

Hmm. Maybe Obama Won't Change Global Opinion of the U.S. After All

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During the last years of the Bush administration U.S. popularity abroad was at an all-time nadir. Anti-American sentiment in Europe, South Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere was so strong that the longtime alliances were, if not actually threatened, than far less comfortable, efforts to win the hearts and minds of Muslims anywhere in the world had almost no chance of success and the U.S. was seen by much of the globe as the primary source of all the world's problems.

That all changed in 2008 during the year long presidential election which captivated the world's attention and resulted in the election of Barack Obama as president of the U.S. Obama's unique personal history, commitment to conducting foreign policy differently once in office, ability to put a new face on American foreign policy and strong refutation of his predecessor's policies were going to change how the world viewed America and win back global support for the U.S. At least that is what was supposed to happen.

After almost two years in office it is necessary to question this assumption. At home we have already seen that many of Obama's most ardent domestic supporters have cooled their enthusiasm for Obama largely due to a style of governance that appears to be driven more by timidity than by hope, leaving Obama with weaker poll numbers and the Democratic Party wondering how many of those young voters who contributed to the party's big victory in 2008 will bother voting in 2010. These voters, perhaps out of naivete, or perhaps out of sheer frustration with Obama's inability to do either the difficult things, such as pass meaningful progressive health care reform, or the easy things like take a strong position in support of marriage equality, increasingly see Obama as more or less just another politician, albeit one who is younger and better spoken than most. Most of these voters recognize that Obama is far superior to his predecessor, but they also don't see the real change.

Perhaps a similar dynamic will evolve globally as well. People around the world who saw Obama's election as evidence of the real promise of America and as a reason to hope that Bush's America was an aberration may begin to question these assumptions too. This is partially natural as American foreign policy has always been characterized by more continuity than change between administrations. U.S. interests almost never change substantially when a new president comes to office. People anywhere in the world who expected the Obama administration to abandon long standing alliances, tone down U.S. efforts to combat Jihadist terror or to seek to change the U.S. role in international relations were inevitably going to be disappointed.

There are, however, people who did not expect this, but might have expected a foreign policy that was more aware of the difficulties in Afghanistan and Iraq and less beholden to conventional military and foreign policy elite views on these two wars, or who thought that the U.S. would now be able to take a lead role and achieve some meaningful outcomes on issues like global climate change.

People like this will continue to grow disappointed at an administration that has not made a radical break with the failed policies of its predecessors. Obviously, global public opinion should not be an important constituency for the president, but a well liked and respected U.S. makes achieving almost any foreign policy goal easier.

Obama's early, and somewhat inexplicable Nobel Prize notwithstanding, Obama's presidency may create a different perception of the U.S. than what we first thought. Instead of being evidence of the ability of the American people and their political system to change and self-correct, Obama may become a symbol of the inflexibility of the U.S. system and evidence that no matter who is in office, the goals, means and behavior of the U.S. doesn't change all that much. If indeed this happens, then squandering the Obama moment due to timidity and a failure to pursue real change will damage America's standing abroad no less significantly than the disaster that was the Bush administration.