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## How History Will Remember Obama (Hint: Not Well)

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By William Pfaff

Action begets reaction in foreign policy as in physics, and action unconsidered for its possible consequences has been responsible for many results for which statesmen (or their unqualified counterparts) are eventually sorry, as are multitudes (as it may be) who pay the price. That, sententious as it may be, is my holiday message to Barack Obama. I continue:

In 2012, at the start of his second term, President Barack Obama called the Pentagon to assure its leaders that the American nation would remain the “greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known.” The war in Afghanistan was, at that time, continuing, and the disorders and sectarian attacks had begun, which have continued in Iraq ever since the United States had declared that war over in 2011—after 8 years, 8 months, 3 weeks and 4 days.

Mr. Obama endorsed his and his predecessor’s (George W. Bush) achievements, which he enumerated as (I paraphrase): strengthened alliances, new partnerships forged, defense of universal rights and human dignity, defense of the nation, the fight taken to America’s enemies, the number of Americans in harm’s way reduced and America’s global leadership restored. Seconded by (then) Defense Secretary Robert Gates, he promised a larger military budget and, instead of a downsized force, a more capable one. He said that after the Second World War and Vietnam, American forces had been left ill-prepared for the future, but that would not happen “on his watch.”

It was a curious speech because it implied that the Iraq War had been won and finished—sectarian and regional conflict ended, which is not true—and that the same soon would be true in Afghanistan. In the Afghan war, his administration has already widened the war (without congressional consultation) so as to include frontier regions of Pakistan, employing drone missile attacks and commando raids. This has intensified anti-Americanism and undermined Pakistani political stability to no one's advantage.

He has bargained with Afghan President Hamid Karzai to keep some American troops in the latter's country long after the originally scheduled withdrawal of the bulk of U.S. forces at the end of 2014. (The new agreement remains subject to national elections and Mr. Karzai's whims).

Since Mr. Obama spoke at the Pentagon, there have been major redeployments of American forces in Asia (where, in November 2011, he confirmed U.S. forces' "pivot" to Asia and told the Australian parliament that Asia's security is America's "top" security priority).

President Barack Obama's foreign policy "pivot to Asia" has never been given a complete explanation. The apparent justification is apprehension at the rise in China's economy, its military development and China's expanding claims with respect to disputed waters and territories. Is this really considered a threat to the United States?

It has been a legitimate concern to Japan and the countries that are the southeastern neighbors of Beijing in the Yellow and South China Seas. The Obama administration has implicitly treated it as if it were a prospective casus belli. (One would think congressional opposition to bombing Syria last fall suggests that the American people are not in a mood for a new casus belli.) The United States' major existing security commitments in East Asia concern the security of Japan and Korea, and the sole current dispute has been China's declaration in late November of a new air security and identification zone over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, rejected by Japan, the United States and other governments, and disregarded in a subsequent transit by American B-52 bombers from Guam.

The last time the United States caused its overseas military forces to "pivot" from the American mainland and their commitments in Europe was 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea, where units of the American occupation army were deployed. That produced a bloody war in which China became involved as North Korea's ally. The dispute has yet to be settled, a nominal state of war still existing so far as North Korea is concerned, that recently took an 85-year-old American tourist and war veteran belated prisoner of war, but now have released him, the affair no doubt proving bad for tourism.

Barack Obama decided to run for president in 2007 and won, as the man who would end George Bush's Iraq war. He did so up to a point (see above) but enlarged the one in Afghanistan, following the generals' advice about which he had little choice, having been, in civilian life, a community organizer and teacher. Since then, he has followed the beat of the drum in the Middle East and South Asia, bombing Libya and enthusiastically offering to bomb Syria. He has inaugurated drone assassinations (not something endorsed in international law) and perpetuated Guantanamo imprisonment (ditto). He has opened a new era in America of governmental secrecy

and persecution of dissidents, matters in which the United States was, in the past, considered to have an edifying record.

The wars that he has not ended and the moral climate he has sustained in American government, in succession to George Bush, will be the remembered qualities of his presidency. This seems a disheartening disappointment, which the United States might have been spared.