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Obama Against the World

By Tom Engelhardt

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Since this is my version of an election piece, I plan to get the usual stuff out of the way fast.

So yes, the smartest political [odds-givers](#) around [believe](#) President Obama has a [distinct edge](#) over Mitt Romney coming out of the conventions, the Senate is [trending](#) Democratic, and who knows about the House. In fact, it almost seems as if the Republicans put forward the only man in America incapable of defeating an economically wounded and deeply vulnerable president (other than, of course, the roster of candidates he ran against for the nomination).

In every way that they [can control](#), the Obama people have simply been smarter. Take those conventions: in each of them, the presidential candidate was introduced by a well-known figure who went on stage and ad-libbed. One was an [82-year-old guy](#) talking to an empty chair (and I still thought he was the best thing the Republicans had to offer, including his shout-out about withdrawing all our troops from Afghanistan) and the other was... well, [Bill Clinton](#).

It wasn't even a contest. As for the upcoming [debates](#), if you think Romney can outduel Obama without wandering in among the thorns, I have a Nigerian prince I'd like to introduce you to. In other words, it should really all be over except for the usual shouting and the [gazillions of dollars](#) of attack ads that will turn swing-state TV screens into a mind-numbing blur of lies. Even there, however, some Super PAC and dark-money types may evidently be starting to consider [shifting funds](#) from beating up on Obama to beating up on Democratic senatorial candidates. It's a sign that the moneybags of the Republican right fear the Romney campaign is a rerun of McCain World and the candidate is a Bain Capital version of [John Kerry wind-surfing](#). After all, Romney seems almost [incapable](#) of opening his mouth without letting out a [howler](#), his staff is in a [state](#)

of civil war, and Republican candidates elsewhere are leaping from the ditched bandwagon, as are even conservative pundits.

By now, Obama and his savvy campaign staff should really be home free, having run political circles around their Republican opponent as he was running circles around himself. There's only one problem: the world. These days it's threatening to be a bizarrely uncooperative place for a president who wants to rest on his Osama-killing foreign-policy laurels.

An Administration of Managers Face the Tsunami

So send Mitt to the Cayman Islands, stick Paul Ryan in a Swiss bank account, and focus your attention instead on Obama versus the world. For the next 43 days, that's the real contest. It could prove to be the greatest show on Earth, filled as it is with a stellar cast of Islamist extremists, Taliban militants, Afghan allies intent on blowing away their mentors, endangered American diplomats, an Israeli prime minister on the red-line express, sober central European bankers, and a perturbed Chinese leadership, among so many others.

In such a potentially tumultuous situation, the president and his people are committed to a perilous high-wire act without a net. It involves bringing to bear all the power and savvy left to the last superpower on Earth to prevent some part of the world from spinning embarrassingly out of control, lest the president's opponent be handed a delectable "[October surprise](#)."

Keep in mind that, despite the president's reputation as a visionary speaker, in global terms his has distinctly been an administration of managers. The visionaries came earlier. They were the first-term Bushites, including George W., Dick, and Donald, each in his own way globally bonkers, and all of them and their associates almost blissfully wrong about the nature of power in our world. (They [mistook](#) the destructive power of the U.S. military for global power itself.) As a consequence, they blithely steered the ship of state directly into a field of giant icebergs.

Think of that wrecking crew, in retrospect, as the three stooges of geopolitical dreaming. The invasion and occupation of Iraq, in particular — as well as the hubris that went with the very idea of a "global war on terror" — were acts of take-your-breath-away folly that help explain why the Bush administration was MIA at the recent Republican convention (as was, of course, the Iraq War). In the process, they drove a stake directly through the energy heartlands of the planet, leaving autocratic allies there gasping for breath and wondering what was next. Since 2009, the managers of the Obama administration have been doing what managers do best: fiddling with the order of the deck chairs on our particular Titanic. This might be thought of as managing the Bush legacy.

The problem was that in much of the world an older order, linked to the Cold War scheme of things, was finally coming unglued. A [combination](#) of the Bush invasions of the Eurasian mainland and the way the U.S. financial sector stormed the planet with a vast [Ponzi scheme](#) of bogus financial derivatives did much to promote the process, especially in what neoconservatives liked to call "[the arc of instability](#)" (before they offered a striking demonstration of just what instability was *really* all about). In a sense, what they dubbed their "democracy agenda" — though it had little enough to do with democracy — played a distinct role in unifying much of

the Arab world in opposition to its Washington-backed one-percenters. In this way, the Arab Spring was launched against [Ben Ali-ism](#), and Mubarak-ism, against, that is, an American system of well-armed regional autocrats. (The unraveling of Syria is just a reminder that what we are watching is the disintegration of the full Cold War set-up in the Middle East, including the less significant Soviet part of it.)

Back in 2004, Egyptian diplomat Amr Moussa [warned](#) the Bush administration that its invasion of Iraq had opened “the gates of hell.” Of course, Washington paid him no heed. He was neither an autocrat nor a soldier, but the secretary-general of the meaningless Arab League, so what were his credentials to explain reality to them? As it happened, he couldn’t have been more on the mark and they more in the dark. Unfortunately, it took some time, two minority insurgencies, much chaos, millions [driven into exile](#), a bitter sectarian civil war (now being repeated in Syria), and morgues filled with [dead bodies](#) before the Arab Spring would be launched. Though that movement was named for a season of renewal, its name was apt in another sense entirely: a whole system that had long held in place a key region of the planet was being sprung loose.

From Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, vast hordes of people would take to the streets, nonviolently at first, to protest the corruption and depredations of the 1% in their countries and, often, the foreign powers behind them. As autocrats began to fall, a region-wide system in all its complexity, corruption, and brutality began to shudder and come apart at the seams.

Today, that system is, politely put, in transition, but possibly simply in a state of collapse. What will replace it remains unknown and probably unknowable. In the meantime, into the emptied space have flowed all sorts of raw emotions, bitterness, repressed memories, hopes, and despair, much of it stored up for years if not decades, including feelings that are extreme indeed, and some that are simply murderous or quite mad. A way of life, a system in the Greater Middle East, is clearly over. Surprise is the order of the day, including [wild demonstrations](#) and [killings](#) over a bizarre “trailer” for a non-existent film that barely made it out of Southern California.

The truth is, from Iran to Iraq to Afghanistan to Pakistan to Libya to Yemen, despite almost four years of Obama’s ministrations and management, war and diplomacy, the Bush legacy is still threatening to blow the region sky-high. It could easily happen any time in the 43 days before November 6th. Which is why, from [Sudan](#) to [Libya](#), the Obama administration is playing little Dutch boy, trying to plug every hole it can in the Middle Eastern dike and praying that any coming tsunami won’t hit before the election.

A World at the Boiling Point

The question of the political season, then, has nothing to do with Mitt. It’s this: Can the Greater Middle East be managed effectively enough for any potentially embarrassing thing to be swept under some rug until November 7th? And that’s just one region on a planet aboil.

Similar questions could be asked of Israeli policy on Iran where Prime Minister Netanyahu has been, quite literally, on the warpath and in the Obama administration’s face. He has been pushing for a green light for Israeli strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities or guaranteed [red lines](#) that would

lead to such strikes. To an outside observer, it might almost seem that “Bibi” is [on TV](#) in the U.S. often enough these days to be running for office. From [late night](#) presidential phone calls to a stream of messages to Tel Aviv, some offering promises, others [warnings](#), the Obama administration has been putting enormous energy into ensuring that no Israeli strike on Iran will take place before election day (and on this they are likely to succeed). But keep in mind that, to placate Israel, the U.S. has [built up](#) its [forces](#) in the Persian Gulf region to such an extent that any misstep anywhere could result in a blow-up that neither Washington nor Tehran wants.

When it comes to the disintegrating American position in Afghanistan, almost 11 years after victory was declared and the Bush administration decided to occupy the country rather than go home, the news is grim. The whole mission on which the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops is ostensibly based — to train the Afghans to stand up and fight for their country — has essentially been [put on hold](#). That’s hardly surprising, since Washington’s Afghan allies are now regularly standing up and, with the weapons and training U.S. mentors have given them, [blowing those mentors away](#).

Meanwhile, the actual enemy, the Taliban, supposedly surged into near nonexistence in its southern homeland, has just launched the [most devastating attack](#) on a military base of the war, resulting in [at least \\$200 million](#) in allied loses. (It’s their first attack that might even faintly be compared to those the Vietnamese [launched](#) against American bases in the 1960s.) The question once again is: Can Washington hang on in Afghanistan until November 7th, even if it has to put every Afghan training mission and joint operation on hold and confine American troops to their bases? The great advantage the Obama administration holds in this regard is that the American public has generally been paying next to no attention to the Afghan War. This, nonetheless, is a situation in which an American mission has a possibility of imploding (and [unexpected voices](#) are finally being raised on the issue of early withdrawal). And we haven’t even mentioned Afghanistan’s unsettled and unsettling nuclear neighbor Pakistan.

Keep in mind that the increasingly disturbed regional system we’re discussing just happens to be located in the energy heartlands of the planet and, in case you hadn’t noticed, prices at the pump have been [rising](#) lately. The Saudis are, however, now [promising](#) to put extra oil into the global system, which just might providentially help the Obama administration by lowering gas prices before November.

Lest you think that Obama’s October surprise fears lie mainly in the Middle East, however, remember that a world system is shuddering, too. There’s the tottering Eurozone, in recession and threatening to shatter with unknown global financial consequences; and there’s the Chinese economy, that motor for the planet this last decade, which seems to be [slipping into recession](#) (just as the powerhouse [Indian and Brazilian](#) economies do the same), amid growing signs of unrest and ugly [nationalist upheavals](#). And don’t even bother to bring up climate change, the state of the planet, or the fact that extreme droughts in [the U.S.](#) and [elsewhere](#) this year are driving food prices [up worldwide](#) in a way that guarantees [future popular unrest](#) on a large scale. Any of the above could burst into prominence in the next 43 days, surprising the world and putting President Obama on the hot seat. And keep in mind that we’re only talking about — to [paraphrase](#) former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld — the known knowns, and known unknowns. No one is even thinking about the unknown unknowns.

The liberal hit on Obama has been that the man won't fight for what he believes in. The next 43 days will put the lie to that. He's ready to fight fiercely for his job by doing his damndest to tamp down any possible embarrassments, any potential October surprises — and he's enlisted the U.S. government lock, stock, and State Department in that campaign. So if you want a little horse-race entertainment for the next six weeks, skip the Ohio, Colorado, and Virginia polls, don't worry about the results of the coming debates, or the court tests on restrictive new voting laws. After all, there's going to be no better show in town than the acrobatic contortions of the Obama crew as they work to keep global disaster off the menu until November 7th.

It should be a lesson in what a declining superpower can (or can't) still do: a shining tale of great power management and luck or a sobering parable of what is no longer within the grasp of such a power on this planet of ours.

In the meantime, it's Obama against the world and the horse-race question is: Will he make it to November 7th and a second term? Think of that as Obama's problem.

But there's another far less entertaining problem few are thinking about right now. Consider it our problem. The Obama people are understandably focused on the election. Being of a managerial frame of mind, their thoughts don't tend to run to the long-term anyhow. I doubt they have, at this point, put a second's consideration into what's likely to happen, if they manage to keep everything under wraps, 44 days from now — and beyond. It's not as if war with Iran, disaster in Afghanistan, chaos in the Middle East, a staggering Eurozone, a stumbling Chinese economy (in the midst of seaborne saber rattling), rising oil and food prices, climate change, and so much else won't be as threatening then. None of these are problems, however managed, that are going away anytime soon or are likely in the long run to prove particularly manageable from Washington.

The question for the rest of us is: What the hell happens next? It's one you better start thinking about because the Obama people, much as they want to rule the roost for four more years, don't have a clue.