

The “Obama Doctrine”: Eternal War For Imperfect Mankind

"For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world."

By [Rick Rozoff](#)

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President and commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United States Barack Obama delivered his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance address in Oslo on December 10, which has immediately led to media discussion of an Obama Doctrine.

With obligatory references to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi (the second referred to only by his surname) but to no other American presidents than Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy – fellow peace prize recipients Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter weren't mentioned – the U.S. head of state spoke with the self-assurance of the leader of the world's first uncontested superpower and at times with the self-righteousness of a would-be prophet and clairvoyant. And, in the words of German philosopher Friedrich von Schlegel, a prophet looking backward.

Accompanied by visionary gaze and cadenced, oratorical solemnity, his comments included the assertion that “War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man.” Unless this unsubstantiated claim was an allusion to the account in the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible of Cain murdering his brother Abel, which would hardly constitute war in any intelligible meaning of the word (nor was Cain the first man according to that source), it is unclear where Obama acquired the conviction that war is coeval with and presumably an integral part of humanity.

Paleontologists generally trace the arrival of modern man, homo sapiens, back 200,000 years, yet the first authenticated written histories are barely 2,400 years old. How Obama and his speechwriters filled in the 197,600-year gap to prove that the practice of war is as old as mankind and implicitly inseparable from the human condition is a question an enterprising reporter might venture to ask at the next presidential press conference.

Perhaps delusions of omniscience is the answer. The Oslo speech is replete with references to and appropriations of the attributes of divinity. And to historical and anthropological fatalism; a deeply pessimistic concept of Providence.

Obama affirmed that “no Holy War can ever be a just war. For if you truly believe that you are carrying out divine will, then there is no need for restraint.” Then shortly afterward stated “Let us reach for the world that ought to be – that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls.” An adversary's invocation of the divine is false, heretical, sacrilegious; Washington's is true, unerring, sufficient to justify any action, however violent and deadly. As unadulterated an illustration of secular Manicheism as can be found in the modern world.

Toward the beginning of his speech the first standing American president in ninety years to receive the Peace Prize acknowledged that “perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of the military of a nation in the midst of two wars.”

Understandably he exerted no effort to justify one of the two wars in question, that in Iraq, but endorsed and pledged the continuation of the other, that in Afghanistan and increasingly Pakistan – while elsewhere speaking disparagingly of the European Crusades of the later Middle Ages.

Neither the Nobel Committee nor its honoree seemed inordinately if at all concerned by the unprecedented awarding of the prestigious and generous (\$1.4 million) Peace Prize to a commander-in-chief in charge of two simultaneous wars far from his nation’s shores and in countries whose governments and peoples never threatened it in any manner.

In language that never before was heard during a peace prize acceptance speech, Obama added “we are at war, and I’m responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill, and some will be killed.”

With not a scintilla of national self-awareness, balance or irony, he also derided the fact that “modern technology allows a few small men with outsized rage to murder innocents on a horrific scale,” as he orders unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) linked by space satellites to launch deadly missile attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The central themes of Obama’s speech are reiterations of standing U.S. policy going back over a decade with the waging of war against Yugoslavia in early 1999 without United Nations authorization or even a nominal attempt to obtain one; that the U.S. and its Western military allies can decide individually and collectively when, to what degree, where and for what purpose to use military force anywhere in the world. And the prerogative to employ military force outside national borders is reserved exclusively for the United States, its fellow NATO members and select military clients outside the Euro-Atlantic zone such as Colombia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Israel and Saudi Arabia of late.

What is arguably unique in Obama’s address is the bluntness with which it reaffirmed this doctrine of international lawlessness. Excerpts along this line, shorn of ingenuous qualifications and decorative camouflage, include:

“We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.”

He offered a summary of the just war argument that a White House researcher could have cribbed from Wikipedia.

“[A]s a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their [Gandhi’s and King’s] examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world.”

“I – like any head of state – reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation.”

Evil, as a noun rather than an adjective, is used twice in the speech, emblematic of a quasi-theological tone alternating with coldly and even callously pragmatic pronouncements.

Indicative of the second category are comments like these:

“[T]he instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace.”

“A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism....

“I raise this point, I begin with this point because in many countries there is a deep ambivalence about military action today, no matter what the cause. And at times, this is joined by a reflexive suspicion of America, the world’s sole military superpower.”

Comparing a small handful of al-Qaeda personnel to Hitler’s Wehrmacht is unconscionable. Whatever else the former are, they barely have arms to lay down. But Obama does, the world’s largest and most deadly conventional and nuclear arsenal.

His playing the trump card of Nazi Germany is not only an act of rhetorical recklessness, it is historically unjustified. There would have been no need to confront the Third Reich’s legions if timely diplomatic actions had been taken when Hitler sent troops into the Rhineland in 1936; if Britain and France had not collaborated with Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy to enforce the naval blockade of Republican Spain while German aircraft devastated Guernica and other towns and German and Italian troops poured into the country by the tens of thousands in support of Generalissimo Franco’s uprising. If, finally, Britain, France, Germany and Italy had not met in Munich in 1938 to sacrifice Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland to Hitler to encourage his murderous drive to the east. The same four nations met 70 years later, last year, to reprise the Munich betrayal by engineering the secession of Kosovo from Serbia, to demonstrate how much had been learned in the interim.

As to the accusation that many nations bear an alleged “deep ambivalence about military action” and even more so “a reflexive suspicion of America, the world’s sole military superpower,” it bespeaks alike arrogance, sanctimony, and an absolute imperviousness to the reality of American foreign policy now and in the recent and not so recent past. According to this imperial “sole military superpower” perspective, the White House and the Pentagon can never be wrong. Not even partially, unavoidably or unintentionally.

If others find fault with anything the world’s only military juggernaut does, it is a reflection of their own misguided pacifism and ingrained, pathological “anti-Americanism.” Perhaps this constitutes the aforementioned “threats to the American people,” as there aren’t any others in Afghanistan or in the world as a whole that were convincingly identified in the speech.

What may be the most noteworthy – and disturbing – line in the address is what Obama characterised as the “recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.” Lest this observation be construed as an example of personal or national humility, other – grandiose Americocentric – comments surrounding it leave no doubt that the inadequacies in question are only applied to others.

One would search in vain for a comparable utterance by another American head of state. For a nation that prides itself on being the first one founded on the principles of the 18th century Enlightenment and the previous century's Age of Reason, that its leader would lay stress on inherent and ineradicable human frailty and at least by implication on some truth that is apart from and superior to reason is nothing less than alarming. The door is left open to irrationalism and its correlates, that the ultimate right can be might and that there are national imperatives beyond good and evil.

And if people are by nature flawed and their reasoning correspondingly impaired, then for humanity, "Born but to die and reasoning but to err" (Alexander Pope), war may indeed be its birthright and violent conflicts will not be eradicated in its lifetime. War, which came into existence with mankind, will last as long as it does. They may both end, as Obama believes they originated, simultaneously.

How the leader of the West, both the nation and the individual, has arrived at this bleak and deterministic impasse was also mentioned in Obama's speech in reference to pivotal post-Cold War events that have defined this new century.

It is only a single step from:

"I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That's why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace."

To:

"The belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it. Peace requires responsibility. Peace entails sacrifice. That's why NATO continues to be indispensable."

In proclaiming these and similar sentiments, Obama made reference to his host country in alluding to the war in Afghanistan: "[W]e are joined by 42 other countries - including Norway - in an effort to defend ourselves and all nations from further attacks."

Again, threats are magnified to inflated and even universal dimensions. All nations on the planet are threatened and some of them - 43 NATO states and partners - are fending off the barbarians at the gates. It is difficult to distinguish the new Obama Doctrine from the preceding Blair and Bush ones except in regard to its intended scope.

It is a mission outside of time, space and constraints. "The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms....America's commitment to global security will never waver. But in a world in which threats are more diffuse, and missions more complex, America cannot act alone. America alone cannot secure the peace. This is true in Afghanistan. This is true in failed states like Somalia....And sadly, it will continue to be true in unstable regions for years to come.

"The leaders and soldiers of NATO countries, and other friends and allies, demonstrate this truth through the capacity and courage they've shown in Afghanistan."

The U.S. president adduced other nations - by name - that present threats to America and its values, its allies and the world as a whole in addition to Afghanistan and Somalia, which

are Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan and Zimbabwe. All five were either on George W. Bush's post-September 11 list of state sponsors of terrorism or on Condoleezza Rice's later roster of "outposts of tyranny" or both.

Hopes that the policies of Obama's predecessor were somehow outside of the historical continuum, solely related to the aftermath of September 11, 2001, have been dashed. The rapidly escalating war in South Asia is proof enough of that lamentable fact. War is not a Biblical suspension of ethics but the foundation of national policy.

In his novel *La Bête Humaine* (The Human Beast) Emile Zola interwove images of a French crowd clamoring for a disastrous war with Prussia ("A Berlin!") and a locomotive heading at full steam down the track without an engineer. Obama's speech in Oslo indicates that America remains bent on rushing headlong to war even after a change of engineers. Veteran warhawks Robert Gates, James Jones, Richard Holbrooke, David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal have stoked the furnace for a long run.

Stop NATO

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato>

Blog site:

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/>

To subscribe, send an e-mail to:

rwrozoff@yahoo.com

or

stopnato-subscribe@yahogroups.com

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