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Obama abandoned Wilsonianism just in time to avoid supporting Iranian democracy.

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President Obama has largely drawn praise for his tepid response to the mass uprisings in Iran challenging the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In general, Obama has offered three justifications for his tentativeness — and they have strangely been accepted by his supporters, who almost immediately evolved in lockstep from liberal Wilsonians to hardcore realists.

Here are Obama's three justifications:

1. Given the historical record of U.S. intervention in Iran, we do not wish either to perpetuate that shameful record, or to hang on the necks of the dissidents the smelly albatross of U.S. support.
2. We don't know which side will emerge triumphant. Supporting losers in the street will only antagonize the Ahmadinejad regime and render Obama's ongoing diplomatic overtures null and void.
3. There is not much difference anyway between the agendas of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and those of his challengers, led by Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khameneh. No matter who wins, Iran will still have an overtly anti-American government bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. Why then incur further hostility for a response that would bring no advantage anyway?

There are a number of things wrong with all this — well aside from the strange spectacle of seeing once-fervent liberal critics of old-style Kissingerian realism suddenly espousing Barack Obama's kinder, gentler version of it.

1. The coup that unseated Mohammad Mossadeq was in 1953 — nearly six decades ago. Its details are still controversial: the proportional degree of CIA intervention compared to that of the British, the role of fundamentalist clerics in the opposition, the degree to which Mossadeq himself entertained authoritarian measures, and so on. What Kermit Roosevelt Jr. did or did not do as the CIA officer in charge, what were the actual intentions of the Mossadeq government in the Soviet-American Cold War rivalry — all of that is all now in the distant past.

Blaming America for undermining Mossadeq but not blaming it for later undermining the Shah is about as logical as claiming we must hold the current generations of Japanese accountable for Pearl Harbor, or that German actions in World War II permanently warped the American psyche, or that the Chinese Communists' butchering thousands of Americans in Korea must be held against current generations of Chinese. At some point, all nations, big and small, need to get a life and move on. Of course, when one rushes in and blabbers out apologies without context, then one becomes a prisoner of those past actions — we are to be sorry about Iran then and so must be sorry ever after.

Iran, remember, has no such reluctance about meddling. It endorsed Bush in the 2004 presidential race — to the delight of the Kerry campaign. For six years, it has tried to murder Americans in Iraq and destabilize the Iraqi democracy. It has killed Americans in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, and done its best to thwart democratic government in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq. How odd that Iranian theocrats have no worries about violently overthrowing democracy abroad, while we are terrified of supporting democracy by words alone.

Criticizing the Ahmadinejad government for its election fraud and its response to peaceful demonstrations is not synonymous with crudely egging on street demonstrations. Reagan found a way to voice support for the Polish resistance to Soviet thuggery. Kennedy made sure that the Berliners knew that we believed they were right and the Soviet-sponsored East German Communists wrong.

In contrast, Ford's calculated snub of Solzhenitsyn brought no gratitude from the Soviets, but plenty of shame to America. The elder Bush's allegiance to Gorbachev over Yeltsin was finally embarrassing, and was rendered obsolete almost before it was embraced. To the extent that George W. Bush spoke out against autocracy in the Gulf and Egypt, he was to be praised, and some liberalization followed; but to the extent that he grew quiet in his second term, we were branded as hypocrites for supporting freedom in Iraq but not elsewhere in the Arab world.

Support for the reformers can be framed in terms of shared criticism of what we and they oppose, rather than clumsy cheering for their own agenda.

2. Voicing careful and wise support for the challenge to Ahmadinejad's thuggery can influence events. That's why the European Union is well ahead of us in its condemnation of the Iranian election fraud and subsequent crackdown.

Ahmadinejad is going to blame the U.S. whatever it does. He rightly sized up the new administration and realized there is now an American government that will apologize for the CIA's actions in 1953, but not ask Iran to apologize for its deplorable record in Iraq from 2003 to 2009. So it is a one-way street with Iran, and it's better to be damned for voicing criticism than for being afraid to voice criticism.

The Iranian theocrats are realists par excellence; they do not give a damn about ideals or morality, and will deal with us in the future on their perception of their own self-interest: whether or not we "meddle" now, if they find it useful to talk in the future, they will; if they find it of no value to talk in the future, they won't.

3. Obama's third assumption makes even less sense than the first two. Mousavi may be a past supporter of Khomeinism, as are ostensibly all Iranian politicians. But he is not on a moral or even a practical par with Ahmadinejad. He has already voiced criticism of Holocaust denial, and has called for freer expression and communication, and for liberalization of Iranian theocratic law. In other words, he is a type of multicultural "other" who is a rational opponent of U.S. policy, but whom Obama actually could court.

Furthermore, the crowds seem already to have transcended Mousavi, seeing in him more a tool than a totem, hoping that his election would lead to far more liberalization than even he intended. One of the reasons Gorbachev was welcomed by Reagan was that he began to initiate change that would soon render Gorbachev himself obsolete. The same may well be true with Mousavi.

In conclusion, we are seeing a new multicultural realism in American foreign policy — the result of a number of currents in our popular culture. We do not judge the authoritarian "other" in the same way in which we judge authoritarian conservatives abroad who ape Westernism.

There is also a weird sort of multicultural fantasy about cleric-ruled Iran, fueled by the non-Western dress of its elites, the constant evocation of 1953 (ironically by fundamentalists whose forefathers approved of Mossadeq's removal), and its serial Hollywood-like denunciation of America. Ahmadinejad brilliantly ties into the Che effect, which makes his blood-curdling remarks about Israel's end about as disturbing to American public opinion as the fact that Che himself was a cold-blooded killer who executed the innocent with his own hands. Add it all up and we get a reprise of Bill Clinton at Davos in 2005 gushing on about Iranian democracy and its progressives, as if a rigged plebiscite overseen by a group of unshaven dictators in Nehru-like coats is somehow neat.

Iraq explains a lot — and provides the greatest irony of all. We wish not to meddle in Iran in order to encourage real democracy there, but we accept Iranian meddling intended to destroy Iraqi democracy. We reach out to the Shiite thug Ahmadinejad in Iran, but not to the Shiite moderate Maliki in Iraq. We feel so guilty about promoting Iraqi democracy that we won't aid its budding counterpart in nearby Iran. We are so wedded to the canard that the removal of Saddam removed the counterweight to Iran and empowered the clerics that we cannot see the existence of Iraqi democracy as a great catalyst to the democratic forces in Iran, undermining the theocracy more with words than Iran could undermine the Iraqi democracy with guns.

Then, of course, there is Obama and his quest for a global messianic rather than an American presidential role. So far it pays to be Hamas and the Palestine Authority rather than Israel, Chávez rather than Uribe, Ahmadinejad rather than Maliki, Putin rather than an Eastern European elected prime minister, a Turkish Islamist rather than a Greek elected prime minister. The former all gain attention by their hostility, the latter earn neglect by their moderation and generally pro-American views. Praising Islam abroad is a lot more catchy than praising democracy — one boldly inspires Bush's critics, the other sheepishly dovetails with Bush's agenda. All that, in varying degrees, also explains the troubling neglect of the Iranians in the street.

One mystery remains: Does Obama do this because the squeaky problem gets the attention, or does he really empathize with the tired anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist refrain of those who used to be considered hostile?

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