CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

ON JANUARY 20, 2009, Barack Hussein Obama was sworn into office as the first black American president of the world's most powerful country. He bore the name of his Muslim father from Kenya, but his white mother and her parents—who hailed from Kansas—had raised him in Indonesia and Hawaii. He was already a historic figure on the day that he entered the Oval Office, and history has weighed heavily on his shoulders ever since. Elected president at a time when the U.S. economy was plummeting into the Great Recession, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of his first year in office while the United States was still engaged in two wars in the greater Middle East, he had ample reason to feel that his destiny was to make history. And from his first days in office, Barack Obama was intent on doing more than just being there, undertaking a breathtaking array of domestic initiatives in his first year as president.

When it came to foreign policy, he had already developed an activist vision of his role in history: he intended to refurbish America's image abroad, especially in the Muslim world; end its involvement in two wars; offer an outstretched hand to Iran; reset relations with Russia as a step toward ridding the world of nuclear weapons; develop significant cooperation with China on both regional and

global issues; and make peace in the Middle East. By his own account, the forty-fourth president of the United States sought nothing less than to bend history's arc in the direction of justice, and a more peaceful, stable global order.[1]

This vision manifested itself early in Obama's bid for the presidency. It appeared at first to be a campaign tactic designed to differentiate his candidacy from the record of the George W. Bush administration as well as the policies advocated by his main primary rival, Hillary Rodham Clinton. But it would subsequently become clear that Obama's vision was thought through as both good politics and ambitious foreign policy. Its leitmotif was uplifting rhetoric—"Change we can believe in," "Yes, we can," "Our time has come"—notable more for its inspirational and emotional character than policy specifics. He borrowed a phrase from early Obama supporter and former presidential candidate Bill Bradley, as he developed the idea of a "new American story."[2] And while his primary focus was on the home front, his messages about foreign policy, America's role in the world, and the demands of the twenty-first century across the globe were also central to his vision for what he would do if the American people chose him as their president.

When it came to specifics, there was a clear "anything but Bush" flavor to many of his stances, beginning with opposition to the Iraq war, a willingness to engage pragmatically with dictators, and an emphasis on enhancing the roles of diplomacy and multilateralism in American foreign policy. These three aspects of Obama's strategy—and his role in implementing it—were interwoven into what became a seamless and appealing message from a candidate whom the American people would soon vault into the White House.

For most other candidates, foreign policy amounted to a set of policy positions. For Obama, by contrast, his foreign policy vision became part of the atmosphere and attitudes that his campaign evoked. For example, in his "Yes, we can" speech given on January 8, 2008—after *losing* the New Hampshire primary to Hillary

Clinton that same evening—he wrapped his global vision into his broader message of hope: "Yes, we can, to justice and equality. Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can."[3]

Healing the nation and repairing the world were two sides of Obama's coin—a message of change, hope, and audacity unified his domestic and overseas agendas under a common banner. And his particular "American story" spoke to many around the world as well.[4] Indeed, a BBC poll taken in September 2008 in twenty-two foreign countries showed a four-to-one advantage for Obama over his general election opponent Senator John McCain.[5]

Obama sought to define himself as a progressive candidate who had consistently opposed what had become an unpopular war in Iraq. This enabled him to appeal to the party's left at the same time as he distinguished himself from those candidates, notably Hillary Clinton, who had voted for the war.[6] Among the primary contestants, he was not the most hurried in his plan to get out of Iraq; Governor Bill Richardson, Representative Dennis Kucinich, and Senator John Edwards were to his left on that point. But he was hardly the model of caution, either. His initial proposal in early 2007 would have redeployed all U.S. combat forces out of Iraq by March 2008—within fourteen months, before Obama could even become president and before the troop surge ordered by President Bush could be given a chance to work.

In a July 14, 2008, *New York Times* op-ed published just before he left for Iraq on a battlefield tour, he reiterated what had become his plan for rapidly downsizing forces there should he be elected president. While emphasizing the need to be "as careful getting out of Iraq as we were careless getting in," he spoke of redeploying the combat brigades in sixteen months—before the summer of 2010.[7]

Another signature Obama idea from the campaign emphasized his willingness to negotiate with rogue state leaders in places such as Iran and North Korea. He was careful not to sound apologetic for these countries' actions or optimistic that talks would

themselves quickly produce breakthroughs. But he opened himself to the charge, amplified by Senator McCain, that he was too willing to negotiate personally with such leaders. Obama retorted that he would choose the time and place of any such meeting in a manner consistent with American interests.[8] While this did not satisfy critics who thought he was demeaning the office of the presidency and displaying naïveté about what it would take to convince the likes of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chavez to change their hostile policies toward the United States, Obama was willing to run that risk. He was happy to appear the anti-Bush candidate on the matter, but it also fit his pragmatic approach. In situations of conflict in his own life, he had always sought to bridge differences through dialogue, and he believed that dealing with foreign leaders—for which he had almost no experience—should be no different.

This approach offered a pathway toward better relations with allies and neutral countries—who often perceived the Bush administration as unilateralist and too quick to use force—if not necessarily with the extremists themselves. By returning to diplomacy and countering the perception of America as prone to knee-jerk military interventionism, Obama hoped to find a way to restore U.S. standing, especially in the Arab and Muslim worlds. As he put it in a speech at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington in the summer of 2007:

> The lesson of the Bush years is that not talking does not work. Go down the list of countries we've ignored and see how successful that strategy has been. . . . It's time to turn the page on the diplomacy of tough talk and no action. It's time to turn the page on Washington's conventional wisdom that agreement must be reached before you meet, that talking to other countries is some kind of reward, and that Presidents can only meet with people who will tell them what they want to hear.[9]

Going beyond what he saw as repairing the damage of his predecessor's mistakes, Obama also emphasized a more fundamental reorientation of American foreign policy. In substance, Obama argued, it needed to pay more attention to the "global commons" that were threatened by terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and pandemic disease. In style, American leadership required a new spirit of humility, "of quiet confidence and sober intelligence, a spirit of care and renewed competence."[10] But there was nothing humble about his objectives, as he outlined them in his July 2008 speech in Berlin: a planet saved from famine, rising oceans, and carbon emissions; a world without nuclear weapons; and the redemption of those left behind by globalization through providing them with dignity, opportunity, and "simple justice."[11]

Clearly Obama knew that he would not end global hunger, abolish nuclear weapons, and end the threat of global warming within a four-year or even an eight-year presidency. Taking all of his goals so literally would be unrealistic and unfair. But it would be equally incorrect to dismiss his focus on such high-minded objectives as simply cynical campaign politics. While he would be quick to acknowledge that the road would be long and arduous, he nevertheless believed that he could make meaningful progress on all or most of these historic challenges on his watch—and he certainly recognized the degree to which laying out such ambitious visions could motivate followers and electrify the world at the prospect of his presidency.

Not all of Obama's words were peacelike. In addition to his toughness on Afghanistan— promising to deploy at least two more brigades there—the candidate was also firm in his statements about how to handle terrorists and insurgents who resided in Pakistan's tribal areas. In the same summer 2007 speech notable for its promise to return to diplomacy, even with extremist states, Obama declared, "If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets [in Pakistan] and President Musharraf won't act, we will."[12]

At the time, both Senators McCain and Clinton lambasted Obama for showing his inexperience by suggesting that he would ignore Pakistani sovereignty when pursuing terrorists.[13] Commentators saw it—together with his promise to step up the war in Afghanistan—as an attempt by Obama to cover his flanks from Republican charges that he was weak on defense as he advanced his progressive foreign policy agenda. But as the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, in Abbottabad, Pakistan, would demonstrate, the candidate was deadly serious.

Above all, Obama was promising a major break with the past and historic change for the future. This image of a new domestic agenda, a new global architecture, and a transformed world was crucial to his ultimate success as a candidate. Just how well it would set him up to assume the reins of power once elected was, however, a different matter. There was inevitable tension between his soaring rhetoric and desire to depart fundamentally from the policies of the Bush administration, on the one hand, and his instinct for governing pragmatically, on the other. He may have recognized the tension all along, but certainly not all of his followers did. Nor did many of those in Congress and foreign capitals with whom he would have to work in pursuing his vision.

In seeking to resolve that tension, Obama's foreign policy has repeatedly manifested a combination of the realist's pragmatic approach to the world as it is and the idealist's progressive approach to a new world order that he seeks to shape. He is, in that sense, a hybrid president: a progressive pragmatist. He is progressive in his earnest efforts to promote the big-picture goals of reducing nuclear dangers, the risks of climate change, poverty, and conflict—bending history in the direction of justice, as Martin Luther King inspired him to do. At times this stance has served him well, but at other times it has generated a yawning gap between his declared objectives and the means he is prepared to use to achieve them. Obama has proven to be progressive where possible but pragmatic when necessary. Given the harsh, tumultuous reality of

international politics in the twenty-first century, that necessity has won out most of the time.

FROM REMAKING THE WORLD TO REPAIRING IT

Obama's pragmatic side manifested itself early in his presidency, as the state of the U.S. economy required immediate and sustained attention. Even as Obama's victory was making history, developments of historic proportions were occurring in the nation's financial sector. For Obama, this became issue number one, not only for domestic policy but foreign policy, too, as the president-elect began to build his team and prepared to assume office.

The magnitude of the economic crisis that President Obama inherited was profound. Just before the rescue of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and the bailout of AIG in September of 2008, the Congressional Budget Office issued a semiannual projection of the country's future economic prospects. Among its prognostications were deficits for the following three fiscal years of $438 billion, $431 billion, and $325 billion. GDP growth rates for 2008 and 2009 were expected to be low but positive—1.5 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively. That was then.

In practice, the situation deteriorated rapidly and drastically. Deficits skyrocketed, a result of the crisis and ensuing slowdown in the economy (meaning reduced tax revenues and increased countercyclical costs for programs like unemployment insurance) as well as the costs of the financial bailout and subsequent Obama stimulus package. A 4.1 percent reduction in GDP made this the steepest peak-to-trough recession in the post–World War II era. Actual deficits exceeded $1 trillion in 2009, 2010, and 2011.[14] Warren Buffett described the situation as an economic Pearl Harbor, the equivalent of a wartime situation—phrases that he had never used before in his career.[15] Real estate values declined by 10 percent before the recession even began, and then by more than 20 percent additionally before beginning an anemic and only piecemeal recovery. Household wealth fell by more than 20 percent

across the nation over the course of the recession.[16] Unemployment grew to 10 percent and declined from those heights only very slowly, even well after the recession technically ended. Obama and his team—Michael Froman and Larry Summers at the White House, Timothy Geithner at Treasury, together with the Federal Reserve's Ben Bernanke and others—worked furiously to arrest the mushrooming crisis.

Arguably the most difficult steps to avert catastrophe were taken late in the Bush presidency, with the Troubled Assets Relief Program, passed by Congress early in October, as well as associated actions by the Treasury and Federal Reserve designed to bail out or otherwise sustain key financial institutions. But Obama still had to play a major role in determining which institutions to rescue (like General Motors) and taking other steps to arrest the economy's free fall and attempt to stimulate growth.

The economic collapse and threat of worse things to come had profound implications for Obama's foreign policy. The crisis, though largely—if not primarily—American made, quickly became global in its economic effects. For example, in the last quarter of 2008, global GDP declined at a 6 percent annual rate.[17] If a global collapse were to be avoided, quick collective action with other powerful economies would be essential.

The Obama administration did this, first informally and then more formally, by working with a broader group of countries than the traditional G-8 of the world's larger economies. The formal membership of that group excluded countries such as China, India, and Brazil, whose economies were still experiencing rapid growth and could help most in staving off collapse. As a result, Obama turned to the larger but nascent G-20, in which all the emerging economic powers were represented. At the April 2009 G-20 summit in London, Obama succeeded in persuading most key countries to pass major stimulus packages, with the combined effects of new policies and existing countercyclical tools totaling upwards of $5 trillion in aggregate demand.[18]

The London summit provided additional resources to the International Monetary Fund so that it could help countries in particular need with rescue packages, and undertook a coordinated tightening of rules regulating financial institutions.[19] The danger of each country acting to protect its own economy at the expense of others was largely avoided, demonstrating a surprising degree of collaborative common sense about shared interests.

Even achieving these limited goals required a great deal of effort during the administration's early months. The president personally, along with Secretary Geithner and much of the administration's foreign policy and economic teams, was frequently involved in promoting and coordinating the international bailout packages. In the early weeks, many of Obama's initial calls to foreign leaders focused on the crisis, as did his first meeting with a foreign head of government (the Japanese prime minister, in February), his first trip abroad (to Canada), and his first major overseas trip (to Europe).[20]

Despite these generally successful efforts at triage, America's role in precipitating the global crisis through the popularization of dubious financial instruments had severely tarnished the "Washington consensus" of free markets, reduced government deficits, deregulation, and trade liberalization (among other things) as the model that the rest of the world should adopt. Instead of promoting growth and global economic development through these measures, the United States was now seen by much of the rest of the world as having been responsible for precipitating a profound economic crisis, precisely because of the harm done by its purposely deregulated financial markets. This reputation posed a daunting challenge for Obama as he sought to lead the world out of a crisis that was largely American made.

It should be recognized that Obama's considerable efforts to reach out to global audiences, both on the campaign trail and once in the White House, probably softened the world's anger at the United States. A different sort of U.S. president, at that moment

in history, might have become a lightning rod for the international community's frustrations. Obama deserves more credit than he commonly receives for avoiding such an atmosphere and for his imperfect but still significant steps to coordinate a global response to the financial meltdown and recession. Hardly an apologist for America's mistakes, as sometimes alleged, he was nonetheless able to strike a balanced tone. He employed a sense of humility and a consultative style to go along with his supreme self-confidence and his recognition that despite it all, America must still lead.

Nonetheless, the crisis catapulted China into the forefront of economic powers as Beijing adopted the world's largest stimulus package and helped fuel the global economic recovery. The perception of China's accelerated rise, and of America's relative decline, would complicate U.S.-China relations during the Obama presidency. And indeed, it poses a central dilemma still for American foreign policy, an issue treated in the pages that follow and in the book's concluding chapter.

With its economy in crisis, its armies stretched thin in Iraq and Afghanistan, its traditional allies seemingly in decline, emerging powers in Asia and Latin America demanding their due, and challenges to a Western-led international order being mounted by rogue leaders in Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea, the United States that Obama inherited was no longer the "überpower." America's reputation had been tarnished by the wars and the financial crisis, its hard power strained, and its pursuit of democracy and free markets abroad seriously discredited.

Barack Obama therefore had to find a way to adjust his ambitions and the expectations that he had ignited in the United States and across the globe to the grim realities of world conditions. The progressive instincts of a newly elected Democratic president—to shape the world according to an American liberal's perspective—would have to be tempered. Looking back after Obama's first year in office, observers noted how those realities had elicited pragmatism from the new president—some argued that he had been

"mugged by reality." But in fact, the pragmatism had been present long before Obama's quest for the presidency.

Obama is a deeply intelligent and deliberative individual. His experience with community organizing in Chicago seems to have bred in him a belief in human progress achieved in small but determined steps. In his Nobel Peace Prize speech at the end of his first year, Obama cited President Kennedy's call to focus on "a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions." His task, as he defined it, was not to seek transformational change abroad but to pursue a more modest effort to "bend history in the direction of justice."

This balancing act pleased few and provided fodder for Obama's critics. His compromises were interpreted as signs of weakness, and his inability to produce clean outcomes in short order was taken as an indication of incompetence. His efforts to engage competing powers seemed to come at the cost of ignoring traditional allies. His initial reluctance to unfurl the banner of human rights and democracy in Iran, the Arab world, and China was labeled as an abandonment of values-based diplomacy. Above all, his approach caused some to question whether he had any strategy beyond responding to the situation he inherited by making pragmatic adjustments to manage adversaries and competitors abroad—so that he could focus on pressing domestic priorities.

This composite narrative on Obama's foreign policy, however, misses a significant subtext in the president's approach to the world, which is now emerging in sharper focus as it takes on greater form and substance. Put simply, Obama is more than just a reactive realist pursuing a "counterpunch" grand strategy. The forty-fourth president of the United States has it clearly in mind to pursue his higher vision: to shape a new, multilateral global order with America still in the lead, especially in matters of hard power, but sharing more responsibilities and more burdens with others where possible or necessary.

USHERING IN THE EMERGING NEW GLOBAL ORDER

The first pillar of this new order was a changed relationship with the large rising powers in Asia. This meant, Obama believed, treating China with the respect it deserved as an emerging global power while encouraging it to assume the responsibilities that went with such status. It also required an even greater focus on India as a rapidly growing economic power in China's neighborhood than under Bush and Clinton, one whose potential could, over time, rival that of China. It took a while for the president to arrange a visit to India, but his announcement there that the United States would support a permanent seat for India in the UN Security Council—however far-fetched in current circumstances—underscored the enhanced role he hoped India would play in the new global order.

This did not quite add up to a fundamental remaking of the international system for the twenty-first century; indeed, with its focus on "Russia reset" and occasional reference to the diplomatic style of the first President Bush, Obama's worldview on multilateralism was quite realist in its calculations: India would not only receive a seat at the high table, its rise could also help to balance China's power. Securing Russian cooperation would also serve the purpose of containing Iran's ambitions.

But this was intended, in other ways, as a fundamental break from the behavior of the second President Bush, especially during the latter's first term. Under President Obama, the United States would no longer attempt to dictate to others or act unilaterally, on the easy assumption that other states would simply fall in line. In making more room for other powers, Obama would also seek to recast American power. There would be a greater focus on diplomacy and engagement, including with rogue states such as Iran and North Korea; an attempt to recapture moral leadership by ending the war in Iraq and solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and a necessary emphasis on rebuilding America's strength at home, the better to continue America's role abroad as the key global power.

In particular, President Obama sought Chinese and Indian partnerships in managing the "global commons" through dealing with climate change and promoting trade and development. In this context, Obama's decision to elevate the role of the G-20 over the G-8 in his first days in office was more than just a pragmatic response to urgent circumstances; it fit within his broader purpose of encouraging India and China to assume their responsibilities for the well-being of the planet.

Understandably, the Europeans feared being left behind by Obama's focus on emerging powers, a fear underscored by their absence from the room in Copenhagen when Obama negotiated the Copenhagen Climate Accord with the Indian, Chinese, Brazilian, and South African leaders late in 2009. Nevertheless, there was a role for them, too, in Obama's global vision. Because the Europeans shared common values and interests with the United States, Obama sought a stronger and more united Europe to serve as a like-minded partner for global action and to secure "a century that is more peaceful, more prosperous, and more just."[21] But if the United States would have to accept a diminished role as "first among equals," so too would Europe have to adjust by making room for the emerging powers to take their seats at the table, whether it be in the G-20, the International Monetary Fund, or an eventually enlarged UN Security Council.

A second pillar of Obama's framework for the emerging global order was nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, "to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons," as the president put it in his April 2009 Prague speech.[22] Russia was a critical partner in this effort, which is why Obama sought the "reset" in relations to remove the frictions generated by Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's efforts to expand NATO's writ to Russia's borders and by the latter's determination to deploy an antimissile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) signed with Russian president Medvedev in March 2010, with its reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear

arsenals, was a manifestation of this new partnership, designed to set an example to the rest of the world. Obama also sought to promote a rules-based system in which the "world must stand together to prevent the spread of these weapons"—hence the April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit's effort to promote greater international control of nuclear material, and the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. The latter enunciated a new doctrine covering America's nuclear arsenal: the United States declared a "no first use" nuclear commitment toward those states that would foreswear nuclear weapons.

In this new U.S.-shaped order, Obama wanted to ensure that those who broke the rules would face consequences—sanctions that "exact a real price." Hence the passage of a UN Security Council resolution in June 2010, with Russia and China voting in favor, that mandated tougher sanctions against Iran for its violations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

A third pillar of Obama's framework involved turning Bush's combative relations with the Muslim world into a positive partnership. This goal was particularly important to Obama's vision, in part because the United States was engaged in two wars in the Muslim world, and having public opinion there support America could help the effort. But improved relations were also needed to advance the broader effort of combating terrorism and pressuring Muslim Iran to curb its nuclear program. Obama also believed that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by establishing a Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel would be helpful to solidifying this U.S.-Muslim rapprochement. Middle East peacemaking therefore became his priority, too.

Although Obama's vision included combating terrorism as part and parcel of this global agenda—"a common cause on behalf of our common security"—he did not embrace Bush's concept of a "global war on terror." Instead, his strategy for combating terrorism entailed a very specific focus on defeating al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan (as well as in Yemen and Somalia) and removing

it as a threat to the United States and the emerging global order that Obama sought to shape.

Promoting democracy abroad also was not part of Obama's vision, evidently reflecting his strong conviction that George W. Bush's foreign policy was an unmitigated disaster for the United States. The war in Iraq, which Obama considered unjustified from the start, was ultimately justified by Bush as a way to spread democracy to the Arab world. That goal, together with Bush's insistence on elections as the vehicle for achieving it, had led to the election of Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Obama preferred supporting the more abstract notion of "universal human rights"—freedom of speech and assembly, equal rights for women, rule of law, and accountable government—rather than free elections that would end authoritarianism in the Middle East. In Cairo in June 2009, he declared that "there is no straight line to realize this promise" and that without those rights, "elections alone do not make true democracy."[23]

At the outset Obama had two more concrete foreign policy goals: preventing a global economic meltdown while also protecting America from immediate threats. Beyond that, establishing workable relations with states such as China and Russia, controlling nuclear dangers, and improving the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world were his top priorities. There were other important foreign policy goals, such as mitigating climate change, but promotion of democracy or human rights received less emphasis since Obama recognized that shaping a new global order would inevitably require partnerships with countries that did not meet democratic standards. Only a revolution in the Arab world—one that Obama did not anticipate, let alone promote—would provide him with the opportunity to allow his progressive instincts to take flight by elevating democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority. But as we shall see, such instincts were still tempered by the pragmatist's caution in places where America's interests trumped progressive values.

BUILDING THE FOREIGN POLICY TEAM

While Obama had a clear vision, he had no experience in making or executing foreign policy. To implement his grand design, the new president would have to surround himself with a talented and experienced national security team. His choice of defense secretary would be critical to his ability to end America's involvement in two wars while at the same time defeating al Qaeda and denying his political opponents the opportunity to paint him as weak on defense. His choice of secretary of state would be critical to his ability to pursue "tough diplomacy" that included engaging rogue dictators, recasting relations with established and emerging powers, and resolving conflicts in South Asia and the Middle East. Since his instincts were pragmatic, he chose nonideological, practical people to help him. And since he modeled himself on Abraham Lincoln and was hardly lacking in self-confidence, he was intrigued by the idea of putting together a "team of rivals"—strong personalities from across the political aisle and from among his Democratic primary competitors who could give him political cover even as they might offer him hard-nosed and sometimes contradictory advice.

Viewed in this context, Obama's decision to ask Robert Gates to remain as secretary of defense seems natural, even obvious. But it was unprecedented: no other secretary of defense has served two consecutive presidents from different parties, especially not after a president controversial for his global activities was succeeded by someone who had consistently and stridently criticized his predecessor for that very foreign policy.[24]

On one level, the Gates selection made sense: the nation was at war; a young, inexperienced senator from a party often criticized for its national security performance had been elected president; so why not maintain continuity with an experienced leader who was widely viewed as nonpartisan, serious, and effective? Yet Gates was

a Republican, and there were highly qualified Democrats available to do the job who had been loyal to their party and to Obama.[25]

The decision by Obama was thus clearly about more than politics. Obama chose Gates on merit for his pragmatism, seriousness, focus, and good judgment, as well as his ability to help the young progressive president overcome the skepticism of the military.[26]

Gates provided a sure and steady hand during the Iraq and Afghanistan strategy reviews that occupied much of 2009 for the president. He also provided wise counsel on national security matters such as the challenge of Iran and the rise of China. And he was vocal about favoring a boost in the State Department's capabilities so that diplomacy could play a bigger and more effective role. Gates would joke that there were more people in the bands and orchestras of the U.S. armed forces than in the entire U.S. diplomatic corps. That was music to Obama's ears.

Gates also provided continuity on key matters such as defense strategy and the defense budget.[27] He focused defense resources even more intently on the wars the nation was involved in and canceled several futuristic weapons systems he did not think the nation could afford.[28] And within a couple of years, when huge deficits contributed to the rise of the Tea Party, the Republican takeover of the House in the fall 2010 elections, and growing anxiety about the country's economic future and national security fundamentals, Gates became a credible voice pushing for modest but real reductions in defense spending.[29]

Obama's choice of Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state was based on a more political calculation. Obama liked her toughness, intellect, work habits, diligence, and, of course, pragmatism. But her popularity within the Democratic Party also gave this choice a powerful political logic. In one stroke it removed the divisions of a hard-fought and drawn-out primary campaign. It tamed Bill Clinton and removed Hillary from the Senate, thereby displacing from the arena two high-profile and credible potential critics.

When this advantage was combined with her natural attributes, Hillary Clinton became an obvious choice.[30]

Over time, Obama's relations with Gates and Clinton differed significantly. Gates worried little about being on precisely the same page as the president—after all, what could Obama do? Firing Gates, or even criticizing him, would undermine the cover that Gates provided. On the other hand, in the first year at least, Clinton showed a serious desire to prevent any daylight from showing between herself and the president, presumably out of concern that she would be accused of disloyalty. When the president had made up his mind, his secretary of state tended to amplify his policy in public; when he was still deliberating, she avoided staking out a public position.

By about the second year, with her popularity soaring and Obama's plummeting, the balance of dependency shifted as talk of putting her on the ticket for Obama's reelection bid emerged. Nevertheless, on the one occasion that she inadvertently showed independence—over whether Egypt's Hosni Mubarak should stay or go—the White House backgrounders pounced with alacrity, and she took care not to let it happen again, expressing her frustration instead by making clear that she intended to resign her post at the end of Obama's first term. However, as Obama entered his fourth year, his necessary preoccupation with reelection left Clinton with greater room to take the lead in foreign affairs, staking out a stronger position than Obama had expressed on democratic transitions in the Arab world and nurturing the effort to counter China in Asia.

With strong and experienced personalities at the helm at the Pentagon and State Department and a vice president with deep experience in foreign policy, Obama felt he needed a particular type of person to head up his National Security Council. He decided against selecting among his closest foreign policy advisers during the campaign—Susan Rice, Greg Craig, and James B. Steinberg. Rice and Craig had clashed too openly with the Clinton campaign for either of them to assume the job of coordinating the

activities of the new secretary of state. Dispatching Rice to the UN proved to be a good solution since her combination of idealism and toughness would help greatly in generating support for Obama's global agenda. Taking Craig on as White House counsel proved less efficacious because his efforts to fulfill the president's commitment to close Guantanamo ran afoul of domestic politics. Teaming Steinberg with Clinton as deputy secretary of state generated its own complications.

Steinberg was well suited to the task of national security adviser, having served as deputy national security adviser during Bill Clinton's second term and developed a keen ability to balance strategy and politics in his development of policy options for the president. His contributions were numerous, perhaps most of all on China policy, and his departure from the State Department after two years was a loss for Obama.

The net effect, however, was that in selecting his national security team, Obama chose to sideline or subordinate those campaign advisers who might have reinforced his progressive instincts in favor of outsiders or adversaries who would promote his more pragmatic side. The choice of General James Jones as national security adviser again reflected a presidential desire to balance his own appearance of idealism, youth, and inexperience with a team of seasoned, older defense and foreign policy experts. Jones certainly had the defense credentials as a former Marine commandant and NATO supreme allied commander. But he barely knew Obama and had no exposure to his worldview; indeed, he had a closer relationship with Obama's rival for the presidency, John McCain. Jones could coordinate a complex foreign policy apparatus, but he was not known as a global strategist.

Whatever the justification, Obama's choice suggested that he wanted a coordinator, rather than a strategic thinker in the mold of Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski, as the person who would be the president's closest adviser on national security issues. This penchant for selecting a coordinator as national security adviser

continued with Obama's choice of Tom Donilon to succeed Jones after the latter had spent only two years in the position. As Jones's deputy, Donilon had demonstrated both considerable skill at coordination and finely tuned political antennae. But his previous foreign policy experience had been limited to two years as Secretary of State Warren Christopher's chief of staff, another coordinating position; Donilon was not a likely candidate to develop the integrated strategy that would help Obama fulfill his grand design.

Obama's motive in making these two appointments only emerged over time, as it became increasingly clear that the young and inexperienced president intended to be his own overall national security strategist. Beyond Jones and Donilon, he depended on two National Security Council staffers who had worked closely with him during the campaign—Denis McDonough and Ben Rhodes; as of 2012 both are serving as Donilon's deputies. However, they had no previous foreign policy experience in the executive branch; their task was to articulate the president's foreign policy rather than design and conceptualize it.

Obama's interest in presenting to the world a team of experienced people—but not depending on them for designing overall strategy—also manifested itself in his appointment of two highfliers as special envoys for Afghanistan-Pakistan and Middle East peace. Richard Holbrooke had successfully negotiated the Dayton Accords that ended the war in Bosnia; George Mitchell had successfully negotiated the Belfast Agreement that ended the conflict in Northern Ireland. Both were well suited to deal with the most complicated diplomatic challenges on Obama's agenda. But over time it would become clear that Obama did not intend that they would actually fly high. Instead, the White House clipped their wings and denied them the backing they needed to play effective roles. Holbrooke died in office; Mitchell left quietly after two years of fruitless effort. Neither of them fulfilled his mandate.

Obama nevertheless believed strongly in a deliberative process in which he wanted to know the views of all the NSC principals

and would focus their presentations by asking them penetrating questions. He would listen attentively and then retire to take his own counsel and make his decisions. Often, especially in the case of his decision to send additional troops to Afghanistan, he would take his time, leaving his lieutenants uncertain about his policy preferences for long periods. On other occasions he would take matters into his own hands when it would have been better to leave them to his principals to implement.

In these ways, Obama deliberately put a huge burden on himself for the conceptualization, articulation, and sometimes even implementation of his foreign policy. Brilliant, self-confident, ambitious, and aloof, he intended to remake the world in his own manner, developing the strategy for doing so essentially by himself, leaving to his aides the maintenance work.

AN INCOMPLETE AGENDA

Along the way, Obama the candidate with a vision became Obama the president with a pragmatic approach to implementing it. Seemingly intractable circumstances turned him from the would-be architect of a new global order into a leader focused more on repairing relationships and reacting to crises—most notably the global economic crisis. Yet it is still possible to discern him trying to shape the emerging order in the process. That is a central story of Obama's foreign policy in the first three years of his presidency. Judged by the standard of protecting American interests, it has so far worked out reasonably well; judged by the standard of fulfilling his vision of a new global order, it unsurprisingly remains very much a work in progress.

As we detail in these pages, there have been some notable foreign policy successes: rebuilding America's standing in much of the world, resetting the relationship with Russia, effectively managing relations with China, achieving a UN Security Council resolution imposing harsh sanctions on Iran, overdue but welcome free trade accords, a ratified New START treaty, the elimination of Osama

bin Laden and significant weakening of al Qaeda, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and the beginning of downsizing U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

However, there also have been some notable setbacks: no progress on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran still bent on acquiring the means to produce and deliver nuclear weapons, North Korea still developing its nuclear arsenal, deepening frictions in U.S.-Pakistan relations, Mexico awash in drugs and violence, America's standing in the Muslim world as low as in Bush's time, and major setbacks on combating climate change.

Still, along the way, one can discern some promising signs of change in the global order: some G-20 coordinated action to deal with the global economic crisis; UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which mandated the use of all necessary means to protect the people of Libya; and Russian and Chinese support for sanctions on Iran.

Part of this mixed record can be attributed to the degree of difficulty involved in reordering the world in the aftermath of a global economic crisis widely viewed as "made in America," compounded by a deeply polarized political environment in Washington that diverted the president's attention and constrained some high-priority foreign policy initiatives, such as that on climate change. Part of it can be attributed to the steep learning curve experienced by any new president, especially one so determined to keep foreign policy initiatives in his own inexperienced hands. And part of it is a function of the hand he has been dealt, where developments beyond Obama's control have rendered some of his best laid plans inoperable.

Now Obama confronts unanticipated revolutions across the Arab world that have compelled him to elevate promotion of democratic change as a priority, even as they jeopardize long-standing American diplomatic and security positions in the vital Middle East. While these crises potentially create new opportunities for Barack Obama to bend the arc of history, his presidency to date highlights both the tumultuous forces of change now coursing

through the global system and the equally daunting obstacles to bending those changes to Obama's will and vision.

We have wrestled collectively with the key question of discerning an overall foreign policy strategy out of the individual elements of Obama's incrementalist approach to world affairs. The fact that other foreign policy experts have offered so many competing versions of Obama's supposed doctrine demonstrates how hard it is to pin him down. Our central thesis begins with the assessment that Obama is a competent pragmatist. He has protected American interests well given the circumstances and, whatever his mistakes along the way, prevented an economic disaster that might have been much worse. But he has not yet put his indelible stamp on foreign affairs or bent the arc of human history in the positive transformational way to which he aspires. And indeed, he has lost some of his ability to explain his bigger vision—to connect the day-to-day management of global affairs with his ambition to lead the country and world in a better direction.

To some extent his challenges in conducting foreign policy have resulted from the magnitude of the global economic crisis, as well as the domestic political difficulties of trying to lead a badly divided country at home. That said, presidents must confront the world as it is and play the hand they are dealt. Obama is not the first chief executive to face far different challenges than he expected when deciding to run for the highest office in the land and most powerful position in the world. Regardless of whether he becomes a one-term or two-term president, ultimately Obama's legacy will be shaped largely by how he is able to help the United States regain its economic strength, confidence, and international appeal. He wanted to heal a nation badly divided in partisan terms, and it appears unlikely that he will succeed anytime soon with that task. But he may still have the chance to do something even bigger and more fundamental: get the wounded nation that he leads back on its feet and able to sustain the leadership role that, even in these changing times, the world still needs it to play.