



GOP Hawks Love Obama's War Talk

The world of American politics has witnessed an interesting role reversal over the past couple of weeks. Barack Obama's most ardent liberal supporters are disappointed, in some cases bitterly, with the President's recent decisions and proclamations, while many of his "conservative" (more accurately, neo-conservative) critics seem encouraged by what they see as Obama's recently discovered "realism" in perceiving and defining America's purpose and mission in the world.



Disappointment with Obama has been simmering on the left through much of his first year in office, as he has proceeded either cautiously or not at all on promises ranging from closing the prisoner base on Guantanamo to banning "enhanced interrogation" procedures (known in simpler times as torture) to eliminating the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding homosexuals in uniform. Even on healthcare legislation, the centerpiece of Obama's domestic policy agenda, the President has wavered on support for the "public option" and has left most of the details for Congress to formulate, rather than coming forward with a specific White House plan.

But the most recent disappointment from the left and the qualified, albeit temporary, support for Obama on the right stems from first, the President's decision to send an additional 30,000 American troops to Afghanistan; and secondly, the many justifications for the use of military force he set forth in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. It was likely, as many commentators have noted, the most warlike speech ever delivered by anyone accepting that renowned prize for promoting peace. But what's a president to do when the Nobel Committee insists on giving him the Peace Prize while he is waging war in three countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) halfway across the world from his own?

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So it was incumbent on the President, even as he was praising the commitment to nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, to set forth a revised and expanded view of the traditional "just war" theory and to sanction the use of force by the United States and its allies, by the United Nations, NATO, and other alliances for myriad "peacekeeping" purposes.

"More and more, we all confront difficult questions of how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region," Obama said in his acceptance speech. "I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later."

This is essentially the Fram Oil Filter justification for perpetual warfare, based on the ad that warned of the consequences of putting off changing your car's oil and filter: "Pay me now or pay me later," when the damage and the cost will be significantly greater. Thus, we may choose to go to war, even if we don't have to, in order to avoid going to war later when we might have to and it will be more costly. This



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may not be an explicit embrace of "preventive war," but it's close.

"That is why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace," Obama said. "Peace entails sacrifice. That is why NATO continues to be indispensable. That is why we must strengthen UN and regional peacekeeping, and not leave the task to a few countries. That is why we honor those who return home from peacekeeping and training abroad to Oslo and Rome; to Ottawa and Sydney; to Dhaka and Kigali — we honor them not as makers of war, but as wagers of peace."

There are, to be sure, circumstances under which it is justified to use military force and circumstances under which it is not, and the difference is not always clear-cut. But the distinction has been made increasingly blurry by what some are calling the "Obama Doctrine." When combatants march into a country that has neither attacked nor threatened to attack their own and bring "peace" at the barrel of a gun, or the end of a bayonet, or the treads of a tank, or by the explosive force of rockets launched by unmanned bombers, how are those "wagers of peace" acting differently from wagers of war? It has become a bit trite to invoke George Orwell's *1984* whenever a government official communicates in the language of "Newspeak." But it is difficult to avoid the comparison when the leader of the world's military superpower calls upon "all responsible nations" to "embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace." And the supreme irony, of course, is that Obama issued that call while accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. As the Ministry of Truth proclaimed, "War is Peace."

Obama cited civil wars as a cause for military intervention and elsewhere in his speech appeared to be saying that secession of one part of a country from the rest of the nation might also be a just cause for an international "peacekeeping" mission. Perhaps he believes that if the United Nations and NATO had been in existence in 1861, South Carolina might have been stopped in her tracks and our Civil War averted. In more recent times, perhaps even the armed conflict between U.S. government and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1993 might have been the occasion of an armed intervention by an international peacekeeping force under the full flowering of the Bush-Obama doctrine. U.S. policymakers these days seem undecided over whether we should be going to war to defend national sovereignty or to nullify and disregard it.

So while antiwar activists and commentators, left and right, generally panned the Obama's Nobel speech, mainstream "conservative" Republicans generally praised it. Karl Rove, top political advisor to former President Bush, called it "superb," "tough" and "effective." The speech was "actually very good." former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich said on WNYC radio's *The Takeaway* show.

"And the President, I think, did a very good job of representing the role of America which has been that of — at the risk of lives of young Americans — creating the fabric of security within which you could have a Martin Luther King Jr. or you could have a Mahatma Gandhi," Gingrich said.

In other words, we wage wars, including wars "of choice," to make the world safe for peace activists. And it gives them something to do. Just as decades ago, we began stationing American troops all around the world — presumably so Bob Hope would have places to visit at Christmas time.

"It continues to be of great value that a modern, left-leaning American president speaks in this way to the world." Peggy Noonan, former Reagan and Bush 41 speechwriter wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*. "The world' didn't seem to enjoy it," she observed, "and burst into applause a resounding once."

It is worth noting that one of the lines Noonan quoted with approval from Obama's Oslo speech was this one: "The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades



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with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms."

Ms. Noonan's statement notwithstanding, the only cause for which the United States has moral and constitutional authority to sacrifice "the blood of our citizens" and employ "the strength of our arms" is the defense and security of the United States, not for something as vague and far-reaching as "global security." We authorize and fund armed forces "for the common defense" of the United States and its people, not the entire world. Nor is it the constitutionally authorized mission of the United States to go to war with any tyrant anywhere in the world, simply because every tyrant, by nature, bears some resemblance to Adolph Hitler. As President John Quincy Adams said, the United States "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..."

But America has gone from defending national security to embracing the concept of collective security with our allies, to sacrificing the blood and treasure of our citizens on the altar of some ill-defined "global security." All of which appears to be just fine with many of today's political leaders, who seem eager to send our youth to fight and die in wars, just or unjust, declared or undeclared, in a "necessary war," as Obama has called our eight-year-old occupation of Afghanistan, or a "war of choice" as Iraq was. War over enemy weapons that may exist or don't exist. War at the drop of a hat or the tilt of a turban. Any war America undertakes is, by definition, just and righteous altogether.

Even Obama's call to "strengthen UN and regional peacekeeping" efforts does not disturb them. It was amusing to listen to the Republicans at their national convention in 2004, as one speaker after another ridiculed and denounced the United Nations. All the while young Americans were fighting and dying in Iraq because George W. Bush had sent them there to enforce United Nations sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime.

The Saddam regime is gone in Iraq. The Bush regime has expired in the United States. But under the Bush-Obama doctrine, America remains committed to fighting perpetual wars for an elusive and ill-defined "peace."

Photo of Nobel committee chairman Thorbjorn Jagland with President Obama: AP Images



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