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Obama at UN, Calls for “Change ... New Era of Engagement”

President Obama delivered his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 23, employing impassioned rhetoric reminiscent of his presidential campaign’s theme of “change”:

“The people of the world want change,” Obama said at the UN. “They will not long tolerate those who are on the wrong side of history. The time has come for the world to move in a new direction. We must embrace a new era of engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect and our work must begin now.”



While — unlike former President George H.W. Bush’s Sept. 11, 1990, address before a joint session of Congress — Obama did not employ the term “new world order” to describe his vision for global governance, he did come close, saying:

In an era where our destiny is shared, power is no longer a zero-sum game. No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed. No balance of power among nations will hold. The traditional divisions between nations of the South and the North make no sense in an interconnected world; nor do alignments of nations rooted in the cleavages of a long-gone Cold War.

Defending the United States against foreign critics who have charged that the nation either has done too little or has acted unilaterally to solve the world’s problems, Obama stated: “Make no mistake: this cannot solely be America’s endeavor. Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world’s problems alone.”

“America has acted unilaterally, without regard for the interests of others. And this has fed an almost reflexive anti-Americanism, which too often has served as an excuse for collective inaction.”

At the same time, the U.S. president took an apologetic tone for not accomplishing what he apparently views as a U.S. responsibility to act beyond the mandate for American government established by the U.S. Constitution, saying:

Now is the time for all of us to take our share of responsibility for a global response to global challenges. If we are honest with ourselves, we need to admit that we are not living up to that responsibility.... We can be remembered as a generation that chose to drag the arguments of the 20th century into the 21st; that put off hard choices, refused to look ahead, and failed to keep pace because we defined ourselves by what we were against instead of what we were for. Or, we can be a generation that chooses to see the shoreline beyond the rough waters ahead; that comes together to serve the common interests of human beings, and finally gives meaning to the promise embedded in the name given to this institution: the United Nations.



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One point in the president's address could be seen as indirect criticism of his predecessor, George W. Bush: "For those who question the character and cause of my nation, I ask you to look at the concrete actions that we have taken in just nine months. America will live its values, and we will lead by example."

In one of his few references in the speech that actually defended the Constitution, specifically its Bill of Rights, Obama said:

On my first day in office, I prohibited — without exception or equivocation — the use of torture by the United States of America. [The remark was met with applause.] I ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed, and we are doing the hard work of forging a framework to combat extremism within the rule of law. Every nation must know: America will live its values, and we will lead by example.

However, Obama gave a boost to the concept of international law, presumably enforced by a world government such as the UN, when he charged that Iran and North Korea "must be held accountable" if they continue to ignore international nuclear weapons treaties.

If the governments of Iran and North Korea choose to ignore international standards; if they put the pursuit of nuclear weapons ahead of regional stability and the security and opportunity of their own people; if they are oblivious to the dangers of escalating nuclear arms races in both East Asia and the Middle East — then they must be held accountable. The world must stand together to demonstrate that international law is not an empty promise, and that treaties will be enforced. We must insist that the future not belong to fear.

Playing to a home crowd, Obama emphasized support for the UN, stating:

We've also re-engaged the United Nations. We have paid our bills. We have joined the Human Rights Council. [This was also met with applause.] We have signed the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We have fully embraced the Millennium Development Goals. And we address our priorities here, in this institution — for instance, through the Security Council meeting that I will chair tomorrow on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and through the issues that I will discuss today.

Continuing on this one-world theme, he said:

This body was founded on the belief that the nations of the world could solve their problems together. Franklin Roosevelt, who died before he could see his vision for this institution become a reality, put it this way — and I quote: "The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man, or one party, or one nation.... It cannot be a peace of large nations — or of small nations. It must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world."

Obama also harkened back to the fear of nuclear annihilation that was strong in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — fear that served as a strong initial impetus for founding the UN — and exploited that fear to promote ratification of the nuclear Test Ban Treaty:

This institution was founded at the dawn of the atomic age, in part because man's capacity to kill had to be contained. For decades, we averted disaster, even under the shadow of a superpower stand-off. But today, the threat of proliferation is growing in scope and complexity. If we fail to act, we will invite nuclear arms races in every region, and the prospect of wars and acts of terror on a scale that we can hardly imagine.



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A fragile consensus stands in the way of this frightening outcome, and that is the basic bargain that shapes the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It says that all nations have the right to peaceful nuclear energy; that nations with nuclear weapons have a responsibility to move toward disarmament; and those without them have the responsibility to forsake them. The next 12 months could be pivotal in determining whether this compact will be strengthened or will slowly dissolve.

America intends to keep our end of the bargain. We will pursue a new agreement with Russia to substantially reduce our strategic warheads and launchers. We will move forward with ratification of the Test Ban Treaty, and work with others to bring the treaty into force so that nuclear testing is permanently prohibited. We will complete a Nuclear Posture Review that opens the door to deeper cuts and reduces the role of nuclear weapons. And we will call upon countries to begin negotiations in January on a treaty to end the production of fissile material for weapons.

I will also host a summit next April that reaffirms each nation's responsibility to secure nuclear material on its territory, and to help those who can't — because we must never allow a single nuclear device to fall into the hands of a violent extremist. And we will work to strengthen the institutions and initiatives that combat nuclear smuggling and theft.

All of this must support efforts to strengthen the NPT. Those nations that refuse to live up to their obligations must face consequences. Let me be clear, this is not about singling out individual nations — it is about standing up for the rights of all nations that do live up to their responsibilities. Because a world in which IAEA inspections are avoided and the United Nation's demands are ignored will leave all people less safe, and all nations less secure.

Among the topics Obama covered was the elusive effort to reach a peace agreement between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors.

"The time has come to re-launch negotiations — without preconditions — that address the permanent-status issues: security for Israelis and Palestinians; borders, refugees and Jerusalem," he said. "The goal is clear: two states living side by side in peace and security — a Jewish state of Israel, with true security for all Israelis; and a viable, independent Palestinian state with contiguous territory that ends the occupation that began in 1967, and realizes the potential of the Palestinian people."

The U.S. President received applause after the above statement and as he continued speaking on the theme of Middle East peace, using skillfully crafted parallel statements: "The United States does Israel no favors when we fail to couple an unwavering commitment to its security with an insistence that Israel respect the legitimate claims and rights of the Palestinians."

"And nations within this body do the Palestinians no favors when they choose vitriolic attacks against Israel over a constructive willingness to recognize Israel's legitimacy, and its right to exist in peace and security."

And, referring to a topic of concern ceaselessly addressed by international forums in recent years, "global warming," Obama painted a picture of ominous doom:

The danger posed by climate change cannot be denied. Our responsibility to meet it must not be deferred. If we continue down our current course, every member of this Assembly will see irreversible changes within their borders. Our efforts to end conflicts will be eclipsed by wars over refugees and resources. Development will be devastated by drought and famine. Land that human beings have lived on for millennia will disappear. Future generations will look back and wonder why we refused to act; why we failed to pass on — why we failed to pass on an



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environment that was worthy of our inheritance.

And that is why the days when America dragged its feet on this issue are over. We will move forward with investments to transform our energy economy, while providing incentives to make clean energy the profitable kind of energy. We will press ahead with deep cuts in emissions to reach the goals that we set for 2020, and eventually 2050. We will continue to promote renewable energy and efficiency, and share new technologies with countries around the world. And we will seize every opportunity for progress to address this threat in a cooperative effort with the entire world.

Near the conclusion of his speech, Obama again referenced Franklin Roosevelt as a father of the UN, stating: "Sixty-five years ago, a weary Franklin Roosevelt spoke to the American people in his fourth and final inaugural address. After years of war, he sought to sum up the lessons that could be drawn from the terrible suffering, the enormous sacrifice that had taken place. 'We have learned,' he said, 'to be citizens of the world, members of the human community.' "

By a statement intended to be one of praise, President Obama has revealed a fundamental truth about the UN and about every U.S. President from Roosevelt to himself — Democrat or Republican — who have without exception worked to strengthen the United Nations.

Internationalism — the philosophy that we are all citizens of the world — supplants patriotism (literally: love of one's native land) and implores citizens to shift their loyalty from their own sovereign state to an ambiguous "parliament of man." World citizenship, moreover, is meaningless without the existence of a world government — the ultimate goal of internationalists.

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