

Foreign Policy and Presidential Expectations

Lincoln A. Mitchell

July 2, 2011

The ability to manage expectations is an important political skill, both when seeking office, particularly the American presidency because a presidential campaign consists of numerous primaries over the course of several months before the general election in November, as well as when governing. President Obama, has done a good job of managing the enormous and unrealistic expectations around domestic issues, particularly the economy, which he encountered when he became president in January of 2009. Obama has done this by constantly reminding voters about the extremely difficult economic environment he encountered when he took office and has frequently warning that it will be a long and tough path back to good economic times.

In foreign policy, however, Obama has been far less able to manage expectations. Obama has done little to dampen expectations that he needs to to make progress in bringing peace to the Middle East, peacefully remove autocrats from power in Syria, Libya and Belarus, even quicken the pace of democratization in Egypt since the resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak. Obama is also expected to resolve problems he inherited, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which are still going on with, at best, mixed signs of progress. These expectations are obviously stressed more by critics of the President, but it remains true that Obama is expected to achieve very broad array of foreign policy outcomes.

These expectations are, of course, unrealistic. Any American president only has finite, and limited, ability to shape political and military events thousands of miles away from the U.S., particularly during a time of declining American hegemony, but the expectations persist. They are also not unique to the Obama presidency and suggest a larger problem of the American presidency and, indeed, American foreign policy.

All president's take office with plans to solve major international problems such as bringing peace to the Middle East or ending other longstanding conflicts, ending human rights abuses in some places, stabilizing dangerous parts of the world and the like. This is partially because the U.S. has interests, genuine or overstated, in almost every corner of the planet, but it is also because of the American vision of itself as uniquely able, and therefore obliged, to solve problems all over the world. Thus, presidential expectations exist in a synergistic relations with the foreign policy bureaucracy. The latter has been created to address almost any imaginable contingency in any corner of the world leading to an expensive and far flung American diplomatic and military presence, while the former ensures that this bureaucracy will be necessary for any president.

To the extent any individual is positioned to address these types of problems, it is the president of the U.S., but this ability is nonetheless restricted limited because U.S. influence is also limited, and probably declining. Nonetheless, the cycle of claiming the

ability to solve entrenched global problems during the campaign and then failing to do so once in office is reasonably well established and always offers the party not in power the opportunity to attack the incumbent president in the campaign. The one recent exception to this was George W. Bush who pledged a more “humble” foreign policy while running for office in 2000, but did not even come close to governing on this principle.

The expectations which many have for presidents regarding foreign policy are not congruent with the knowledge that for most presidents, foreign policy success means avoiding the worst outcomes and otherwise keeping the status quo more or less in place. This is a less exciting measure and less dramatic vision of America’s role in the world, but it is more consistent with the real ability of presidents to change the world, or even the foreign policy institutions and bureaucracy at home. It is also a measure that is much more generous not just to President Obama, but to most recent American presidents.

If expectations were adjusted to reflect this measure, U.S. foreign policy would also change. If presidential success was not defined by solving every problem, old and new, but by simply staying away from particularly bad outcomes, the U.S. would likely pursue a far more risk averse and cautious foreign policy. Presidents might not only recognize that some problems are beyond their ability to solve, but know that politically they do not need to take chances and expend resources to solve them. There would, of course, be some value to this, but also some negative aspects. The U.S. would over time feel less compelled to have a presence everywhere in the world, but would also rarely put its resources behind addressing important regional problems, thus ceding more influence to regional powers and other forces around the world.