

“CUT OBAMA SOME SLACK;” POLITICAL SLACK AND THE DETERMINATION OF FOREIGN POLICY

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It is easy to assume that US presidents' foreign policy behavior follows a partisan trendline marked by distinctly “Republican” or “Democratic” policies. This paper, however, questions that assumption through an analysis of Obama's foreign policy in the context of the structure of international system. A close examination of “war-inheriting” presidents, Nixon and Obama, versus “war-initiating” presidents, Johnson and Bush Jr, reveals that the structure of the international system and corresponding “slack” available to each president due to the United State's involvement or lack thereof in foreign wars may be a better indicator of a president's foreign policy grand strategy than political party affiliation. Therefore, Obama's lack of geopolitical and domestic slack as a result of the wars in the Middle East can explain his realist and constrained foreign policy, which did not, in many ways, align with the ideals of the Democratic Party.

Partisan politics have dominated every aspect of the American political climate, polarizing the public, policies, and ideologies. Though politicians and the public squabble over the importance of having a president on “their” side of the divide, a president's foreign policy outcomes have much less to do with their political affiliation than what meets the eye. Instead, the structure and constraints of the global system presidents inherit— whether in a state of war or peace, recession or prosperity, activism or isolationism— dictates their foreign policy grand strategy. Thus, I will argue that the pattern of foreign policy decision-making behavior does not follow a partisan trendline dictated by presidents' party affiliation, but follows a pattern of situational flexibility dictated by the degree of “political slack” possessed by each president. As the state of war is a great determinant of slack, I will compare the policies of war-inheriting presidents, Nixon and Obama, to those of war-initiating presidents, Johnson and Bush, in order to elucidate how an examination of slack provides a better explanation of policy than party affiliation. In this vein, Obama, a president incredibly constrained by the inheritance of a destructive war in the Middle East and a resulting lack of political slack, was forced to conduct a conservative, “realist” foreign policy largely aimed at exiting and minimizing the damages of war.

From the onset of his presidency, Obama was left with little “slack” to determine his own grand strategy due to the international constraints of a foreign conflict combined with the American public's exhaustion from war. According to Peter Trubowitz, “leaders have little geopolitical slack when... security is scarce and their state is exposed and vulnerable to foreign intimidation and aggression” (Trubowitz 2011, 19). Obama, therefore, had little geopolitical slack as the US faced the security threat of antagonistic non-state actors in the Middle East. Furthermore, the US

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was confronted by complicated relationships with “allies” like Pakistan who harbored terrorists. Additionally, on the domestic front, Obama faced a public tired of war. Fearing Afghanistan would become “his Vietnam,” Obama knew that he needed to initiate a strategy to win—or at least exit—the war. Stephen Sestanovich, an expert on presidential foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, simply noted: “If you come into office in the middle of a war that is not going well, you’re convinced that the American people have hired you to do less” (Goldberg 2016). Not only was Obama constrained by the complications of a messy war, but also he was constrained by the reality that he was elected with the expectation that he would exit the Middle East.

In light of these constraints, Obama formulated a calculated foreign policy which focused on winning in Afghanistan. First, Obama employed a counterinsurgency program in Afghanistan with the addition of 17,000 troops (Sanger 2013, 18). With this, Obama aimed to stabilize the region by nation-building. In many ways, this approach was in line with his ideals of “promoting values like democracy and human rights and norms and values” (Goldberg 2016). Obama, however, quickly realized that this approach was costly, ineffective, and ultimately infeasible. Instead, Obama turned to further troop escalation in hopes of accelerating an end to the conflict. Thus, Obama’s ideological optimism in the success of Afghanistan as an independent democracy began to wither and a new vision for Afghanistan began to take shape: “Afghan good enough” (Sanger 2013).

With this shift, Obama pivoted away from the typical liberal internationalism associated with his Democratic Party and shifted towards a realist, Jacksonian approach which prioritized American security and minimized cost. In 2010, the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, declared that Afghan National Security forces would lead the country independently of international support. Obama saw Karzai’s declaration as an opportunity to exit Afghanistan (somewhat) honorably. Thus, Obama’s strategy in the Middle East became “escalate and exit” (Sanger 2013, 28). Instead of working towards ensuring a successful, democratic Afghanistan, troops would only “conduct basic training, mentoring, and kill-or-capture operations. They would not be there to win hearts and minds. They would not be there to build schools or roads or clinics.” (Sanger 2013, 46). Karzai’s eagerness to regain control of his country gave Obama a way out. Prioritizing a swift yet effective withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, Obama stated: “My goal... is to make sure that by 2014 we have transitioned, Afghans are in the lead, and it is a goal to make sure we are not still engaged in combat operations of the sort we are involved in now” (Sanger 2013, 46). Obama’s willingness to prioritize American withdrawal over the ultimate success of the nation-building mission in Afghanistan demonstrates that the burden of war constrained Obama’s ability to carry out his own foreign policy ideals and priorities; without political slack, Obama was forced to opt for the “least costly” option, exit. Thus, during the Obama administration, Operation Enduring Freedom became “Afghan Good Enough.”

From his experience dealing with the War in Afghanistan, Obama came to

realize the hard truth that as president, he could not achieve all of his idealized goals. Obama admitted, “I suppose you could call me a realist in believing we can’t, at any given moment, relieve all the world’s misery” (Goldberg 2016). Due to the inflexibility of the geopolitical climate he inherited, Obama focused less on promoting US values internationally, such as democratic nation-building, and prioritized a level of calculated restraint. He opted only to enter into new conflicts or commitments where he saw low-risk success as possible: “his strategy [made] eminent sense: Double down in those parts of the world where success is plausible, and limit America’s exposure to the rest” (Goldberg 2016). Throughout his second term, Obama turned away from messy conflicts, despite even contradicting prior US liberal ideas: he avoided confrontation with Russia in Crimea, failed in a humanitarian intervention in Libya, and neglected to act on his “red line” in Syria. As Obama felt that “the Pentagon had ‘jammed’ him on a troop surge for Afghanistan,” he did not want to be “jammed” into a conflict in Syria too (Goldberg 2016). Having learned the lessons of a costly war, Obama declined to act on his strong declaration against Assad’s use of chemical weapons and instead elected for a diplomatic approach via Russia. He decided that avoiding the potential for another war outweighed the possibility of providing humanitarian intervention (Goldberg 2016). Though Obama faced criticism for this decision, the American public was still recovering from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama acted similarly in Libya, abandoning humanitarian initiatives when intervention became messy.

Though Obama tried to avoid another fixation on the Middle East, Middle Eastern policy dominated his foreign policy agenda. From the beginning of his presidency, Obama wanted to “pivot to Asia,” as he felt that taking a part in China’s rise was a key aspect of securing economic and technological security in the future (Goldberg 2016). Even as Obama tried to exit the Middle East, fears of a rising ISIS came to occupy his presidency and “the president [got] frustrated that terrorism [kept] swamping his larger agenda, particularly as it relates to rebalancing America’s global priorities” (Goldberg 2016). Ultimately, throughout his presidency, Obama was unable to escape entanglement in Middle Eastern politics. Although Obama was focused on exiting Afghanistan, he held a continued presence there during both his terms. At the start of his tenure, Obama inherited a messy war which fundamentally constrained his decision-making flexibility and subsequently his grand strategy. Obama did not determine his strategy based on his own belief system nor that of his own party, but conducted a pragmatic, “realist” strategy based on his experiences and constraints as a wartime president, giving rise to his self-proclaimed doctrine: “don’t do stupid shit” (Goldberg 2016).

Like Obama, Nixon inherited a messy war. By the time Nixon took office, the American public was exhausted from the Vietnam War. Johnson’s Operation Rolling Thunder had been largely unsuccessful in its aim to shut down North Vietnamese aid of the Vietcong. Similarly to Obama, Nixon faced a reality in which the public desperately wanted to exit a war from which the US was not yet prepared to withdraw. As

a result, Nixon’s presidency became completely occupied with Vietnam and Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization took shape. Nixon saw the South Vietnamese Government as an opportunity for exit; if he could transition the US control of war back to the South Vietnamese he could exit appropriately—what he called “peace with honor.” However, the US could not simply leave Vietnam; the US needed to adopt a policy which would be conducive to a peace settlement. Nixon believed this meant showing US resolve by increasing its military operations in Vietnam in order to force the North Vietnamese to the negotiation table. Nixon escalated bombings in the North with “Operation Linebacker” and bombed North Vietnamese strongholds in Laos and Cambodia. This strategy appears analogous to Obama’s “escalate and exit.” Then, Kissinger and Nixon entered into peace talks with South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and China. Ultimately, “the peace settlement enabled the United States to withdraw from the war... Neither of the Vietnamese parties abided by the settlement, however, and the war continued” (United States Department of State 2016) Nixon’s exit of Vietnam did not restore democratic peace, but did allow for swift American withdrawal from the conflict.

Obama’s foreign policy closely mirrors that of Nixon. As both inherited complex wars, Obama and Nixon alike were forced to conduct foreign policies focused foremost on ending wars they, themselves, did not start. Wartime therefore constrained both presidents’ abilities to determine their own foreign policy, as neither Obama nor Nixon could focus on other goals—for Nixon calming tensions with the Soviet Union and opening to China and for Obama “pivoting” to Asia—until the wars they inherited were resolved. With both a public and an economy suffering as a result of war, neither Obama nor Nixon had the flexibility to focus on other objectives. Even though Obama is a Democrat and Nixon was a Republican, their foreign policies converged due to similar geopolitical and domestic conditions. Both presidents exited their respective wars to please and appease the American public, rather than to enact policies “in line” with their respective parties or idealized foreign policy goals. Facing similar global conditions and domestic demands, Obama and Nixon ultimately conducted similar policies focused on exiting a costly war and limiting future US military commitments abroad.

I have argued above that a combination of domestic and international constraints governs a President’s foreign policy determination, explaining the similarities in foreign policy execution between Nixon and Obama despite a difference in political party. Just as war-inheriting presidents conduct similar foreign policies, war-initiating presidents do as well; war-initiating presidents must respond to a perceived external security (or even ideological) threat. In the following section, I will examine the policies of Johnson and Bush, who each respectively initiated the disastrous wars that Nixon and Obama inherited.

Unlike Nixon or Obama, Johnson operated under ample political slack. As a Cold War president, Johnson led under the constant, rumbling threat of the Soviet aggression and spreading Communism. However, this threat was unlike other his-

torical threats the US had faced prior to the Cold War. Most of the time, the Cold War threatened ideology rather than US security itself. Therefore, Johnson inherited a world which afforded him domestic slack fueled by consensus anti-communism combined with an international system that posed little direct security threat. Nevertheless, the threat of the spread of Communism was so potent that it had the power to determine the US foreign policy agenda and pattern of intervention: “During the Cold War, successive presidents, Republican and Democratic alike, so feared a domestic political backlash for ‘losing a country to communism’ that they attached value to places of little intrinsic geostrategic interest” (Trubowitz 2011, 18). In the midst of an election season, Johnson was at first unsure of how to handle Vietnam, hesitant to jeopardize his election. Fortunately for Johnson, the Tonkin Gulf Incident provided an “accidental opportunity” for Johnson to harness support for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and US entrance into Vietnam (Goldstein 99). The Tonkin Gulf Incident signaled a “crisis” in Vietnam, which provided Johnson with even further domestic slack to respond.

Therefore, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution afforded Johnson great flexibility to determine his foreign policy in regard to Vietnam; Johnson held both the authorization from his government, (with a democratic majority in both the House and Senate), and the steadily increasing support of the American public to engage militarily in Vietnam. Johnson so feared losing Vietnam to Communism that he eventually escalated the US intervention to war, abusing the ambiguity of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution: Johnson initiated the three-year bombing campaign known Operation Rolling Thunder and sent in Marines to mainland Vietnam. In doing so, Johnson was the first President to escalate the situation in Vietnam to a full-scale war. In the Vietnam War, it became clear that Johnson was far more concerned about maintaining the independence of South Vietnam than the reality that a war in Vietnam would be long and costly: “LBJ isn’t deeply concerned about who governs Laos, or who governs South Vietnam— he’s deeply concerned with what the average American voter is going to think about how he did in the ball game of the Cold War” (Goldstein 2008, 98). Despite the fact that intervention in Vietnam was arguably unimportant to US vital interests and security, a combination of the Cold War geopolitical and ideological situation and domestic flexibility gave Johnson the running room to engage in military intervention in Vietnam. Thus, as Johnson was an unconstrained President, he was able to choose a high level of involvement and aggressive approach to his foreign policy in Vietnam.

Like Johnson, George W. Bush was a war-initiating president. At the turn of the century, the US was unopposed as a unipolar power, affording the new president copious geopolitical slack: “On Bush’s watch as president, the United States faced no peer challenger. The threat of military attack against the United States by another power was low” (Trubowitz 2011, 20). Furthermore, with the September 11th attacks, the United States spiraled into a state of crisis. This provided Bush with the domestic support to act to punish the attackers; “when Americans believe their security

is threatened— real or perceived— they will back the use of force” (Western 2015, 354). This combination of national crisis and US unipolarity provided Bush with a “unassailable leadership position” to engage in an activist presidency (Trubowitz 2011, 100).

Harnessing his slack and popular support, Bush launched into war in Afghanistan to pursue the terrorists who attacked the US as well as the country that harbored them. Demonstrating the amount of political slack George W. Bush possessed, the war in Afghanistan, “Operation Enduring Freedom” was preventative. In fact, Bush’s “preemptive” action became known as the Bush Doctrine. Bush entered Afghanistan and then Iraq “because even defense may not be possible against terrorists or rogues, the United States must be ready to wage preventive wars and to act ‘against emerging threats before they are fully formed’ as Bush puts it” (Jervis 2003, 369). As an unconstrained president, Bush held the unusual ability to wage an offensive war. Bush’s expansionist and interventionist policy signaled an end to America’s Vietnam Syndrome and period of international military inaction. Similar to Johnson, Bush engaged in an aggressive foreign policy with seemingly little concern for the inevitable consequences. Bush escalated war while refusing to raise taxes, borrowing funds and creating a \$10.6 trillion debt by the time Obama took office (Bump 2015). Bush then passed along the burden and incredible cost of his war onto the next president.

As war-initiating presidents, Johnson and Bush conducted similar approaches to foreign policy and similar reactions to their respective threats. Both Johnson and Bush took advantage of their unconstrained presidencies, launching into expensive full-scale wars, emboldened by publics which supported intervention. Thus, Johnson and Bush conducted foreign policies which took advantage of the international system they controlled and took expansionist stances against a foreign threat. Though Johnson and Bush differ in political party, they each instigated complex wars which were ultimately seen as unsuccessful and furthermore constrained their succeeding presidents. In this way, Johnson and Bush conducted convergent policies not due to similarities in ideology but due to similar domestic and international conditions which afforded them great flexibility in overreaching with aggressive, expansionist military policies.

In examining the foreign policy of war-initiating versus war-inheriting presidents, the lack or prevalence of domestic and international constraints provides a clearer picture of grand strategy than political party ties. President Obama conducted a “realist” foreign policy—which in many ways contradicted his own ideological beliefs—as a result of his acute lack of geopolitical and domestic slack. Extending this analysis to the Johnson, Nixon and Bush presidencies, it becomes clear that national and global constraints serve as the driving force behind foreign policy decision-making. Though party affiliation contributes much to a president’s domestic perception, the state of the international system and the America’s involvement or entrance into conflicts shapes America’s action abroad. In this way, presidents, regardless of political affiliation at home, devise grand strategies in response to situations in the internation-

al system and gage involvement based on their domestic and geopolitical slack. As a result, party affiliation does not unite the foreign policy grand strategies of presidents; instead, it is similarities in the international system which presidents inherit that determines the pattern of foreign policy involvement while allowing us to predict the pattern of grand strategy development in the future.

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