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A Cold-Blooded Foreign Policy

No depot fears the president, and no demonstrator in Tehran expects him to ride to the rescue.

By **FOUAD AJAMI**

With year one drawing to a close, the truth of the Obama presidency is laid bare: retrenchment abroad, and redistribution and the intrusive regulatory state at home. This is the genuine calling of Barack Obama, and of the "progressives" holding him to account. The false dichotomy has taken hold—either we care for our own, or we go abroad in search of monsters to destroy or of broken nations to build. The decision to withdraw missile defense for Poland and the Czech Republic was of a piece with that retreat in American power.

In the absence of an overriding commitment to the defense of American primacy in the world, the Obama administration "cheats." It will not quit the war in Afghanistan but doesn't fully embrace it as its cause. It prosecutes the war but with Republican support—the diehards in liberal ranks and the isolationists are in no mood for bonding with Afghans. (Harry Reid's last major foreign policy pronouncement was his assertion, three years ago, that the war in Iraq was lost.)

As revolution simmers on the streets of Iran, the will was summoned in the White House to offer condolences over the passing of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Montazeri, an iconic figure to the Iranian opposition. But the word was also put out that the administration was keen on the prospect of John Kerry making his way to Tehran. No one is fooled. In the time of Barack Obama, "engagement" with Iran's theocrats and thugs trumps the cause of Iranian democracy.

In retrospect, that patina of cosmopolitanism in President Obama's background concealed the isolationism of the liberal coalition that brought him to power. The tide had turned in the congressional elections of 2006. American liberalism was done with its own antecedents—the outlook of Woodrow Wilson and FDR and Harry Truman and John Kennedy. It wasn't quite "Come home, America," but close to it. This was now the foreign policy of Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi and Joe Biden. There was in the land a "liberal orientalism," if you will, a dismissive attitude about the ability of other nations to partake of liberty. It had started with belittling the Iraqis' aptitude for freedom. But there was implicit in it a broader assault on the very idea of freedom's possibilities in distant places. East was East, and West was West, and never the twain shall meet.

We're weary, the disillusioned liberalism maintains, and we're broke, and there are those millions of Americans aching for health care and an economic lifeline. We can't care for both Ohio and the Anbar, Peoria and Peshawar. It is either those embattled people in Iran or a rescue package for Chrysler.

The joke is on the enthralled crowds in Cairo, Ankara, Berlin and Oslo. The new American president they had fallen for had no genuine calling or attachments abroad. In their enthusiasm for Mr. Obama, and their eagerness to proclaim themselves at one with the postracial meaning of his election, they had missed his aloofness from the genuine struggles in the foreign world.

It was easy, that delirium with Mr. Obama: It made no moral demands on those eager to partake of it. It was also false, in many lands.

Thus Turks who loathed the Kurds in their midst, who denied them the right to their own memory and language, could identify themselves, or so they said, with the triumph of Mr. Obama and his personal history. No one questioned the sincerity with which Egyptians and other Arabs hailed Mr. Obama as they refused to be stirred by the slaughter in Darfur, and as they gave a carte blanche to Khartoum's blatant racism and cruelty.

Surely there was something amiss in Paris and Berlin—the vast crowds came out for Mr. Obama, but there were millions of Muslims in France and Germany, and the gates hadn't been opened for them, they hadn't been swept into the mainstream of European life. Postracialism, rather like charity, should have begun at home, one would think.

Everywhere there is on display evidence of the rogues taking the Obama administration's measure, and of America's vulnerable allies scurrying for cover. A fortnight ago, Lebanon's young prime minister made his way from Beirut to Damascus: Saad Hariri had come to pay tribute to the Syrian ruler.

Nearly five years earlier, Saad Hariri had insisted on the truth about the identity of his father's killers. It had been a tumultuous time. Rafik Hariri, a tycoon and former prime minister caught up in a challenge to Syria's hegemony in Lebanon, had been struck down by a massive bomb on Beirut's beachfront. It's obvious, isn't it, the mourners proclaimed, the trail led to Damascus.

In the aftermath of that brazen political murder, a Syrian tyranny in Lebanon that had all but erased the border between the two countries was brought to a swift end with what would come to be known as the Cedar Revolution. The Pax Americana that had laid waste to the despotism of Saddam Hussein frightened the Syrian rulers, and held out the prospect that a similar fate could yet befall them.

We're now worlds away from that moment in history. The man who demolished the Iraqi tyranny, George W. Bush, is no longer in power, and a different sentiment drives America's conduct abroad. Saad Hariri had no choice but to make peace with his father's sworn enemies—that short voyage he made to Damascus was his adjustment to the retreat of American power.

In headier moments, Mr. Hariri and the leaders of the Cedar Revolution had been emboldened by American protection. It was not only U.S. military power that had given them heart.

There was that "diplomacy of freedom," the proclamation that the Pax Americana had had its fill with the autocracies and the rogues of the Greater Middle East. There but for the grace of God go we, the autocrats whispered to themselves as they pondered the fall of the Iraqi despot. To be sure, there was mayhem in the new Iraq—the Arab and Iranian rulers, and the jihadists they winked at and aided, had made sure of that. But there was the promise of freedom, meaningful elections, a new dignity for men and women claiming their own country.

What a difference three or four years make. The despots have waited out that burst of American power and optimism. No despot fears Mr. Obama, and no blogger in Cairo or Damascus or Tehran, no demonstrator in those cruel Iranian streets, expects Mr. Obama to ride to the rescue. To be sure, it was in the past understood that we can't bear all burdens abroad, or come to the defense of everyone braving tyranny. But there was always that American assertion that when things are in the balance we would always be on freedom's side.

We hadn't ridden to the rescue of Rwanda and Burundi in the 1990s, but we had saved the Bosnians and the Kosovars. We didn't have the power to undo the colossus of Chinese tyranny when the tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square, but the brave dissidents knew that we were on their side, that we were appalled by the cruelty of official power.

It is different today, there is a cold-bloodedness to American foreign policy. "Ideology is so yesterday," Secretary

of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed not long ago, giving voice to the new sentiment.

History and its furies have their logic, and they have not bent to Mr. Obama's will. He had declared a unilateral end to the "war on terror," but the jihadists and their mentors are yet to call their war to a halt. From Yemen to Fort Hood and Detroit, the terror continues.

But to go by the utterances of the Obama administration and its devotees, one would have thought that our enemies were Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, not the preachers and masterminds of terror. The president and his lieutenants spent more time denigrating "rendition" and the Patriot Act than they did tracking down the terror trail and the latest front it had opened at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. Our own leaders spoke poorly of our prerogatives and ways, and they were heard the world over.

Under Mr. Obama, we have pulled back from the foreign world. We're smaller for accepting that false choice between burdens at home and burdens abroad, and the world beyond our shores is more hazardous and cynical for our retrenchment and our self-flagellation.

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