite as strong as it was early on.

In the area of counterterrorism, he has abandoned much of what was said during the campaign as a critique of George W. Bush. To the extent that there has been any success in the area of counterterrorism—killing Osama bin Laden, for example—it is mainly because Obama kept in place things that President Bush and his predecessors had implemented, not only in counterterrorism, but in detainee policy (for which he has gotten into trouble with his political base).

Since our Obama Doctrine paper came out, there’s also been the so-called Arab Spring. President Obama

was slow to react to what was happening in the Middle East. When he did, his reaction was muddled and sometimes confused. This is where the charge of “leading from behind” comes from.

Egypt is a classic example. President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were uncertain about what to do. They ended up supporting the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, but only near the end of the process. Unfortunately, we now have the worst of all possible worlds—a situation in which the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies are gaining power at the same time U.S. influence in Egypt has dropped to its lowest level in decades. Relations are so bad, in fact, that just this month Egypt indicted 19 Americans, including the son of one of President Obama’s Cabinet members, supposedly for interfering in their internal politics.

---

**TO THE EXTENT THAT THERE HAS BEEN ANY SUCCESS IN COUNTERTERRORISM, IT IS MAINLY BECAUSE OBAMA KEPT IN PLACE THINGS THAT PRESIDENT BUSH AND HIS PREDECESSORS HAD IMPLEMENTED, NOT ONLY IN COUNTERTERRORISM, BUT IN DETAINEE POLICY.**

---

On Libya, the President was pushed into action by the Europeans and then quickly pulled back. He invoked the U.N. concept of a “responsibility to protect” civilians as the rationale for the U.N.-sanctioned action. A year later, the situation in Libya is highly unstable and frankly getting worse every day. Amnesty International recently accused Libyan militias of war crimes, which raises the question of whether or not

protecting civilians, as highlighted in the U.N. resolution, is being honored.

On Syria, there was a complete breakdown of the humanitarian intervention rationale used for Libya. It is not being applied to Syria for obvious reasons; Syria is a different case. But it is precisely because there are different circumstances that this decision makes a mockery of humanitarian claims of protecting civilians, as in the Libyan resolution. Because the situation in Syria would make intervention harder, it is a tactical political decision not to intervene. So what does it mean when you go to the United Nations Security Council using protecting civilians as the rationale for going to battle rather than self-defense? That standard does not apply to Syria because tactical considerations are different.

Unfortunately, it is also possible to argue that the Administration’s slow-to-react, muddled response in Egypt applies to its slow reactions toward Syria, which arguably has made the situation there more difficult and gave us fewer options. Secretary of State Clinton, who early on called Bashar al-Assad a reformer, made it clear from the get-go that the Administration was not interested in military intervention. Thus, the U.S. reaction was a megaphone telling the Syrians exactly what our options would *not* be. We lost time helping the opposition to organize, and we may have emboldened President Assad to crack down even harder.

The same is true about the veto by Russia and China of a U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria. Obviously, the “reset” policy didn’t matter. One of the fundamental ideas behind that policy is that the Russians are obstreperous and do not cooperate with us because we are too hard on them. If we would only engage them and sign treaties like

New START, they would engage us and cooperate with us more.

This obviously did not work over Iran or Syria. The Russians interpret their interests in Syria and Iran on an entirely narrow national-interest basis. They have a security and military base relationship with Syria. That's why they do what they do in Syria, not because of what we say or the reset.

I also think the premature withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq is a reason the situation in Syria is more difficult. It is not just that Iraq's leader, Nouri al-Maliki, is not as cooperative as he would have been if our troops had been there; it is also the reports indicating some Sunni-based al-Qaeda based in Iraq are infiltrating the rebel groups of Syria—an issue on which we possibly could have had more influence if we had stayed there in Iraq.

---

**THE ADMINISTRATION WAS TOTALLY UNPREPARED FOR THE ARAB SPRING. THE IDEOLOGY OF NON-INTERVENTION IS AT ODDS WITH CLAIMS OF SUPPORTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY, AND THE PRINCIPLE THEY EVENTUALLY TRIED TO EMBRACE—HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION—IS IN SHAMBLES.**

---

The bottom line is that the Administration was totally unprepared for the so-called Arab Spring. The ideology of non-intervention is at odds with claims of supporting human rights and democracy, and the principle they eventually tried to embrace—humanitarian intervention—is in shambles.

This leads to another aspect of the Obama Doctrine: the primacy of

politics in foreign policy. The driving force behind his desire to get U.S. forces out of Iraq and Afghanistan is to appeal to his political base in the run-up to the next election. I can find no other reason why he should not have listened closely to his generals on the ground—this is true not only in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq—who advised him that more time was needed for a military presence to protect American security interests.

Yet another aspect of the Obama Doctrine is using defense budget cuts to free spending for domestic programs. All told, Obama's budget request increases discretionary spending for domestic programs by \$350 billion, including increases in the Department of Education's budget, for solar energy and high-speed rail projects, for foreign aid, more stimulus projects, and even money to pay to UNESCO despite the fact that current U.S. law prohibits us from doing so since it voted last year to admit Palestine as a member state. He put money in the budget for that even though Congress cannot appropriate it.

At the same time, the President is making real cuts in national defense. He wants to cut almost half a trillion dollars from the defense budget on top of some \$300 billion in cuts already begun. And that does not include the half-trillion or so dollars *more* that would have to be cut under sequestration. These are real, deep cuts to our national defenses at a time when we face many threats, and he wants to spend more on domestic discretionary programs.

The Administration claims these defense cuts are being done for strategic reasons, but it is clear from what Secretary Leon Panetta and even General Martin Dempsey have

said that they are making these cuts mainly because of budget-driven decisions.

We will likely hear the President make the case during this election year—in fact, he already is—that he is winning the war against terrorism. He will cite the killing of bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki as an example of this. The Administration has already narrowed the definition of what the terrorist threat is, not just globally but in Afghanistan: that it is mainly from al-Qaeda. There has been some progress in disrupting that organization. But saying that only al-Qaeda is our enemy in Afghanistan, not the Taliban, gives them political space to negotiate with the Taliban. Politically, it is a much more manageable threat than acknowledging that radicalized Islamist groups are rising up in other places and that terrorism has many heads, not just al-Qaeda.

It is also very telling that the President now claims, much as Robert Kagan did in his essay, that America is not in decline. Kagan is right; it is not inevitable that the United States will go into decline. It is a choice, not a law of nature. But the fact that President Obama is latching onto this idea is a clever sleight of hand so he can argue that his policies are not leading to the decline of America. That's a very different argument from whether or not it's inevitable that America will decline.

Let's look at the record as I see it. Clearly, the military is becoming weaker. You can argue that smaller is smarter, but at some point quantity matters. The military is getting smaller and weaker. It has already cancelled the F-22 and some F-35s, the C-17s are being delayed, and



100,000 forces are being taken out of the military's end strength.

Yet Iran has become more aggressive and is closer to gaining a nuclear weapon. Russia is far more aggressive and certainly not cooperating where we really need them to cooperate, such as on Syria and Iran. Our relationship with Pakistan has deteriorated sharply. It frankly is already acting as an adversary in some areas and may become even more so in the future. It is true that we have not had a successful overseas terrorist-inspired attack since 9/11, but foiling them has not necessarily been due to anything this President has done differently. He has simply implemented long-standing policies.

There's also the question of the future in Afghanistan. The Taliban clearly think that they are winning the conflict and only need to wait us out. It is entirely possible that after 2014, there will be areas in Afghanistan that again become safe havens that the Taliban and other terrorists control.

In his recent State of the Union address, President Obama said that "America is back"—an obvious swipe at George W. Bush. It is one of the President's signature tactics to set up a straw man against which we should measure his supposed successes. Perhaps what he means by "America is back" is that he is personally more popular overseas than George W. Bush. If you look at opinion polls, that is true, though not as much as after his election and certainly less so in the Middle East.

But why is it that Barack Obama is doing well in these polls in Europe and other places? Why is he more popular than George W. Bush? There are many reasons. Certainly, one is that, at least in some parts of the world, people perceive him as more accommodating of their interests

and their values. He's more popular in Europe because he is more ideologically in tune with their social, political, and philosophical views of the world—views that decidedly lean to the left of most Americans.

It doesn't surprise me that he is personally more popular; yet American leadership cannot be just about the popularity of a particular President, particularly if, in order to gain that popularity, he can curry favor by giving the rest of the world what they want. That really cannot be the premise of American leadership and certainly is not the definition of American exceptionalism that I think most Americans share.

---

**PRESIDENT OBAMA APPLIED A COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN MODELED ON THE IRAQI SURGE, THOUGH IT WAS UNDERRESOURCED AND HE'S DRAWING IT DOWN TOO QUICKLY.**

---

**MARC A. THIESSEN:** I wanted to focus on one element of the Obama Doctrine that I wrote about in my book, and my area of specialty is counterterrorism policy. As Kim alluded to, Obama gets consistently high marks on counterterrorism policy from the American people despite his overall approval rating, which is very low.

I would submit to you that probably the main reason for that is the fact that the Obama Doctrine is a continuation of the Bush Doctrine when it comes to many elements of counterterrorism policy. He applied a counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan modeled on the Iraqi surge, though it was underresourced and he's drawing it down too quickly.

He has not followed through on his campaign promise to put new

restrictions on the National Security Agency's Terrorist Surveillance Program. He's continued using state secrets privilege to shut down lawsuits attacking national security policy. He's opposed extension of habeas corpus in Afghanistan, asserted the right to indefinitely detain terrorists, and left in place the military commissions. After a failed effort to try Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in New York, he has backtracked on that, and we've got military commissions turning up again in Guantanamo. And, of course, he's given up on his misguided effort to shut down Guantanamo.

So for these things, he's actually come under withering criticism from the professional left. The ACLU is very upset with Barack Obama. One area where they're particularly upset with him—and it's the one area that distinguishes him from the Bush Administration in counterterrorism policy—is the drone campaign. Obama has dramatically expanded the drone strikes that we began in the Bush Administration.

In fact, the drone campaign is probably the most popular thing that Barack Obama is doing of any policy that he has, across the board. There was a *Washington Post* poll that came out about a week ago that showed 83 percent of Americans approve of Obama's drone policy and, remarkably, 77 percent of liberals support Obama's drone policy. Indeed, when they were asked if they approved of using drones even if the targets were American citizens, 65 percent of Americans approve; 55 percent of liberals approve.

Think about that: Notwithstanding the heated objections of the ACLU, a majority of American liberals support the targeted killing of terrorists even when they're American citizens. That is a remarkable thing.

Of course, the majority of liberal Democrats oppose capturing them alive and interrogating them, but killing them with a drone is fine.

How do you explain those numbers? A simple answer: George Bush isn't doing it. Greg Sargent, my colleague at *The Washington Post* who writes the liberal Plum Line blog and was very upset about these numbers, put it very bluntly: "It's hard to imagine that Dems and liberals would approve of such policies in quite these numbers if they had been authored by George W. Bush." He's right. The drone campaign has broad public support approval even from conservatives.

I've come to suggest to you today that we should hold our applause for the drone campaign to some extent. Drones are critical in the war on al-Qaeda, and there are times when a terrorist is somewhere where you can't reach him with Special Operations forces or you have perishable intelligence and a short window and you can either kill them or let them go. Also, they have a great psychological effect on the enemy because they're always looking up at the sky wondering when the next bomb might drop, so that pressures them and makes it more difficult to carry on their operations, and all that's for the good.

The problem is that Obama is using drone strikes as a substitute for operations to actually capture terrorists alive and bring them in for questioning. After 9/11, we worked with Pakistan and other countries to hunt down senior terrorist leaders and bring them in for interrogation. We captured people like Abu Zubaydah, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Ramzi bin al Shibh, Ammar al-Baluchi, and many, many others—about a hundred of them in all that were brought into the CIA's interrogation program and

questioned. They gave us information that stopped terrorist attacks: plots to blow up the U.S. consulate in Karachi; to blow up the U.S. Marine camp in Djibouti; to explode seven airplanes flying over the Atlantic from cities in Europe to North America; to fly hijacked airplanes into Heathrow Airport, London's financial district, and Big Ben—they wanted to bring down Big Ben when they brought down the Twin Towers—and also a plot to fly an airplane into the tallest building on the West Coast, the U.S. Bank Tower of Los Angeles.

---

**THE PROBLEM IS THAT OBAMA IS USING DRONE STRIKES AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR OPERATIONS TO ACTUALLY CAPTURE TERRORISTS ALIVE AND BRING THEM IN FOR QUESTIONING.**

---

Those are all plots that were broken up because there was open interrogation. The information we got was obtained from the interrogation of captured live terrorists.

Today, the Obama Administration is not attempting to capture these people alive; they're simply killing them. That's satisfying, but it comes at a price. Every drone strike that vaporizes an al-Qaeda leader vaporizes all of the intelligence in their brains. Dead terrorists can't tell you their plans for new attacks.

Take, for example, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is a terrorist network that really emerged at the very end of the Bush Administration and the start of the Obama Administration. They nearly succeeded in December of 2009—they did succeed, actually, in getting an operative to penetrate our defenses and get a bomb onto

a plane and almost blew it up over the city of Detroit. By the Obama Administration's own admission at the time, they were unaware that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula had developed the intent or capability of striking the American homeland. They thought that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was focused on regional attacks.

That was not a *foiled* terrorist attack; that was a *failed* terrorist attack, a bomb malfunction. We got very lucky. Then they did it again only a few months later, getting bombs in printer cartridges onto planes that were headed for the U.S., and this time we got a tip from Saudi intelligence that allowed us to get those printer cartridges before they exploded. They were timed to explode over the Eastern seaboard of the U.S.

So twice in less than a year, they penetrated our defenses. Why was it possible for them to do that? Because we did not have strategic insight into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula the way we did into al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

We finally found last year the man responsible for those attacks and also the Fort Hood shooting and several others, Anwar al-Awlaki, and they killed him with a drone strike. Think of the intelligence that was lost by killing that man. Think of what he knew about the operatives: This was the guy who was out recruiting terrorists. Who had he been talking to? What plots had he set in motion? What other operatives that we don't know about had he been recruiting and radicalizing? All that information was vaporized in that strike.

Interestingly, the public news accounts say that we had been tracking him for almost a month, so it wasn't a situation where we had a small window of opportunity to

get him. He was killed under direct orders of Barack Obama, and Obama made a conscious choice to blow up that intelligence rather than get the information that we could use to dismantle al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

That's not the only time that's happened. There's another terrorist network. We all heard recently that al-Shabaab, the Somali terrorist network, has formally merged with al-Qaeda in East Africa. This is a terrorist network that, if you want to get a sense of where they're thinking of attacking, is actively recruiting American citizens. They have successfully recruited more than 20 American citizens of Somali descent as terrorists, as suicide bombers, and their military commander is a man named Omar Hammami who grew up in Mobile, Alabama.

You do not need suicide bombers with American passports if your intent is to carry out attacks in Africa; you need people with American passports if you're going to attack in the U.S. You would think that the Obama Administration would be really eager to get some information about al-Qaeda and its relationship with al-Shabaab.

Well, they had a chance to do that and they passed it up. In February 2010, *The Washington Post* reported on the front page that the U.S. military had tracked down the senior terrorist leader named Saleh Ali Nabhan, who was Osama bin Laden's man in East Africa. He was the close confidante of bin Laden, had been responsible for the merger of the groups, and clearly was somebody we

would probably want to talk with. In the Bush Administration, we would have definitely had an interest in bringing this guy in for a long and vigorous discussion.

When they found Nebon, they brought it to the White House and asked the President what they wanted to do and gave him the memo with three options: option 1, kill him with a missile from a Navy ship; option 2, send a special operations helicopter to kill him from above and then rapel down to get the DNA to confirm that we got the right guy; or option 3, send that same special operations crew to capture him alive and bring him in. Obama chose option 2.

That means we could have gotten him alive but chose to kill him instead. Just like Awlaki, we could have gotten him. Think of the intelligence that was lost in that decision. A great victory for Obama in the war on terrorism: We killed a major East African terrorist, but look at all the information that was lost as a result of that.

---

**THREE YEARS INTO OBAMA'S TERM,  
ALMOST FOUR, AMERICA DOESN'T  
HAVE A TERRORIST DETENTION  
POLICY.**

---

Why did he make that choice? One of the senior military officers who was involved in the operation told *The Washington Post* the reason was we have nowhere to take him. We don't have a detention policy. The CIA black sites are closed, Guantanamo is not taking any new guests, so we simply have nowhere

to take him. So three years into Obama's term, almost four, America doesn't have a terrorist detention policy.

And it gets worse. Last June, *The Washington Post* reported, and I'm going to read from their story here because I can't do it justice better than they did:

The top military official involved in the raid that killed Osama bin Laden said Tuesday that the Obama administration has no clear plan for handling suspected terrorist leaders if they are caught alive outside a war zone. In response to senators' questions, [Vice Admiral William H.] McRaven said that "in many cases," prisoners captured in secret operations by Navy Seals or the Army's Delta Force are taken to a U.S. Navy ship until they can be tried in a U.S. court or transferred to the custody of an allied country. But if neither option turns out to be feasible, the prisoner is ultimately let go.<sup>4</sup>

Think about that: The U.S. top special operations commander testified before Congress that because we have no place to hold captured terrorists, we let them go. We have a policy of terrorist catch and release. In the Bush Administration, we ended catch and release in the border, and Obama reinstated it for al-Qaeda. If we had done that with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, imagine the destruction that would have been wreaked as a result of that. Today, when we find his successors, that's exactly what

---

4. Craig Whitlock, "Adm. McRaven: Obama Administration Has No Plan for Captured Terrorists," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/adm-mcraven-obama-administration-has-no-plan-for-captured-terrorists/2011/06/28/AGmvpbqH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/adm-mcraven-obama-administration-has-no-plan-for-captured-terrorists/2011/06/28/AGmvpbqH_story.html) (March 23, 2012).

the Obama Administration is doing: voluntarily sacrificing intelligence that is necessary to keep the country safe.

In wrapping up, let me make an analogy, because Kim talked about the decimation of our defense capabilities and what damage that is going to do. One of the things my old boss Don Rumsfeld taught us is that Presidents rarely benefit from the military procurement decisions they make during their Administration. A President, when he comes into office, is dependent on the decisions made by his predecessors. As he famously put it, you go to war with the army you have.

Intelligence is much the same way. Barack Obama inherited a treasure trove of intelligence from the Bush Administration, what we obtained from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the detainees in CIA custody, and he uses that intelligence every single day.

Mike Hayden, the former CIA Director, had a great challenge for the critics of enhanced interrogation. He said if you really think this program didn't produce valuable intelligence, destroy all the interrogation reports. Never use them.

You never hear the Obama Administration say that they won't use them because they use them every day, and the case in point is the operation that killed Osama bin Laden. That was built and made possible by the interrogation specifically of three detainees in CIA custody who gave us the key lead that led us to bin Laden's courier, who led us to his household. In response to a direct question about the role of enhanced interrogation in the bin Laden operation, Leon Panetta, the then CIA Director, confirmed that "obviously there was some valuable intelligence

that was derived through those kinds of interrogations."

If intelligence from CIA interrogations was not critical to the greatest achievement of the Obama Administration, don't you think they'd be shouting it from the rooftops? Of course.

Panetta's predecessor, Mike Hayden, was more explicit. He said, "Let the record show [that] when I was first briefed in 2007 about the brightening prospects for pursuing bin Laden through his courier network, a crucial component of the briefing was information provided by three CIA detainees, all of whom had been subjected to some form of enhanced interrogation."

---

**BARACK OBAMA INHERITED A TREASURE TROVE OF INTELLIGENCE FROM THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION, BUT HE IS NOT REPLENISHING THAT TREASURE TROVE FOR HIS SUCCESSOR, WHICH MEANS THAT THE NEXT PRESIDENT IS NOT GOING TO HAVE THAT KIND OF INFORMATION TO PROTECT THE COUNTRY.**

---

Indeed, Hayden compares those who question the intelligence produced by these detainees to "birthers who deny that Obama was born in the United States or 9/11 truthers who, lacking any evidence whatsoever, claim that 9/11 was a Bush administration plot." He moreover said, "It's nearly impossible for me to imagine any operation like the May 2 assault on bin Laden's compound that would have not made substantial use of the trove of information derived from CIA detainees, including those on whom enhanced

interrogation techniques had been used."

Today, Obama is using that treasure trove of information, but he is not replenishing that treasure trove for his successor. He's been able to escalate the drone attacks in Pakistan because of the intelligence we left him, but his Administration is not gathering the same kind of intelligence on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, in Yemen, and in Pakistan that we bequeathed to him—which means that the next President is not going to have that kind of information to protect the country.

The ultimate consequences of the Obama Doctrine in foreign policy may not happen. The great success is that he hasn't had an attack on his watch, but he is making it incredibly harder for the next Administration to keep that record of success up. I think one of the first things that the next Republican President of the United States needs to do—and I'm sure if Kim has anything to say about it, he will—is have a major review of detention and interrogation policy, because the President gets great credit for having a successful doctrine of counterterrorism, but he's really left a very, very dangerous situation for his successor.

**CLIFFORD D. MAY:** There's certainly much more to discuss. Back almost 20 years ago, Boris Yeltsin was the first president of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he was at a press conference in the U.K. He was asked by a reporter, "Mr. President, in a word, what is the state of the Russian economy?" and Yeltsin said, "Good," after which the reporter said, "In a word' is a British expression suggesting brevity; we'd be grateful if you'd expand." Yeltsin said, "Not good."



So if the task today is to appraise in a word the state of America's foreign policy and national security three years into the Obama Administration, in a word, it's good. But if I have time to expand, I would say it's not good.

Let me explain that a little. Osama bin Laden is dead, yes; Iran's economy is teetering under the impact of Syria's sanctions; a revolution is being waged against the Assad dictatorship, enemy of the United States in Syria. But although Osama bin Laden is dead, al-Qaeda is very much alive, as are Islamism movements. In fact, they're gaining ground all around the world. Iran's jihadi rulers are closer than ever to acquiring nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them, and if they succeed, that will be a hinge moment that will pretty much ensure that this century will be a lot bloodier than the previous century.

Recent upheavals in the Middle East, mislabeled the "Arab Spring," have so far brought change only to regimes that have been cooperating with the U.S.: Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya. If Assad manages to remain in power, the lesson will be that it has become less dangerous to be America's enemy than to be America's friend, and this formulation, I suspect, goes a long way toward explaining Vladimir Putin's backing of Assad as strongly as he is.

---

#### **THE RESET POLICY ON RUSSIA HAS ABSOLUTELY FAILED.**

---

Putin, I think, is sending a message to his fellow autocrats around the world that Moscow, unlike Washington, can be counted on when

the chips are down. It's another example of what Kim was talking about: The reset policy on Russia has absolutely failed.

Back to Assad: He's no moderate, and he's an enemy of the United States. He facilitated the killing of hundreds of Americans in Iraq; he arranged the assassination of pro-Western leaders who dare defy Syrian domination in Lebanon; and, again, he's the handmaiden of Iran, whose leaders intend to lead what they see not as an Arab Spring, but as a grand jihad against America and against the West.

Helle asked about the Obama Doctrine, and I agree with what's been said, but I also want to point out to you that last month, speaking at the Pentagon, Obama proclaimed the following: "Even as our troops continue to fight in Afghanistan, the tide of war is receding." About the same time, he released a document that twice used the phrase "as we end today's wars"—meaning the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The problem there is that our enemies get a vote. They don't see the tide of war as receding. What they see is America receding, or retreating, from battlefields in the present as we've retreated from battlefields in the past—Vietnam, Somalia, Beirut—and they believe we are ceding those battlefields to them.

At the conclusion of World War II—a war we didn't wind down, a war we won demanding unconditional surrender of those we were not shy about calling our enemies—the British electorate rejected Winston Churchill, without whose vision and determination I think it's fair to say Hitler might well have triumphed. The British instead turned inward

to concentrate on building a welfare state. That meant relinquishing global leadership.

They could do that because they could pass the torch to the U.S. If that torch has now become too heavy for Americans, or if it is seen as unfair for Americans to continue to lead, who is prepared to take America's place? I think those who rule in Iran, China, and Russia are probably eager for the task, but I hope it's not controversial to say those are all despots; that's who we'd be turning to.

There are those—and I strongly suspect President Obama is among them—who believe in what they call global governance, the idea that America should increasingly cede power and sovereignty to transnational institutions and the "international community." The problem is that the international community also is dominated by despots, by very bad actors such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, recently renamed the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. George Orwell would have loved that change. The OIC is the most powerful and nefarious international organization that most Americans have never heard of. It dominates the U.N. general assembly in league with the also misleadingly named non-aligned nations.

I'm not going to dwell now on the President's budgetary priorities, which Kim and Marc have talked about. They also talked about the weakening of America's military, quite purposeful; the failure to provide adequate missile defense for the homeland, which is also taking place; the fact that it has long been America's policy to borrow huge amounts of money from the Chinese

Communists who want to diminish us and to transfer that wealth to the oil-rich Islamist states who want to destroy us. I don't think that's a great policy, but it's our policy.

Instead, I'm going to use the few minutes I have remaining to discuss more kinetic threats to America's national security. In particular, the Bush Administration waged what it called a global war on terrorism, yet against Iran, the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, no serious actions were taken. The Obama Administration is waging what Obama himself has called a "war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates," yet he and his advisers have been reluctant to articulate the fairly obvious fact—what has become indisputable—that Iran and al-Qaeda are affiliated. The Taliban is also an al-Qaeda affiliate.

To be fair, senior Obama officials have come closer to calling a spade a spade. Last week, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, talking to a Senate committee, described the relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda as a "longstanding marriage." That's an affiliation, a long-standing marriage. You had to listen carefully to hear him actually say that. Let me read you what his exact words were:

Iran has harbored al-Qaeda leaders, facilitators. [They have been] under house arrest conditions. [Iran's rulers] have had this sort of standoff arrangement with al-Qaeda allowing [al-Qaeda] to exist [inside Iran], but not to foment any operations directly from Iran, because they're

sensitive about "Hey, we might come after them as well."<sup>5</sup>

So there's been this long-standing shotgun marriage, or marriage of convenience. I think probably Iranians may think they might use al-Qaeda in the future as a surrogate or proxy. This is not quite a model of analytic clarity, but at least it does approach reality. By the way, note the cryptic warning about Iran deploying al-Qaeda terrorists down the road.

Also last week, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, MOIS, which it described as Iran's premier intelligence organization, for its sponsorship of terrorism, and among the terrorist groups the Treasury specifically said MOIS supports is al-Qaeda. The forms this support takes include facilitating movement of al-Qaeda operatives in Iran; providing al-Qaeda members with documents, identification cards, and passports; and also providing money and weapons to al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq.

---

**THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION IS WAGING A "WAR AGAINST AL-QAEDA AND ITS AFFILIATES," YET THE PRESIDENT AND HIS ADVISERS HAVE BEEN RELUCTANT TO ARTICULATE THE FAIRLY OBVIOUS FACT THAT IRAN AND AL-QAEDA ARE AFFILIATED.**

---

Michael Ledeen and Tom Joscelyn, my colleagues at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, have for years been

connecting the dots between Iran and al-Qaeda, and former CIA Director Jim Woolsey, who is FDD's chairman, also has long argued that Islamist terrorists, despite whatever differences they may have ideologically or theologically, can and do engage in what Jim Woolsey calls "joint ventures to accomplish common goals." Joscelyn has extensively researched this cooperation. Back in 2007, he wrote, "No fallacy today is more misguided or more dangerous than the widespread belief that Iran, the world's premier state sponsor of terrorism, and al-Qaeda are not allies in the terrorist war against the West."

A corollary myth holds that Hezbollah, Iran's terrorist proxy and the A-Team of international terrorist organizations, has also not allied itself with al-Qaeda. One example: The terrorist attack that killed 19 Americans at Khobar Towers in 1996 was almost certainly an Iranian-al-Qaeda joint venture, but the Clinton Administration chose to shut down investigators from the FBI in the belief—misguided, though widespread at the time—that more moderate Iranians were coming to power in Tehran and that revealing the extent of Iranian participation in Khobar Towers would impede diplomatic efforts.

Iran also was implicated in al-Qaeda's 1998 bombing of America's embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. When federal prosecutors that same year indicted al-Qaeda members, they specifically noted that al-Qaeda had forged alliances with "representatives of the government of Iran and its associated terrorist

---

5. Quoted in Clifford D. May, "Al-Qaeda's Big Fat Iranian Wedding," National Review Online, February 23, 2012, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/291754/al-qaeda-s-big-fat-iranian-wedding-clifford-d-may> (March 23, 2012).

group Hezbollah for the purpose of working together against their perceived common enemies in the West, particularly the United States.”

In November of last year, a Washington, D.C., court found that Iran had provided training for the al-Qaeda terrorists at Hezbollah camps in southern Lebanon. The court stated unequivocally that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of providing material aid and support to terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda.

What about the attacks three years later, the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington? The 9/11 commissioners said they found no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attacks. However, intelligence obtained by 9/11 commissioners or their staffers just before the release of the report—too late for serious examination—showed what Tom Joscelyn called “suspicious flights taken by the muscle hijackers.” Some of the flights were routed through Lebanon, where Hezbollah is based and controls the airport.

Interestingly, most of the muscle hijackers also transited through Iran

to the U.S. The commissioners wrote, “We believe this topic requires further investigation by the U.S. government.” Such investigation has not been conducted, or if it has been, the results have never been made public.

In the years since 2001, Iran has continued to cooperate with al-Qaeda. In January 2009, Treasury designated four senior al-Qaeda members who had received Iranian assistance. Last July, Treasury designated six al-Qaeda operatives who use a network headquartered in Iran to move cash and terrorists. Iran, Treasury noted at the time, is a critical transit point for funding to support al-Qaeda’s activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And in September 2011, the State Department designated a Hamas operative, Mohamed Hesham Mohamed Hismal Abul Ghazaleh, linking him to both Iran and al-Qaeda.

In recent days, Britain’s Sky News has been reporting that their intelligence sources have strong evidence that Iran has been supplying al-Qaeda with training in the use of advanced explosives. Sky News claims it has seen a secret intelligence memo describing intensive cooperation over recent months

between Iran and al-Qaeda. Sky News adds, “Iran has significantly stepped up its investment in maintenance and improvement of operational and intelligence ties with the al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan in recent months. We know that an operation is underway; we assess the most likely target is to be European.”

In light of all this, why has there been so little public discussion of the Iranian–al-Qaeda relationship? Two reasons suggest themselves. One, scholars, journalists, and intelligence analysts who denied this connection in the past are reluctant to admit that they were wrong. And two, perhaps even more important, knowledge conveys responsibility. If Iran is and long has been married to al-Qaeda, and if Iran is now just a few spins of a centrifuge away from acquiring nuclear weapons, it follows that strong measures against this growing threat need to be taken.

But that’s a message many Americans don’t want to hear, and it’s certainly a message that America’s current leaders don’t want to tell them.