

No Nonsense Here

Barack Obama has changed American foreign policy. Author and former presidential adviser Derek Chollet lays out an astute analysis.

By Matthias Nass

Actually, it is still too early to take stock. Barack Obama is officially still in office until the end of January 2017. In the news cycles, however, the American president has practically vanished - overshadowed by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Like almost all of his predecessors, Obama has entered the so-called "lame duck" presidency, where he is unable to make any further movements of consequence as president. So is now the right time to pass judgement on his administration?

Derek Chollet, in any case, has taken it upon himself to do so in his new book "The Long Game - How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World". The former Obama advisor, who held important positions in the U.S. Department of State, the White House, and the Pentagon, has laid out an insightful analysis of American foreign policy in the past seven and a half years. He writes from the perspective of an insider: well-informed, but also benevolent in his judgement. Something that is not very surprising, considering how directly involved Chollet himself was in many of the decisions.

What makes the book worth reading is not just the privileged insight into the activities at the center of power. It is the attempt to explain why Obama has always pushed against "groupthink" in Washington regarding the most fundamental issues, refusing to act according to the "playbook" of the foreign policy establishment. The clearest example of this was Obama's decision not to engage militarily in Syria, even though he had previously declared the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime as a "red line". According to his critics, this was the low point of a foreign policy approach that weakened America's position in the world and squandered the power of its leadership. But as Obama said later in an interview, he found this to be a moment of "liberation". He remains proud of his decision even today, which prevented his country from entering into a third war against a Muslim country, with no prospect of pacifying Syria or the region as a result.

Chollet describes Obama's foreign policy tenure in two phases. In the first phase, between 2009 and 2011, the aim was to clean up the mess left behind by the Bush Administration. Obama wanted to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he wanted to close Guantanamo Bay prison and put an end to the torture of terror suspects.

Then, in 2011, began a "cascade of crises" where the world refracted: the Arab Spring with the

upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Syrian Civil War, Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the terrorism of the "Islamic State". The government had to switch into crisis mode.

When what is happening calls for very fast, responsive action, there is little time for long-term strategic thinking. But according to the central thesis of the book, that is exactly what Obama opposed. Again and again, Chollet reports, Obama opposed hasty actions and questioned the long-term impact of the military interventions that were being demanded. He wanted to know: What really serves America's interests? What strengthens the nation, what weakens it? His hesitation was interpreted as a weakness, but Obama felt strengthened by the criticism. "Dropping bombs on someone just to prove you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force," he said¹.

Obama is a president, at least in Chollet's observations, who is very clear on his actions. He compares himself with Republican predecessors like Dwight Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush, sharing their sober, reality-oriented worldview. Among the active politicians, he stands closest to the rational, unsentimental Angela Merkel.

Certainly Obama's oft-quoted words - "Don't do stupid stuff!"² - is a somewhat understated maxim for the foreign policy approach of a world power. But in response to the ideological campaigns of his predecessor George W. Bush, it is understandable enough. Obama is convinced that military action is not the only possible response to the multifaceted crises in this world, and that diplomacy and economic help may be equally important. He doesn't value "going it alone", preferring to strengthen the role of allies, and rather than always choosing to precede the storm, "leading from behind", as in Libya.

Chollet believes that history will judge this presidency positively. And on that he is quite right. If the world is a place without peace in 2016, the least amount of blame can be placed on this president. Barack Obama has governed his country wisely. Anyone who didn't have unrealistic expectations at the beginning must attest to the success of this administration. It doesn't require the election of Donald Trump to the White House to begin missing this president.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online [in German](#). The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.

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¹ A note from the Bucerius editor: This quote has appeared in slightly varied forms in different publications. This version was taken directly from "The Long Game – How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World" by Derek Chollet, page 22.

² A note from the Bucerius editor: The original quote attributed to Barack Obama uses a word similar to "stuff", which is not always considered appropriate in polite conversation. The New York Times made the editorial decision to replace that word with "stuff", and we have decided to do so as well, since the principle idea behind the statement remains the same in either case.