

Whitewashing Defeat: Obama's Indecisiveness Defines His Presidency

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He may still possess the poise of a confident leader and an eloquent intellectual, but the presidency of Barack Obama is now suffering its most difficult phase to date.

Certainly, Obama cannot solely be blamed for all the factors that have stifled his country's chances of recovery from the failures of the Bush era. But the man who promised the moon has now extended the abhorrent and morally unjustifiable tax cuts for America's wealthiest class. The "sweeping" \$858 billion tax bill was signed into law on December 17. It includes an \$801 billion package of tax cuts, extending Bush's tax break for the rich for two more years – at a time when the majority of Americans are reeling under the weight of a failing economy and persistently high unemployment.

Still, the tax bill was presented by the self-assured president as "real money that's going to make a real difference in people's lives." The cuts will help stimulate an ailing economy, he claims, despite it being the rich who gambled with American wealth to increase their own, stimulating a market crash that led to millions losing their small investments and savings. All we know for sure is that the cuts will add a gigantic chunk to an already impossible deficit of \$1.3 trillion, another Obama battle that is likely to be lost to the Republicans early next year.

But this concession, and its presentation as a victory for America's middle classes says more about Obama's style than the weakening of the Democrats since the midterm elections. Even in his foreign policy management, Obama's approach seems to teeter between giving face-lifts to ugly realities and postponing urgently needed action. The agent of change has become the quintessential American politician, who is more consumed with his chances of reelection than with bringing about the kind of long-term change that can really benefit his country, and the world at large.

Obama's handling of the shortly-lived peace talks between the Palestinian Authority and Israel's rightwing government is another example of a striking failure followed by whitewash. Although he adamantly demanded a halt to Israel's construction of illegal settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, Obama soon began capitulating before an obstinate Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli leader, supported by much of the US Congress and backed by a strong Israel lobby in Washington, finally forced Obama into a humiliating retreat. Even a generous bribe to win a limited Israeli moratorium on settlement construction failed. Obama administration officials finally declared that the US would abandon its efforts to halt Israeli settlement expansion, effectively signaling an American exit from the 'peace process.'

Instead of laying the blame squarely on Israel, the Obama administration delved into the same long-discredited rhetoric that only Palestinians and Israelis are capable of accomplishing peace without any outside intervention. That was the core message of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who argued that it was up to Israel and the Palestinian leadership to “settle their conflict”. It signaled a complete shift in US foreign policy, which Israel has naturally welcomed, for the US-financed military occupier prefers to be left to its own devices in this very unbalanced conflict.

Afghanistan is another example. The eagerly anticipated strategy assessment of the war in Afghanistan was released on December 16, with illusory talk of “gains” and warnings of al-Qaeda threats. It suggests that the US will continue to fight a pointless war for years to come, with no clear goals or end in sight.

“The unclassified version of the secret review said U.S. military operations have disrupted the Pakistan-based al-Qaida terrorist network over the last year and halted the momentum of the Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan,” reported the Kansas City Star.

What the review and much of the media fail to report is that the war on Afghanistan hardly concerns al-Qaeda, which is more widespread and mobile than ever. Its future operation does not hinge on the ongoing battles in Afghanistan either. One must also remain skeptical of the “gains” reportedly made in the south. Taliban is known for avoiding open warfare, a style they have mastered after nine years of practice. The recoil – if that is even the case – of the Taliban is probably temporary, and a spring resurgence is assured by past experiences. But what is most important to note is that the action of NATO and US soldiers, government corruption and the brutality of local militias have allowed the Taliban to extend its presence to northern provinces, including Kunduz and Takhar, which were, until recently, uncharted territories for the strong and resourceful Pashtun fighters.

According to an editorial in the Lebanese Daily Star, “Obama’s long-awaited Afghanistan strategy review amounts to little more than a whitewash of the seemingly intractable problems that have trapped the mighty American military in a quagmire.” Worse, this crisis is likely to be compounded. “The failures of General Stanley McChrystal, who resigned in June, and Richard Holbrooke, who died suddenly this week, are symbolic of the crumbling of the twin pillars, both military and civilian, of Barack Obama’s counterinsurgency strategy. The US has now...entered a violent stalemate,” wrote James Denselow in the British Guardian.

Obama’s response was yet another attempt to distance himself from the looming, if not ongoing failure. US priority, he said, is “not to defeat every last threat to the security of Afghanistan, because, ultimately, it is Afghans who must secure their country. And it’s not nation-building, because it is Afghans who must build their nation.”

One would agree with the president were it not for the fact that the US invasion was what has impeded the security of Afghanistan, destroyed any chance of nation-building and installed a corrupt government. But Obama will not accept responsibility. His cautious assessments are emblematic of his overall political style: avoiding or perpetuating the problem, and distancing himself from it once failure is assured. This is as true of his domestic policy as of his foreign policy.

It is easy to see why Obama’s popularity has plummeted among those who once believed in his ability to bring change to a scarred and traumatized country. And his irresolute

leadership has also empowered his political opponents, who will not cease to demand more from a feeble and ever-willing president.

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