

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

[TomDispatch.com](http://TomDispatch.com)

## The Dumbing Down of American Foreign Policy

By Tom Engelhardt

September 6, 2012

Think back to the election of 2008. Do you remember how one candidate had it easy? He had eight years of abject failure to run against. Eight years that included the launching of [two dismal wars](#), the creation of a torture [gulag](#) with its crown jewel at [Guantánamo Bay](#), the ushering in of a program of [robotic assassination](#) missions and secret [spying programs](#), all presided over by an administration that talked tough about silencing leakers and [reporters who aided them](#), and a president who [kept a list](#) with mug shots of people he wanted bumped off. (When his triggermen killed one, he'd cross off his face.) The roster of the administration's "triumphs" reads like something out of dystopian fiction and people were tired of it. They wanted change, which was good news for the change candidate, because his rival was an old hawk who talked more of the same.

Fast forward to today. The [candidate who won](#) the 2008 contest [expanded](#) the country's [war in Afghanistan](#), [struggled](#) to keep [American troops](#) in Iraq (before [fulfilling](#) his predecessor's pledge to withdraw), and oversaw escalating military interventions in Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and elsewhere. The winning candidate [failed to close Guantánamo](#), [radically expanded](#) the robotic assassination program, [continued](#) and [expanded](#) domestic [surveillance](#), vigorously pursued and [used the Espionage Act](#) against more governmental whistleblowers than all other administrations combined (but prosecuted [no one else](#) in the National Security Complex for illegal activities), and kept his own [extensive kill list](#), personally [okaying](#) assassinations. Could it really be that the "change" candidate won? Could it have been any worse than if the [old hawk](#) had?

Another question follows. Almost four years later, are people happy about the types of “change” he ushered in? After all, as president, the change candidate killed [public enemy number one](#) and he’s still fighting for his political life against a challenger whose own party once [rejected him](#) and now does little more than [tolerate him](#). He, too, is now talking “change.” Yet the type of change the challenger is speaking about includes even more profligate military spending, even more troops to send to war, and possibly the [addition](#) of a new [war](#) or [two](#) to the American agenda. So much change and yet so much remains the same. Confusing, isn’t it? Luckily, [TomDispatch regular](#) John Feffer, author of [Crusade 2.0: The West’s Resurgent War on Islam](#), makes some sense of this strain of American politics and what four more years under President Obama or four years under President Romney is likely to mean for us — and the rest of the world. No matter who wins, be ready to lose hope and fear change. (To catch Timothy MacBain’s latest Tomcast audio interview in which John Feffer discusses power — hard, soft, smart, and dumb — click [here](#) or download it to your iPod [here](#).) *Nick Turse*

## Dumb and Dumber

**Obama’s “smart power” foreign policy not smart at all**  
by John Feffer

Barack Obama is a smart guy. So why has he spent the last four years executing such a dumb foreign policy? True, his reliance on “smart power” — a euphemism for giving the Pentagon a stake in all things global — has been a smart move politically at home. It has largely prevented the Republicans from playing the national security card in this election year. But “smart power” has been a disaster for the world at large and, ultimately, for the United States itself.

Power was not always Obama’s strong suit. When he ran for president in 2008, he appeared to friend and foe alike as Mr. Softy. He wanted out of the war in Iraq. He was no fan of nuclear weapons. He favored carrots over sticks when approaching America’s adversaries.

His opponent in the Democratic primaries, Hillary Clinton, tried to turn this hesitation to use hard power into a sign of a man too inexperienced to be entrusted with the presidency. In 2007, when Obama offered to meet without preconditions with the leaders of Cuba, North Korea, and Iran, Clinton [fired back](#) that such a policy was “irresponsible and frankly naïve.” In February 2008, she went further with a TV ad that asked voters who should answer the White House phone at 3 a.m. Obama, she implied, lacked the requisite body parts — muscle, backbone, *cojones*— to make the hard presidential decisions in a crisis.

Obama didn’t take the bait. “When that call gets answered, shouldn’t the president be the one — the only one — who had judgment and courage to oppose the Iraq war from the start,” his response ad intoned. “Who understood the *real* threat to America was al-Qaeda, in Afghanistan, not Iraq. Who led the effort to secure loose nuclear weapons around the globe.”

Like most successful politicians, Barack Obama could be all things to all people. His opposition to the Iraq War made him the darling of the peace movement. But he was no peace candidate, for he always promised, as in his response to that phone call ad, to shift U.S. military power toward the “right war” in Afghanistan. As president, he quickly and effectively drove a stake through the

heart of Mr. Softy with his [pro-military, pro-war speech](#) at, of all places, the ceremony awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize.

Obama's protean abilities have come to the fore in his approach to what once was called "soft power," a term Harvard professor Joseph Nye coined in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*. For more than 20 years, Nye has been urging U.S. policymakers to find different ways of leading the world, [exercising](#) what he termed "power with others as much as power over others."

After 9/11, when "soft" became an increasingly suspect word, Washington policymakers began to use "smart power" to denote a menu of expanded options that were to combine the capabilities of both the State Department and the Pentagon. "We must use what has been called 'smart power,' the full range of tools at our disposal — diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural — picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation," Hillary Clinton [said](#) at her confirmation hearing for her new role as secretary of state. "With smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of foreign policy."

But diplomacy has not been at the vanguard of Obama's foreign policy. From drone attacks in Pakistan and cyber-warfare against Iran to the vaunted "[Pacific pivot](#)" and the expansion of [U.S. military intervention in Africa](#), the Obama administration has let the Pentagon and the CIA call the shots. The president's foreign policy has certainly been "smart" from a domestic political point of view. With the ordering of the Seal Team Six [raid](#) into Pakistan that led to the assassination of Osama bin Laden and "[leading from behind](#)" in the Libya intervention, the president has effectively removed foreign policy as a Republican talking point. He has left the hawks of the other party with very little room for maneuver.

But in its actual effects overseas, his version of "smart power" has been anything but smart. It has maintained imperial overstretch at [self-destructive expense](#), infuriated strategic competitors like China, hardened the position of adversaries like Iran and North Korea, and tried the patience of even long-time allies in Europe and Asia.

Only one thing makes Obama's policy look geopolitically smart — and that's Mitt Romney's prospective foreign policy. On global issues, then, the November elections will offer voters a particularly unpalatable choice: between a Democratic militarist and an even more over-the-top militaristic Republican, between Bush Lite all over again and Bush heavy, between dumb and dumber.

### **Mr. Softy Goes to Washington**

Mr. Softy went to Washington in 2008 and discovered a backbone. That, at least, is how many foreign policy analysts described the "maturation" process of the new president. "Barack Obama is a soft power president," [wrote](#) the *Financial Times's* Gideon Rachman in 2009. "But the world keeps asking him hard power questions."

According to this scenario, Obama made [quiet overtures](#) to North Korea, and Pyongyang responded by testing a nuclear weapon. The president [went to Cairo](#) and made an impressive speech in which he said, among other things, "we also know that military power alone is not

going to solve the problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” But individuals and movements in the Muslim world — al-Qaeda, the Taliban — continued to challenge American power. The president made a bold move to throw his support behind nuclear abolition, but the nuclear lobby in the United States [forced him to commit](#) huge sums to modernizing the very nuclear complex he promised to negotiate out of existence.

According to this scenario, Obama came to Washington with a fistful of carrots to coax the world, nonviolently, in the direction of peace and justice. The world was not cooperative, and so, in practice, those carrots began to function more like orange-colored sticks.

This view of Obama is fundamentally mistaken. Mr. Softy was a straw man created from the dreams of his dovish supporters and the nightmares of his hawkish opponents. That Obama avatar was useful during the primary and the general election campaign to appeal to a nation weary of eight years of cowboy globalism. Like a campaign adviser ill-suited to the bruising policy world of Washington, Mr. Softy didn’t survive the transition.

Consider, for example, Obama’s speech in Cairo in June 2009. This inspiring speech should have signaled a profound shift in U.S. policy toward the Muslim world. But what Obama didn’t mention in his speech was his earlier conversation with outgoing president George W. Bush in which he’d secretly [agreed to continue](#) two major Bush initiatives: the CIA’s unmanned drone air war in Pakistan’s tribal borderlands and the covert program to disrupt Iran’s nuclear program with computer viruses.

Obama didn’t just continue these programs; he amplified them. The result has been an [unprecedented expansion](#) of U.S. military power through unmanned drones in Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan as well as Somalia and Yemen. The use of drones, and the civilian casualties they’ve caused, has in turn inflamed public opinion around the world, with the favorability rating of the United States under Obama in majority Muslim countries falling to [a new low of 15%](#) in 2012, lower, that is, than the [rock-bottom standard set](#) by the Bush administration.

The drone campaign has undermined other smart power approaches, including that old standby diplomacy, not only by antagonizing potential interlocutors but also by killing a good number of them. Along with the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, often cited as one of Obama’s signal accomplishments, the drone war has by now provoked [a slow-motion rupture](#) in relations between Washington and Islamabad.

The covert cyber-war initiative against Iran’s nuclear program, conducted with Israeli cooperation, produced both the Stuxnet worm, which wreaked havoc on Iranian centrifuges, and the Flame virus, which monitored its computer network. Instead of vigorously pursuing diplomatic solutions — such as the nuclear compromise that Brazil and Turkey [cobbled together](#) in 2010 that might have defused the situation and guaranteed a world without an Iranian bomb — the Obama administration acted secretly and aggressively. If the United States had been the target of such a cyber attack, Washington would have considered it [an act of war](#). Meanwhile, the United States has set a dangerous precedent for future attacks in this newest theater of

operations and unleashed a weapon that could even be reverse-engineered and sent back in our direction.

Nor was diplomacy ever actually on the table with North Korea. The Obama team came in with a less than half-hearted commitment to the Six Party process — the negotiations to address North Korea's nuclear program among the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas, which had stalled in the final months of George W. Bush's second term. In the National Security Council, Asia point man Jeffrey Bader [axed a State Department cable](#) that would have reassured the North Koreans that a U.S. policy of engagement would continue. "Strategic patience" became the euphemism for doing nothing and letting hawkish leaders in Tokyo and Seoul unravel the previous years of engagement. After some predictably belligerent rhetoric from Pyongyang, followed by a failed missile launch and a second nuclear test, Obama largely dispensed with diplomacy altogether.

Hillary Clinton did indeed [move quickly](#) to increase the size of the State Department budget to hire more people and implement more programs to beef up diplomacy. That budget grew by more than 7% in 2009-2010. But that didn't bring the department of diplomacy up to even \$50 billion. In fact, it is still plagued by a [serious shortage](#) of diplomats and, as State Department whistleblower Peter van Buren has written, "The whole of the Foreign Service is smaller than the complement aboard one aircraft carrier." Meanwhile, despite a persistent recession, the Pentagon budget continued to rise during the Obama years — a roughly 3% increase in 2010 to about \$700 billion. (And Mitt Romney [promises](#) to hike it even more drastically.)

Like most Democratic politicians, Obama has been acutely aware that hard power is a way of establishing political invulnerability in the face of Republican attacks. But the use of hard power to gain political points at home is a risky affair. It is the nature of this "dumb power" to make the United States into a bigger target, alienate allies, and jeopardize authentic efforts at multilateralism.

### **A Kinder, Gentler Empire**

Despite its rhetorical flexibility, "smart power" has several inherent flaws. First, it focuses on the means of exercising power without questioning the ends toward which power is deployed. The State Department and the Pentagon will tussle over which agency can more effectively win the hearts and minds of Afghans. But neither agency is willing to rethink the U.S. presence in the country or acknowledge [how few](#) hearts and minds have been won.

As with Afghanistan, so with the rest of the world. For all his talk of power "with" rather than "over," Joseph Nye has largely been concerned with different methods by which the United States can maintain dominion. "Smart power" is not about the inherent value of diplomacy, the virtues of collective decision-making, or the imperatives of peace, justice, or environmental sustainability. Rather it is a way of calculating how best to get others to do what America wants them to do, with the threat of a drone strike or a Special Forces incursion always present in the background.

The Pentagon, at least, has been clear about this point. In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [argued](#) for “strengthening our capacity to use soft power and for better integrating it with hard power.” The Pentagon has long realized that a toolbox with only a single hammer in it handicaps the handyman, but it still persists in seeing a world full of nails.

At a more practical level, “smart power” encounters problems because in this “integration,” the Pentagon always turns out to be the primary partner. As a result, the work of diplomats, dispensers of humanitarian aid, and all the other “do-gooders” who attempt to distinguish their work from soldiers is compromised. After decades of trying to persuade their overseas partners that they are not simply civilian adjuncts to the Pentagon, the staff of the State Department has now [jumped into bed with the military](#). They might as well put big bull’s eyes on their backs, and there’s nothing smart about that.

“Smart power” also provides a lifeline for a military that might face significant cuts if [Congress’s sequestration plan](#) goes through. NATO has already shown the way. Its embrace of “[smart defense](#)” is a direct response to military cutbacks by European governments. The Pentagon is deeply worried that budget-cutters will follow the European example, so it is doing what corporations everywhere attempt during a crisis. It is trying to rebrand its services.

Always in search of a mission, the Pentagon now has its fingers in just about every pie in the bakery. The Marines are doing drug interdiction [in Guatemala](#). Special Operations forces are [constructing cyclone shelters](#) in Bangladesh. The U.S. Navy [provided](#) post-disaster relief in Japan after the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, while the U.S. Army did the [same in Haiti](#). In 2011, the Africa Command [budgeted \\$150 million](#) for development and health care.

The Pentagon, in other words, has turned itself into an all-purpose agency, even [attempting “reconstruction”](#) along with State and various crony corporations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is preparing for the impact of climate change, pouring R & D dollars into alternative energy, and running operations in cyberspace. The Pentagon has been smart about its power by spreading it everywhere.

## **Dumb vs. Dumber**

As president, Obama has shown no hesitation to use force. But his use of military power has not proven any “smarter” than that of his predecessor. Iran and North Korea pushed ahead with their nuclear programs when diplomatic alternatives were not forthcoming. Nuclear power Pakistan is closer to outright anarchy than four years ago. Afghanistan is a mess, and an arms race is heating up in East Asia, fueled in part by the efforts of the United States and its allies to [box in China](#) with more air and sea power.

In one way, however, Obama has been Mr. Softy. He has shown no backbone whatsoever in confronting the bullies already in America’s corner. He has done little to push back against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his occupation policies. He hasn’t confronted Saudi Arabia, the most autocratic of U.S. allies. In fact, he has leveraged the power of both countries — toward Iran, Syria, Bahrain. A key component of “smart power” is outsourcing the messy stuff to others.

Make no mistake: Mitt Romney is worse. A Romney-Ryan administration would be a step backward to the policies of the early Bush years. President Romney would increase military spending, restart a cold war with Russia, possibly undertake a hot war against Iran, deep-six as many multilateral agreements as he could, and generally resurrect the Ugly American policies of the recent past.

But President Romney wouldn't fundamentally alter U.S. foreign policy. After all, President Obama has largely preserved the post-9/11 fundamentals laid down by George W. Bush, which in turn drew heavily on a unilateralist and militarist recipe that top chefs from Bill Clinton on back merely tweaked.

Obama has mentioned, *sotto voce*, that Mr. Softy might resurface if the incumbent is reelected. Off mic, as he [mentioned in an aside](#) to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at a meeting in Seoul last spring, he has promised to show more "flexibility" in his second term. This might translate into more arms agreements with Russia, more diplomatic overtures like the [effort with Burma](#), and more spending of political capital to address global warming, non-proliferation, global poverty, and health pandemics.

But don't count on it. The smart money is not with Obama's smart power. Mr. Softy has largely been an electoral ploy. If he's re-elected, Obama will undoubtedly continue to act as Mr. Stick. Brace yourself for four more years of dumb power — or, if he loses, even dumber power.