

Obama and the Eisenhower Standard

When crafting foreign policy, the late president didn't 'give a damn how the election goes.'

By **FOUAD AJAMI**

On Nov. 6, 1956, Election Day, to be precise, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent a brief message to British Prime Minister Anthony Eden: "We have given our whole thought to Hungary and the Middle East. I don't give a damn how the election goes."



Eisenhower could afford that kind of attitude—he was a genuine American hero in World War II, and there was no chance of his losing his bid for a second term to the inconsequential Adlai Stevenson. But the election came, as the historian David Nichols put it, during a "perfect storm." Britain and France had invaded Egypt under the guise of bringing to a halt fighting in the Suez Canal between Egypt and Israel, and the Soviet Union had deemed this the right time to crush a Hungarian bid for freedom.

Ours is a different world. Barack Obama isn't to be held to the Eisenhower standard. Indeed, as a fortunate "off-mic" moment recently revealed, this president bargains with Russian errand boy Dmitry Medvedev over something as trivial as protecting Europe with a missile defense system. I will have more "flexibility," the leader of the Free World says, with my last election behind me.

Thankfully, we don't live in the shadow of a nuclear showdown. But from its very beginning, this presidency has been about the man himself and his personal ambition, and less so his duty to democracy.

So what's to be said of Mr. Obama's foreign-policy accomplishments? Has he, like Eisenhower, given his whole thought to the troubles of the Middle East? As a candidate, he declared Afghanistan the "war of necessity." But the war does not detain or torment him, nothing here of the anguish of LBJ over Vietnam. He ordered his own surge in Afghanistan but took away so much of its power by announcing a date for American withdrawal in 2014—two good, safe years after his second presidential bid. This way peace could be had with the

Taliban who could wait us out—and with the "progressives" at home who have no use for this war but are willing to grant the president prosecuting it time and indulgence.

In the same vein, the primacy of electoral politics over the necessities of strategy had driven the decision to quit Iraq and give up our gains in that vital country. Mr. Obama gave the Iraqis an offer they were meant to refuse. The small residual force he said he would accept, a contingent of somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers, could hardly defend itself, let alone be of any use to the Iraqis.

No one was fooled. The American president had given every indication that he had no interest in Iraq and its affairs. A decade of sacrifices lay behind us in Iraq, the new order was too fragile to stand alone. We could have had an appreciable presence in Iraq—the Kurds, the Shiites, the Sunnis would have all been glad for the American protection. This presence would have served us well as a hedge against the hegemonic ambitions of Iranian theocracy, and an Iraq in the orbit of U.S. power would have been less likely to cast its fate with the embattled House of Assad in Syria.

For a year now, the people of Syria have been in the midst of a heroic struggle against a tyrannical regime, but no American help has come their way. Moral considerations aside, Syria is now a strategic battleground, a place where Iranian power challenges, by proxy, the moderate order of nations in the region. For three decades, the Iranian radical theocracy has waged campaigns of terror away from its soil.

In Syria, the mullahs are determined to prevail in the face of the moderate Arabs and Western democracies. Much of the order of the region hangs in the balance. Were the Iranian bid for regional hegemony to be broken in Syria, the Middle East would change for the better.

As the noted scholar of strategy Charles Hill put it, Syria is the ideal place to rattle the turbans. Were the Assad regime to bite the dust, the stranglehold of Hezbollah over Lebanon would come to an end. In "the East" there is that age-old instinct for reading the wind and riding with the victor.

It had taken some five months for President Obama to call on Bashar al-Assad to relinquish power, but once that call was made we were reduced to mere spectators of the Syrian calamity. We exaggerated the might of the Assad killing machine, belittled the opposition, and doubting their purpose and cohesiveness, refrained from arming the defectors.

American intelligence and policy statements could never get it right: Assad was, alternately, a dead man walking or firmly in the saddle. When a measure of ambiguity about American intentions could have aided the Syrian rebellion, the Pentagon and State Department went out of their way to reassure the despot in Damascus that there was nothing to worry about in Washington. No wonder the suspicion has grown that the Obama administration is content to see Assad ride out the storm.

From this great contest, the administration wishes to be spared. Were Assad to fall, the claim could be made that the Obama wisdom had been vindicated, that an "organic" Arab rebellion had prevailed. In the meantime, the agony of Homs and Hama, the popular upheaval against a monstrous tyranny, is left untended.

Mr. Obama has never owned up to the fact that the cruel regimes in Tehran and Damascus were the ones he had been eager to court at the dawn of his presidency. Read the Wikileaks from Damascus in early 2009—they are full of false hope that the olive branch extended to the Damascus dictatorship had altered its ways.

History is perhaps forgiving nowadays, the Syrian rebellion could be crushed without Mr. Obama paying an appreciable political price. It is a sad truth that the president has become the embodiment, and the instrument, of our retreat from distant shores—and concerns. He trades away strategic American assets in the hope that the American people will not care or notice. On the face of it, he exudes a sublime confidence that the world could be held at bay—at least until November, past that last election.

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