THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Brookings Intersections Podcast:
Examining President Obama's Legacy

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

ADRIANNA PITA

Contributors:

MOLLY E. REYNOLDS
Fellow, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution

THOMAS WRIGHT
Fellow, Foreign Policy
Director, Project on International Order and Strategy
The Brookings Institution

PITA: Hello, and welcome to Intersections, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. We're the podcast that looks at different angles on policy issues, and today in the very last days of the Obama presidency we are going to take a look back at his presidential legacy. So with me today are Thomas Wright, who's a fellow and director of our Project on International Order and Strategy, and Molly Reynolds, who's a fellow in our Governance Studies program. Molly and Tom, thank you very much for being here.

REYNOLDS: Thanks for having me.

WRIGHT:Thank you.

PITA: So unsurprisingly, if one, in prepping for something like this, starts searching up what Obama's legacy is, there's pieces that run the whole gamut from celebrating it to lambasting it; some that focus really narrowly on policy issues, to some questioning about whether he's going to leave a legacy at all given that the Trump presidency and Republican-controlled House and Senate might be trying to undo everything that he might have accomplished. So I'm looking forward to hearing your take on what his presidential legacy might be. I thought I would just start by mentioning that each of you has a book coming out in the early summer. Tom, your book is coming out in May, it's *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power*; and Molly, your book in June will be *Exceptions to the Rule: The Politics of Filibuster Limitations in the Senate*. Very different subject matters, but both pretty interesting things, so – . So again, thank you both, and I thought I would start with the typical question of, I want like each of you to weigh in, sort of, what you think one or two of his biggest policy accomplishments, and then one or two of the biggest policy failures or missed opportunities were. Molly, would you like to start?

REYNOLDS: Sure, so I spend most of my time thinking about Congress and domestic policy so when you ask this question that's naturally where my mind went, and I think for – in terms of accomplishments – I think any list would have to start with the Affordable Care Act. It's fitting that before I left my office to come over here I was watching the House of Representatives debate early steps in a possible repeal of the law, but I think that that is probably Obama's biggest domestic policy accomplishment. The second thing I would point to is a set of policies, including the stimulus and the Dodd-Frank financial reform law, that were really targeted helping bring the US out of the Great Recession during the early period of the Obama administration.

PITA: And were there any big –

REYNOLDS: Oh, sure, I think there are plenty of big failures as well. I think one that many folks would point to was the inability to get any real legislative action on gun control, particularly starting in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting; and then I would also point towards a couple of policy areas where Obama and the Obama administration, I think, really wanted to be able to work more aggressively with Congress than they were able to and get more durable policy change than they ultimately did. So here I'm thinking about things like climate change and immigration where there were initial efforts to work with Democrats and Republicans in Congress and in 2009 and 2010 there were efforts to do some sort of cap-and-trade bill in Congress, there was a failed effort later in the administration at comprehensive immigration reform, and that's not to say we didn't see major policy accomplishments in those areas. A lot of them ended up having to be accomplished through executive action, which we're now seeing as we're about to transition to a Republican presidency, may them less durable going forward – make it

easier for a new president of the other party to roll them back, because they weren't adopted through legislation passed by Congress and signed by the president.

PITA: Ok. Tom, in the foreign policy and international relations world?

WRIGHT: Yeah, it's a great question and, you know, it it's always hard to tell at such a short distance. The example I often think of is, you know, when President Eisenhower finished his term, a lot of people said “boy,” you know, “you really should have done more in Vietnam, you weren’t that engaged,” and Kennedy sort of came in saying we need to recalibrate the US position in Vietnam, and of course in ten years after that it looked very different, right? Eisenhower looked like a genius for having stayed out, so with all the caveats that it's hard to write history at a time like this, for the Obama administration, I do think in, sort of, 10, 20, 30 years’ time, historians, I think, will sort of identify definitely one major accomplishment and then one sort of shortcoming, and the major accomplishment, I think, is his response to the financial crisis. Particularly internationally, you know, the first few months of the crisis were worse in terms of the damage to the global economy and the US economy than the crisis in the thirties. Various economists have tracked that. And then it sort of bottomed out, and the effect was not as bad, and that's largely because of the international cooperation. In the thirties it was a lot of sort of tit-for-tat, better than your neighbor protectionism, and Obama, and Bush, to his credit, both avoided that, and I think did the right things, and this was a crisis that was really once every 50 years or once every 100 years. And so, when historians look back they will give credit to both.

I think the one area where, particularly in foreign policy, not sort of focused on particular things like Syria or individual failings, I think the meta-issue is that, you know, this is a president who wanted to sort of remake America's role in the world and to remake the

international order. He wanted to transition away from focusing on things that divided nation to tackling common challenges, whether it's terrorism, non-proliferation or climate change; and he wanted to sort of prevent the US. getting pulled back into conflict. And I think what happens in the second term was the world began to transition to a more nationalistic geopolitical world, you know, with Russia invading Ukraine, annexing Crimea, the breakdown of regional order in the Middle East; I mean, this is really the return of geopolitical competition, the return of major power at competition, and he just resisted that frame. They did a lot to try to say "we're not going to be bound by this." You know, Russia's a regional power, it doesn't matter too much, we sort of stay out of the Middle East. And every year it got measurably worse, and now we're in this situation where, you know, we really have not just returned to nationalism elsewhere, but here also in America as well, after sort of a Russian cyberattack which really makes mockery of his claim that Putin wasn't particularly dangerous or didn't pose a threat to the US. And so I think that's sort of willful denial, in a way, of an unwelcome global trend that needed to be sort of recognized and dealt with. I think is part of the negative legacy that he would leave behind.

PITA: I did notice your Tweet referring to his failure to act on the Russian hacking, knowing that they hacked the DNC earlier and not moving on it, and you had Tweeted that that was probably his greatest failure. Which I thought was pretty interesting, I think a lot of people would point to Syria as his biggest, so I just thought that was – from a procedural point of view – so?

WRIGHT: Yeah, well, I mean, just, you know, on that I think Trump's election, I think, is obviously a major, major event and I think it will shape a lot of what people think about Obama's legacy and the Russian hack, you know. Whether or not it directly contributed to

his election or not, it certainly didn't hurt his chances, and that I think is a big part of it and, you know, also when, you know, we don't know that in a hundred years when historians look back at this period, you know, will the main event be the Trump presidency, or will they be writing about Obama? I mean if we are in for anything close to the levels of turbulence some people think, everything that just happened on the last eight years is sort of a prologue to the main event, which could be very, sort of, destabilizing and turbulent, and so that's very unfortunate, I think. But, you know, we'll have to wait and see.

PITA: I did – also wanted to ask you both what you thought might be the least noted, either a compliment or failure, you know, you mentioned Affordable Care Act, improving international cooperation, and those sort of get a lot of coverage and a lot of people will – their brains will automatically go there when you think about Obama's legacy. Wondering if you had any thoughts about something he might have done that might have been more under the radar or had a longer-lasting effect than people might think.

REYNOLDS: It's a great question, and I'm pausing because in my head I have to go through all of the things that do get really solid attention. I think one thing – and this is sort of less on the policy front, but is something that I think is still really important to talk about – is the degree to which, by and large, the last eight years of governance were quite devoid of large scale scandal. And this might be at the front of my mind because we are transitioning into a period where that's unlikely to be true, you know, we spent quite a lot of time during election talking about ethics issues and all of those challenges, you know, we had my colleague in Governance Studies here, Norm Eisen, has been very active on this. But just to sort of look back at the Obama administration and actually think about how, in that sense, it was a real departure from, I think, a lot of other late-twentieth-century periods

of governing, and is likely to be different than what we're about to see, and I think that's easy to overlook and I think it's easy to forget that, at the end of the day, to have good policy, it's not just about, sort of, what you can pass through Congress but it's also about kind of how government works and how well it works for the people it's supposed to serve and so I think that'll be something that we probably don't pay quite as much attention to as we should.

WRIGHT: Yeah I agree with that, that was actually going to be my one too. I mean, I think just the incredible sort of grace and dignity and propriety, really, he acted in such a proper, responsible, ethical way throughout the whole eight years, and how unusual that is to have a presidency that, you know, really has no hint of scandal whatsoever for the people. The President and the First Lady and the family have just acted in a way that I think has made everyone sort of very proud of them. I think that's something that, you know, is probably pretty easy to take for granted and I agree that i think that may well change, obviously, pretty soon, but also it's just historically unusual. You know, most presidents have some sort of scandal and it's incredibly difficult for a president, I think, to ensure that their White House is scandal-free, because it's not just about them, it's about sending a message to all of their team, to all of their officials, to the wider entourage, that certain things are sort of not acceptable, and it's just extraordinary think that he managed to do that. I think on the international front, I do think the climate stuff, I mean, it has gotten some attention, obviously, but I think it does matter and they were very sort of patient and persistent on the climate change diplomacy, even when it was quite difficult in the Paris agreement. I think it's not a – you know, it has its shortcomings, it's certainly not a silver bullet to any of this, but it is sort of progress and I think it took a lot of effort. And, you know,

maybe part of it will be undone, although you know, we'll see, maybe – Trump has given mixed signals on that.

PITA: On the question of governance and how the Obama White House governed, Molly, you had mentioned – you brought up that he did a lot of action through signing agreements and executive action. Can you talk a little bit more broadly about what the changes were in presidential powers; whether there were a lot of changes from Bush to Obama, and what sort of changes he might have made?

REYNOLDS: Sure, so I think when you think about Obama's use of executive power, there are sort of a couple of contextual things to keep in mind. One is that we have seen over, certainly, the course of the 20th century, sort of each new president to try to really push the boundaries of the executive powers of the presidency. Each one tries to go a little bit farther than his predecessor, and so in the sense that you hear folks say, you know, Obama was a very aggressive user of his executive power, that's not inconsistent with, kind of, broad historical trends. And depending if you want to sort of look at the data, depending on which measures you look at, you'll get different pictures of whether Obama, say, issued more or fewer executive orders, signing statements, that sort of thin. From my perspective, and again this is because I spend a lot of time thinking about Congress, I think a really important thing to understand about the Obama administration's use of executive power, particularly in the domestic arena, is the fact that it was, in many cases, in response to an inability to get Congress to do things legislatively. So I think a great example of this is – was the president's executive actions on immigration. They were aimed largely at ensuring that individuals who were brought to this country as young children could remain in the country without fear of deportation, could get work permits, that sort of thing, this whole

DACA program. And so, this came about after the president was unable to get Congress, and Congress was unable within its own walls, to act on some sort of comprehensive immigration reform that would have addressed this and a wide range of other immigration policy problems. And so I think a lot of what we saw out of the Obama White House in terms of executive power domestically really was a response to their inability to work to get Congress to pass the kinds of policies that they wanted to see. And so, to go back to something I said earlier, this has real implications in terms of the durability of policy going forward, that there are certain things where, because they had to resort to doing things through executive action – and there's a lot of different kinds of executive actions that are more or less hard for any president undo – but it is sort of very different than having worked through the legislative process where things have the ability to be a little bit more durable.

PITA: I did want to ask you if the perception that he was trying to do – whether it was more or just be more aggressive about doing things through the executive branch rather than the legislative – might have to do because of the scale of what he was trying to achieve through executive actions, where Clinton or Bush or any previous presidents before, did they do more tinkering around the edges with their signing orders?

REYNOLDS: I mean, we've certainly seen presidents throughout the 20th century use the executive powers, executive actions of various kinds, in very aggressive ways. I think a lot of the opposition or criticism that Obama received for doing what he did is just really a reflection of the fact that, over the course of his administration, public opinion on the president was very polarized by party. And so Democrats, generally, were very in favor of things that Obama was doing; Republicans were generally very against them, and so that very large, very persistent gap in how people saw what the president was doing, the

degree to which they attach – they would say that they opposed things merely because they were associated with the President and not based on, sort of, the substance of the policy. I think what you saw in the executive power realm is just another reflection of that.

PITA: Tom, can I ask you to weigh in on use of executive power in terms of international relations – particularly, some might particularly call out the use of pursuing ISIS under the old Authorization to Use Military Force from 2001 that was for al-Qaeda and what the role of the presidency in pursuing wartime powers is?

WRIGHT: Yeah, you know, he certainly did that but it wasn't just that, I think, on the executive authority side. I mean, waged the war against ISIS but also the opening to Cuba and the Paris climate deal, I mean, these were all largely done without Congress. In fact, in the face of congressional opposition, the Paris deal was deliberately not a treaty to get around the ratification rules. Kerry said that it couldn't be a treaty. And on Cuba, it was sort of executive action on the suspension of sanctions and on other restrictions, and that really allowed the opening to occur. You know, it's I think a little less controversial in the foreign policy space just because the presidency really has been sort of evolving in that direction since World War II, and we've had the emergence of a more sort of imperial presidency in the foreign policy. And although there are, you know, congressional restrictions on war powers and other things, they haven't really being operating as maybe they were intended, and for quite some time. So I think what we have seen is a very active president, I mean, this is somebody who has, I think, used his executive authority in the international space to advance his goals.

And to your original question though on Syria, I mean, I think this is, you know, obviously a huge part of his legacy and it's one that has made a lot of people uneasy. And

the larger sort of drone campaign is something he sort of recognized as well, I mean, he said during his presidency that he wanted, you know, to build a framework that would sort of regulate this for his successors, which a lot of people thought was a little bit odd, but I guess he was saying, “well, I'm wise enough to be able to do this myself but I don't necessarily trust the people down the line.” Now, he didn't know at that point that Trump would be succeeding him, obviously. So, you know, that I think is really unfinished business in terms of, you know, that that framework has not been put into place and he really has loosened that, and it's an interesting counterfactual to ask, had he known four or eight years ago that Donald Trump would be his successor, what would he have done differently on executive authority in foreign policy and I suspect he would have done quite a lot differently, especially on the drone and anti-terrorism campaign, that you may have seen more sort of a regulatory framework put into place. By the time the election happened it was obviously far too late, and so he now bequeaths this sort of legacy to Trump and I think part of what the historical discussion will be will be to sort of hold him to account a little bit for opening some of that up.

PITA: I wanted to get back to looking at the White House’s relationship with Congress, and Molly, you and Phil Wallach, our colleague, had put together an interactive timeline about the many years of fiscal budget fights between the White House and Congress, and the couple things you guys pointed out was that basically these cliffhanger deadlines and eleventh-hour negotiations that became the new normal crisis function on budget, but you did also point out that in terms of the scale of all the other legislative inaction the budget matters were the things that did, even at the eleventh hour, everyone

did agree this has to get done. They did get around to passing it. Can you expand a little bit?

REYNOLDS: Sure, so I think that's a great way to frame it because those two dimensions of the budget battles or fiscal fights as we call them in the timeline that we put together are related to one another. So, in a period of very high congressional gridlock – which is what we have been living through and are continuing to live through, at least until we enter a new period of unified Republican control of Congress and the White House next week – we have really high levels of congressional gridlock and in that kind of environment there's this real emphasis on what can be done in what people often refer to as must-pass bills, and here I'm talking about things like the annual spending bills to keep the government running – and at points even that didn't get accomplished on time, we had the 2013 government shutdown for a couple weeks in October – and then things like raising the debt limit which is an issue that my colleague Phil Wallach has worked on quite a lot.

And so what's happened is that when members of Congress realize that they don't have many other avenues to try to really exert some leverage over the legislative process, they turn to the few things that they expect are definitely going to have to pass because the consequences of inaction are so high. And so that sort of raises the stakes for everyone; it raises the stakes for Congress, it raises the stakes for the White House, and that’s how we end up with these periods of very high fiscal brinkmanship as we call them. And so this was, as you said, a really common feature of policymaking during the Obama era. If you check out the timeline on the Brookings website you'll see that starting in 2011 after Republicans retook control of the House after the 2010 elections, basically every time Congress needed to make some sort of major fiscal decision there was some sort of high-

profile showdown where some faction, usually within the Republican Party in Congress, especially House Republicans, tried to exert some leverage from the Obama administration. And in political science we often refer to this dynamic as strategic disagreement – the idea that both sides think that if they disagree quite prominently with one another, that there are benefits with their electoral basis for – and in terms of increased bargaining power – by kind of taking those strong stance and disagreeing with one another. And there's some really interesting new political science research from two political scientists named David Hopkins and Matt Grossmann that suggests that Republican voters, more so than Democratic voters, prefer their representatives to take principled stance instead of compromising, and I think that that is a real dynamic that we saw during these fiscal fights over the past six years.

PITA: So a lot of people will often talk about the, sort of, the personal relationship that the president has with members of Congress and the presidential leadership in terms of helping to resolve things and keep things moving, but you had written that when we seek to understand executive legislative relations in the Obama era, we should think less about personal skills and relationships and more about structural factors.

REYNOLDS: Absolutely. So this is a thing that I think political scientists, me included, spend a lot of time trying to push back against as a major narrative in the media, and that's not to say – I don't want to say – that the kind of personal relationships that the President may have with key members of Congress don't matter ever. There are certainly presidents who are more or less willing to kind of put in the interpersonal legwork to have a good personal relationship with their counterparts on the Hill. But at the end of the day, much more of how these negotiations and how this bargaining plays out has to do with

structural features of the American political system, like which party is in control of the House and the Senate and which party controls the White House, and especially in recent years, just how polarized Congress is. So there's some really great research, some of it done by my Brookings colleagues Sarah Binder, that suggests that in recent years, the level of polarization between the parties has mattered more than unified party control of Congress has, so that more of why Congress is so gridlocked now has to do with the fact that parties are so far apart than it does with the fact that we've had this period of having Republicans control at least one chamber of Congress and Democrats controlling the White House.

PITA: Ok. And Tom, does that map over, in your experience, to the foreign policy realm? Are things more due to a president's personal charisma, or relationship with other leaders, or maybe the Secretary of State's relationships; or is it more about how the systems work and how they choose go about doing things?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I mean, it's a big debate in international relations about structure and agency, and the extent to which individual presidents will pretty much behave in the same way because of the external sort of environment, but I do think, you know, that strategic choice sort of matters a lot actually, and then particularly for the President of the United States because the US is such a powerful country that it has far fewer constraints than most other countries. I mean, there's very few limits to what it can sort of choose to do, and so there's a wide sort of spectrum of choice and what that individual decides to do matters, you know, a lot and I think we've seen that in this presidency. I mean, Obama is, I think, quite an unusual sort of Commander-in-Chief. He's highly intelligent but tended sometimes more towards sort of the professorial rather than the sort of commander side,

and always tried to have a very sort of calibrated position on everything; sort of highly nuanced, highly analytical, highly contingent and sort of conditional. And he articulated that in a series of interviews including with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* but also in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. And I think we saw that sort of very much, you know, play out in the Middle East in particular, and as I mentioned at the beginning just on this resistance to the sort of geopolitical frame. And I think that sort of really was his personality in the same way that George W. Bush's foreign policy, I think, reflected his more Manichaean sort of worldview. And so I think that sort of predisposition that presidents have I think really sort of comes through and has come through on the foreign policy side.

PITA: I wanted to get a little bit sort of meta about how we think about presidential legacies. There's always that narrative of "well Obama was one of the most polarizing presidents ever, one of the most racially divisive, or…" and to me that always – when you look at his policies, his policies, whatever they achieved or didn't achieve, they weren't actually all that terribly radical, so was it his policies that were polarizing, or was he perceived as polarizing? And so when we think about his legacy, do we think about what his policies actually did or didn't do, or is it about how people perceived his policies, and which one matters more when you – when you come down to examining them?

REYNOLDS: Sure, I mean, I think that there's some of both and I think that to answer the question "which matters more?" depends a little bit on the context that you're looking at. So I think certainly for individuals, for example, who now have health insurance with a result of the Affordable Care Act who did not have health insurance before that law was passed, then for them, yes, that policy change that was accomplished during the Obama era is extremely significant and is, I think, what we should be thinking about when

we kind of answer the question in that way. In terms of thinking about the degree to which he was a very polarizing figure and what that has meant for our political system going forward, I think that when we think about what happened in the 2016 election, I think that is a place where it's really important to think about the degree to which voters had very polarizing opinions of Obama over the course of his presidency. So if you look at presidential approval rating data, Obama – the split between Democratic approval and Republican approval of Obama was historic highs, basically, for the last seven years of his presidency, and averaged about 67% gap between the share of Democrats who said they supported him and the share of Republicans who said that they did. So thinking about that, I think that that's a really important thing to remember as we think back about how we got to the 2016 election, and then what does that mean for what's about to come in the country.

WRIGHT: Yeah, so I don't think he was particularly polarizing on foreign policy. I think he actually reflected pretty much the mainstream view of the American people and probably sort of the mainstream view in both parties. Even though Republicans sort of criticized him over radical Islam and ISIS and all of these things, you know, the country, I think, wants to sort of limit its role internationally, wants to do a little bit less as our colleagues, sort of, Bob Kagan, you know, has argued this sentiment has sort of been brewing since the end of the Cold War and, you know, one can agree with it or disagree with it – I probably disagree with it – but I think it is where the center of gravity is, and in the most recent election it was really only Hillary Clinton of all of the major candidates – Cruz, Bernie, Trump, and Clinton – who was making the argument for a much more robust and engaged and activist foreign policy. So I think that sort of tells us something, you know, about where the country is and also Obama's sort of view, which was, you know, to sort of

go along with that right, and to sort of reinforce that. Now, I think we've seen the consequences of it, particularly in the Middle East and also in Europe, and I would prefer to see a, sort of, a more assertive approach, but I think he was sort of in the mainstream and actually, you know, Trump is very different, I think, and he will go even much further. But he's not sort of obviously making the case for more American leadership either, which I think sort of reflects where his sort of base is so –

REYNOLDS: I mean I think it's, as we sort of look forward to the next president, I think it's important think about to what degree will some of this idea that the president is a polarizing figure continue, and I, at this point, have seen no indication that we're likely to have – to sort of change course and have a sort of large-scale number of Democrats coming over and thinking that Trump is doing a good job, and I think that Republicans generally will sort of be driven by their shared party allegiance. And so I don't sort of see this changing going forward, but I think it is an important thing to think about.

PITA: When we think about Obama's policies and his legacy as the president, do you think that he may have suffered from really high expectations in first coming in – the fact that he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 after his first year in office, you know, the tide of good feeling about the fact that you know, “hey, America elected our first black president, this must say great things about us!” and just sort of the expectations that people had looking at him. Did that affect – ?”

REYNOLDS: One thing I do – where I do think this comes into play is the degree to which he ran on, especially in 2008, this message of changing the way Washington works. Not in a sort of “drain the swamp” way that Trump ran on but, you know, “we can make Washington work better for everyone,” sort of a renewed spirit of bipartisanship, and so that

was his brand, that was the message that he ran on coming into office. And then he had two years where Democrats controlled both the House and the Senate including, for some of that time, Democrats had a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate; and he was only able to get so much done on the policy front in that window, and then after the 2010 elections, Republicans controlled the House and he ran smack-dab into this wall of polarized parties in Congress who weren't willing to cooperate with one another. And so I think that, in that sense, he created for himself these expectations that, you know, we would be able to change the way our polarized politics work and been created a sense of expectation that we might be able to do that; whereas when you look at Congress itself there was really no indication even from the beginning that there was a lot of willingness on the part of members of Congress to kind of change from what they were doing and the kinds of debates, level of polarization, and party-line voting that was happening in the chamber.

WRIGHT: Yeah, on the international side, I mean, I think he did benefit from the high expectations. We know that countries were a little, you know, of course disappointed by reality, to some degree, but he remained very popular in Europe and also in large parts of Asia. Really the big reversal within the Middle East where, you know, he did that speech in Cairo in 2009 and now he's, you know, one of the most unpopular presidents ever in Egypt and many other countries in the Middle East as well, which says more about what happened in that region, I think, than it says about him. But I think it also does get to another sort of interesting aspect to his presidency on foreign policy which was, he really hasn't changed his mind that much on anything you know, and presidents often do. I mean, Bush’s second term was very different than his first term. He was sort of chastened by failure in the first term and became more mainstream in the second term. Obama has not. I

mean, there's been very little sort of introspection on his foreign policy approach and sort of thinking “okay, we need to change course here” or “this has demonstrably failed,” you know, “the US policy in Syria has failed, therefore we need a new course of action.” And so he's been very sort of certain in his own beliefs and in the correctness of his position. And I think that has damaged him, actually, because I think it's important to be able to be flexible and to be open to the possibility that your position actually is the wrong one and to be able to change your mind, and he hasn't really done that, certainly on the Middle East but also on this larger geopolitical shift as well.

PITA: Well, for my last question: you both have referred to this in answering a couple of the other questions along the way, of talking about his idea about what America's role in the world is; talking about how he came in with these aspirations for changing government works and then hit cold reality in the face. But I do want to ask if he's leaving behind any sort of philosophical legacy about who America is or how it works or any sort of bigger picture legacy rather than specific actions.

REYNOLDS: I mean, I think in some ways this gets back to your question earlier about sort of the least appreciated part of the Obama administration, where am I both pointed to the absence of real scandal. And so I think that there's something to be said for the fact that this – we’ll look back at these last eight years as a time when certainly at the beginning there's real hope about kind of what government – about changing government to make it work better for people, and what it could do. And I think that over the course of eight years people became less and less – had less and less confidence in that messaging, and despite the fact that, you know, everything kind of ran smoothly on the scandal front, I think that when we look back at where we've been for eight years, I think Obama remains a

very hopeful person who sees the best in Americans; you saw this when he gave his farewell address this week. And so I think that if you asked him, he would say that that's kind of the legacy he wants to leave behind, but I think if we kind of think about it more broadly, there's the real disconnect between kind of that message and I think how many people are feeling as we end the Obama years.

WRIGHT: Yeah, I think he's, you know, I think he's a moderate and he believes in sort of an open America that's engaged in the world, that trades with other countries, that's part of this liberal international order that's been around since the late 1940s. And, you know, that stands not only in stark contrast to Trump but also to people in his own party, you know, like Bernie Sanders and maybe some others who have a more sort of liberal nationalistic approached about, you know, less trade, more protectionism, doing sort of less in the world. And so, while Obama was never as much of a cheerleader for the order as, say, Hillary Clinton was, still I think there's a big sort of philosophical gap, and it will be really interesting to see the role that he plays I think going forward. And so, you know, he's a very – still a very young person, he seems to have changed his position on staying out of politics. Now he's going to try to, you know, carefully limit his engagement but still engage, maybe more than normal for a typical ex-president. And I think the big question is, is this moment that we're in sort of a major shift in both parties toward a more sort of closed, inward-looking America in the world? Or is this an ongoing battle that will tilt back in the other direction in two or four or eight years' time? And his position on that, I think, or his philosophy on that, I think, has a major sort of pull in that debate.

PITA: Alright. Well, thank you both very much for being here and adding your thoughts. I want to let our listeners know that they can follow you both on Twitter. It's

@mollyereynolds and @thomaswright08. And you can also follow Intersections, as well the Brookings Cafeteria and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network @policypodcasts. Thank you both.

REYNOLDS: Thank you.

WRIGHT: Thank you.