



Written by on November 30, 2010

Bush and Obama: Standards & Similarities

According to Alex Barker writing in a November 9 blog entry for Britain's Financial Times, President George W. Bush once confided to several British officials, including then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown, "I'd have endorsed Obama if they'd asked me."

Although former President Bush's spokespeople have vehemently denied that the President ever said any such thing, Bush's statement seems in line with what too few partisan Democrats and Republicans are willing to acknowledge: that differences between former President Bush and President Obama are mostly cosmetic.



It may be clichéd to observe that there isn't a dime's worth of difference between Republicans and Democrats, but most of us still nurture the fond hope that there is some difference between an allegedly conservative Republican President like George W. Bush and a liberal Democrat like Barack Obama. Certainly the two men differ strikingly in style. Where Bush was verbally awkward, Obama is the soul of eloquence (at least when his teleprompter is working). Where Bush cultivated a good ol' boy persona, Obama exudes effete elitism. Where Bush typically played the hardliner against his political enemies, Obama has often appeared conciliatory. These, in addition to obvious contrasts in race and upbringing, are the sorts of differences that the media love to dwell on, as though the most crucial attributes of the President are a nimble intellect and a winning personality.

But whatever their various distinguishing traits in their private lives, our political leaders must be judged foremost by their actions in office. And in these, there has been, for several generations, little variation from one President to the next. Our most recent two Presidents are no exception; in matters of bread and butter policy, their similarities far outweigh their differences, while in matters of fundamental political principle, they differ not a whit.

As to the sort of policy decisions that adorn electoral platforms, consider how striking the similarities between Bush and Obama have proven to be, both during Bush's presidency (when Obama was in the Senate and regularly voted in favor of Bush initiatives) and during the Obama presidency, when the President has mostly carried on the policies of his predecessor.

Make War, Not Love

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, likely to be remembered as President Bush's most important undertakings, have been carried on under President Obama almost precisely as President Bush would have done, had he been elected to a third term in office. It was President Bush, after all, who envisaged winding down the war in Iraq sometime after 2010, rejecting out of hand any notion of an earlier withdrawal. Candidate Barack Obama conspicuously distanced himself from this policy, promising to end the war in Iraq soon after taking office — only to change his position once elected. We're now more



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or less following the timeline for Iraq recommended by President Bush, which was cemented by a “Status of Forces Agreement,” and signed with the Iraqi government shortly before Bush left office. That agreement committed the United States to withdraw military forces by the end of 2011. Many thousands of American troops are still in the country, the gigantic new fortress-like U.S. embassy in Baghdad — the most expensive in the world — opened for business in January 2009, and the bombings and violence continue unabated in that tragic land. It should now be plain to all observers that, despite the much-ballyhooed withdrawal of combat troops, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, as emblemized by its Residency-esque new embassy, is to be as permanent as the British Raj in India.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, President Obama’s surge is an obvious imitation of President Bush’s attempts to put down insurrectionists in occupied Iraq. And, as with Iraq, the infusion of tens of thousands more American troops in Afghanistan has led only to more violence and to higher American casualty rates. As the *Huffington Post*’s Jennifer Loven summarized:

From process to goals to specifics, Obama’s new war plan is eerily similar to Bush’s.

Then in Iraq, as now in Afghanistan, the president took weeks of rumination to settle on a new policy, drawing criticism for dragging out his decision-making.

Then in Iraq, as now in Afghanistan, the war has become longer, costlier and more unpopular than U.S. leaders expected. American-led forces quickly toppled Afghanistan’s Taliban government after the 2001 terrorist attacks, but al-Qaida and Taliban extremists now have regrouped in neighboring Pakistan.

Then in Iraq, as now in Afghanistan, violence grips the country, insurgents are making inroads and leaders are incapable or unwilling to govern effectively. Much of the local population is suspicious of the American soldiers in their midst. Some cooperate with militants out of fear, some for the insurgent payroll in a feeble economy.

Then in Iraq, as now in Afghanistan, everyone becomes a trainer. Whether in a combat unit or dedicated training mission, all U.S. forces now will be expected by the commander in chief to mentor their Afghan counterparts, going out side by side on patrols and embedding in units.

Then in Iraq, as now in Afghanistan, a “bottom-up” strategy is proclaimed the best. Securing Afghanistan’s population centers is a new priority, so that people will have less reason to support the insurgents. U.S. financial help will be funneled to provinces and districts and not just to Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s ineffectual central government.

Nor are the foreign policy similarities between Bush and Obama confined to our two wars. Obama has continued his predecessor’s policy of threatening Iran over that country’s construction of nuclear power facilities. The current President has also continued Bush’s (and Clinton’s) policy of kowtowing to Beijing despite China’s flagrant human rights violations and growing military threat; if anything, Obama has been the most servile U.S. President yet, as far as Sino-American relations are concerned. As *Time* magazine’s Tony Karon crisply observed, “Obama’s realpolitik has seen him refrain from some of the largely symbolic irritants to the U.S.-China relationship that Bush was willing to risk, such as meeting with the Dalai Lama or going to church in Beijing to express solidarity with Chinese Christians, but then, Obama’s America is even more financially dependent on China’s goodwill than Bush’s was.”

Internationalist Notions

In an arena not so often noticed in these post-Cold War times, Obama has more or less stayed the course set by Bush in his relationship with Russia, continuing to press for the expansion of NATO into



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Russia's sphere of influence even though — as Moscow often points out — NATO's entire *raison d'être*, containment of the Soviet Union, is completely out of date.

Which raises an interesting question: Why, two decades after the implosion of the Soviet Union and the lifting of the Iron Curtain, does NATO still exist at all? The now-misnamed North Atlantic Treaty Organization has now become a sort of catch-all military alliance entrusted with projects — like the war in Afghanistan — seemingly far removed from its original mission. It has swallowed up nearly all of the former Eastern Bloc countries and not a few former Soviet republics, giving every appearance, as the Russians charge, of trying to perpetuate the Cold War encirclement and containment of Russia.

To understand NATO, it is important to understand its true purpose. The organization was created under the camouflage of the Cold War as an early experiment in international military cooperation, a stepping-stone toward the still fondly held goal of a single supreme global military force. The distinctive feature of NATO was and is intended to be its permanency, not its strategic relevance; when geopolitics changed, so did NATO. As they did during the Cold War, U.S. and other national forces serve under NATO command, a useful precedent if the aim is to dissuade soldiers from “old-fashioned” national allegiances. And continued U.S. involvement in NATO guarantees that America will continue to be embroiled in overseas conflicts (like the potentially explosive confrontation with Russia over former Soviet republic Georgia's entry into NATO) irrelevant to our national security.

But NATO is merely one piece of a more comprehensive foreign policy issue, and one withal ignored by the press and presidential candidates alike: U.S. involvement in the United Nations system, a 65-year-old experiment in international government that, in defiance of all logic, is still with us, stronger and more meddlesome than ever.

Within the framework of the United Nations, the basis for U.S. foreign policy has not been national self-interest but international interest. Since the UN was created, the United States has spent its strength warring abroad in defense of far-flung regimes like South Korea and South Vietnam, and to evict tyrants from Serbia to Iraq — all at the behest of the so-called “international community” in the guise of the United Nations.

But this type of conduct is precisely what the Founders warned Americans against, from George Washington onwards. “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations,” Washington explained, “is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connexion as possible.... Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.” A generation later, John Quincy Adams reaffirmed that America

goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.... She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.



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Clearly, modern American foreign policymakers, from our Presidents on down, have completely set aside the counsel of the Founders. The result? America is now embroiled, almost “beyond the power of extrication,” in precisely the sorts of bellicose enterprises Adams warned about. She does indeed fancy herself “dictatress of the world” these days, but at what cost in lives, wealth, and moral authority?

If there is one crystal clear historical constant, it is the fall of empires that bankrupt themselves, financially and morally, by imperial overstretch. Surely the United States, with her precarious finances, is in grave danger of doing the same. Yet President after President, Bush and Obama certainly included, have plunged into the Great Game of global militarism with nary a qualm, heedless of the long-term price such a policy will inevitably exact.

Finagling the Finances

Our bloated global military and unending wars aren't the only thing sapping our national resources. Another more universally recognized peril is the towering national debt, which is now reckoned in the tens of trillions of dollars. The economic collapse of 2008-2009 led to trillions of dollars of new government spending under the guise of economic stimulus — spending that began, lest we forget, under President Bush, who pushed through a \$700 billion stimulus (the bank bailout) that only made things worse. No sooner was Obama in office than he began pushing for a second, even more gargantuan stimulus package.

In tandem with these faux stimuli, both Presidents committed billions more to bailouts of select corporations, from financials to automotives, which were arbitrarily deemed “too big to fail.” The American public gnashed their teeth at such blatant favoritism, but the elites in Washington and Wall Street got exactly what they wanted, with Presidents Bush and Obama equally willing to extract the tributary payments from the taxpayers' hides. Two years on, the economic and financial crisis shows no sign of abating, and the national debt continues to spiral further and further out of control. Not surprisingly, but rather ironically considering how Republicans and Democrats on the whole vilify each other, federal spending has increased about 10 percent per year under President Obama, and it increased at a nearly 10-percent rate under George W. Bush, as well.

As with foreign policy, the monetary and fiscal policy of the United States government has not varied for several generations. We are now beginning to reap the fruits of decades of improvident government spending propped up by the greatest effusion of funny money the world has ever seen. Empires past, such as Rome under Diocletian, engaged in deceptive monetary policy, like diluting the purity of gold and silver in their coinage, but nothing in previous ages can compare to the brazen falsehood of modern fiat money created at whim by the printing press and (more recently) the computer entry. In this deceptive practice both the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve are complicit, the former in issuing excessive debt, and the latter in creating new money out of thin air to pay for it. This is what the Federal Reserve will be engaged in, to the tune of roughly 600 billion new dollars, in the infamous “QE2,” or second round of “quantitative easing” (i.e., creating new money) announced by the Fed in November. The result, as always with such financial flummery, will be massive inflation eroding the dollar's value at home and abroad.

Such practices were familiar to the Founders, which is why they insisted that America be placed on a gold and silver standard. Americans printed paper money heedlessly from the late 17th century through the Revolutionary War, resulting in financial havoc. From the ratification of the Constitution through the early 1930s, America managed to stay on a precious metal standard, limiting the ability of the federal government to indulge in deficit spending. But with the abolition of the gold standard,



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Washington could borrow and print money almost without limit, funding with deficits what taxpayers would be unwilling or unable to fund directly.

The evils of such a system notwithstanding, no President has uttered so much as a whisper of opposition to it since its inception, and virtually every other elected leader has followed their example. Both Bush and Obama have shown their willingness to perpetuate this unjust and destructive system, caring little that it is driving our country into international receivership.

What about President Obama's most costly, controversial policy initiative, the overhaul of America's healthcare system?

More About the Bad-boy Buddies

For many Americans, "ObamaCare" is proof positive that our President is a dangerous radical, a not-so-closeted socialist bent on inflicting inefficient state-run healthcare along Canadian or British lines on the United States. Indeed, the Obama healthcare "reforms," encompassing what liberal Democrats of earlier generations — like Ted Kennedy and Hillary Clinton — wanted to enact but couldn't, will do great damage to our once enviable healthcare system.

But ObamaCare is hardly the starting point of socialized medicine in the United States. President Lyndon Johnson, with the enactment of Medicare, first got the federal government involved in healthcare, touching off the climb in healthcare costs that has continued up to the present day and, predictably, prompted calls for still more government intervention to fix the problem.

President George W. Bush was one President who heeded those calls. His overhaul of Medicare, signed into law after his reelection, bears an estimated price tag of \$7 trillion, and has been called "the greatest expansion of America's welfare state in forty years" by CBS legal correspondent Jan Crawford Greenburg. In no small measure, Bush's massive Medicare reform laid the political foundation for more comprehensive healthcare legislation under President Obama. Public perceptions notwithstanding, both Bush and Obama not only favor the socialization of the American healthcare system, they have both used their presidencies to enact massive, expensive, and (need we say it?) blatantly unconstitutional overhauls of our healthcare system.

President Bush incurred the wrath of America's civil libertarians and Bill of Rights enthusiasts (this writer included) with the enactment, shortly after 9/11, of the Patriot Act and the creation of the Orwellian Department of Homeland Security. A welter of new intrusions on the privacy of Americans followed, including stepped-up airport security that arbitrarily placed thousands of Americans on secret "no-fly" lists, ramped up warrantless surveillance of e-mails, phone calls, and other activities, and Draconian new identification requirements, including absurd strictures mandating passports for travel to Canada and Mexico and much more rigid standards for opening bank accounts.

Candidate Obama professed to abhor such compromises of long-cherished civil liberties protected in the Fourth Amendment and elsewhere. In March 2007, for example, he called for homeland security that "must protect citizens, not intrude on them." But once in office, he quickly embraced the new security-at-any-cost mentality that has been driving American domestic policy for almost a decade. In the wake of the clumsy Christmas attempt to bring down a domestic jetliner last year, President Obama hastily authorized the use of stimulus monies for the TSA to install new backscatter body-imaging machines at all major airports. These machines electronically undress hapless passengers, producing images so graphic that the viewer can tell, for example, whether or not a male passenger has been circumcised. For those who "opt out" of this procedure, the TSA now conducts full body pat-downs in which every



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part of the body, including private parts, are touched. These devices and the mandatory pat-downs that are the only alternative are quite possibly the worst invasion of privacy and the most flagitious disregard of the Fourth Amendment ever embarked upon by the federal government, yet President Obama, onetime professed champion of civil liberties, has imposed them on us without so much as a by-your-leave.

On issue after issue, in both foreign and domestic affairs, Presidents Bush and Obama agree far more often than not. When they do disagree, their differences are usually a matter of degree rather than of substance. And much the same could be said of every other President for several generations. With the sole exception of Calvin Coolidge, no American President since the First World War has done anything to challenge the ascendancy of certain special interests over the American body politic. While Presidents often squabble — with Congress, with electoral opponents, with the media — over policy points, none of them challenges any of the core policies near and dear to the elites who get them elected. This is why the “issues that matter” — fidelity to constitutional limits on government power, a wise foreign policy truly consecrated to American interests, and a sound monetary system — are never up for presidential review.

But these are the very issues upon which the survival of our country and our liberties ultimately depend. Absent prudent foreign policy, our country will morph into another lumbering imperial behemoth with nothing but a catalog of conquests to transmit to posterity. Without sound money and the limits it imposes on federal spending, the President and Congress will continue to run up debts and deficits until the economy collapses once and for all. And unless constitutional limits on government are re-enshrined, any and every pie-in-the-sky federal program, whether to socialize healthcare, reform education, or regulate every industry under the sun, will be enacted, to the lasting and perhaps permanent detriment of our cherished liberties.

Our Founders created the federal government to safeguard our liberties and our Republic, not to use the power of the state to re-engineer our entire way of life and to confer favors on the few at the expense of the many. But neither President Obama nor his predecessor shows any evidence of grasping this notion.

Nor, for that matter, will President Obama’s successor, be he Republican or Democrat, likely be any different, unless the disposition of the American public changes drastically. Only when it does will presidential elections become more than the usual menu of false alternatives.



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