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# Barack Obama's Progressive Presidency and Legacy: A New Style for a New Era

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Master Recherche en Études Anglophones

**Barack Obama's Progressive Presidency and Legacy:  
A New Style for a New Era**



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Tom ROBERT

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A New Style for a New Era**

Tom ROBERT

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## Remerciements

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## Introduction

I have chosen to study American civilization as my major because I am interested in history. During my years at university, I have constantly chosen history options when they were not part of the common core. Thus, I followed Greek and Roman history classes. I also studied American, British as well as Commonwealth history classes when they were not compulsory either as a student or as an auditor. I had several ideas in mind as to which subject I would have liked to tackle. Barack Obama's presidency and the Cold War were frontrunners. However, I had already done presentations on the Cold War during my third year after I had enrolled in the American civilization class. Moreover, I was given Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* at the end of my Bachelor's Degree so I read it and decided it would be interesting to study a relatively new subject. Barack Obama became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States when I was in Elementary School and left the Oval Office when I was in High School. At the time, I had already thought about studying the English language at University. I was a contemporary of his time in office and yet I grew up intellectually and became much more politically conscious even though I watched all the news editions on television from his campaign against John McCain to when Donald Trump became the new tenant on 1 600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. which led to Barack Obama's gradual disappearance from regular news coverage. I lived during his time without closely studying his presidency. Thus, I chose to study the challenges and challengers he faced as well as his accomplishments and failures during his two terms as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

There are many ways one can study Barack Obama. One can study Barack Obama as the writer; his most influential works being the following: *Dreams From my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* as well as *A Promised Land*. Barack Obama can also refer to Barack Hussein Obama, Sr., the Kenyan father of the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. What I chose to study has to do with American civilization in general and not Illinois politics in particular. Thus, the elements of Barack Hussein Obama, Jr.'s life prior to being President can be relevant to a certain extent but will not be the bulk of this work. The personality and ambition of an

American President are to be taken into account especially when the United States of America has nuclear weaponry that can turn a skirmish into a world conflict. This partly explains why Donald Trump worried pundits because his temperament was not steady enough to inspire confidence all over the world.

I chose to read Barack Obama's *Dreams From my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* as well as *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* to have an insight on him before he became President. I also read his last book, *A Promised Land*, which he wrote once his presidency was over. I hope his second volume will be available before I finish writing my work as Barack Obama's point of view would be beneficial to include his personal reflections on his time at the head of the most powerful country in the world. It shows he was committed to work for his country and the American people even after he left the White House. He had time to reflect upon what had happened during two terms, the maximum an American president can serve. He had time to explain what his personality was to those who had not read his two books mentioned beforehand and to defend his motivations with his words, trying to be as clear as possible even though he is known to lecture people because he was a scholar who taught constitutional law. I studied Michelle Obama's *Becoming* to have a close insight into former President Obama but from a different point of view.

I knew that the Obama Presidency has been a subject of the Agrégation so I bought Alix Meyer's *The Obama Presidency (2009-2017)*, Jean-Éric Branaa and François Durpaire's *La Présidence de Barack Obama*, and Élisabeth Fauquert's *La Présidence Obama*. Quite rapidly, I discovered Julian E. Zelizer's *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment* which seems to be a must-have. I skimmed through and looked closely in their bibliographies and ended up finding other most interesting books.

I wanted books about Barack Obama made by unbiased external pundits and contemporaries before Barack Obama became the President of the United States, works which retrace his early years and his time in the Illinois Senate as well as in the U.S. Senate, or during his early years in Washington, D.C. I found David Remnick's *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (2010) a famous biography on Barack Obama at l'École des Mines in Saint-Étienne. I also acquired Martin Dupuis and Keith Boeckelman's *Barack*

*Obama, The New Face of American Politics* from 2008 as well as James A. Thurber's *Obama in Office* which is a two-year assessment of his presidency published in 2011.

Peter Baker's *Obama: The Call of History*, which was published by *The New York Times* contains illustrations and certain anecdotes I had forgotten about such as the attack which was planned over Detroit, Michigan, and would have killed lots of people.

I wanted to have books written by Americans which included key notions dear to Barack Obama such as changing Washington from the inside, "change," and "hope." I am also particularly interested in foreign policy and the following works were thorough and provided me with the context in which the events took place. Such books include Derek Chollet's *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*, James T. Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hopes, and the American Political Tradition* and Michael Grunwald's *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* (the title of which compares President Obama's overhaul of the American economy with Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal).

I was also interested in studying French authors who did not write specifically for the Agrégation so I found François Vergniolle de Chantal's *Obama's Fractured Legacy: The Politics and Policies of an Embattled Presidency* in Meyer's bibliography.

We can ask ourselves the following questions and try to bring informed answers to them. First of all, the main overall questions over Barack Obama's Progressive Presidency and Legacy are the following: What effects did Barack Obama's background, education, style and personality have on Americans and his presidency? Is there a before and an after Obama? Did his presidency bring about more equality and peace in the American multicultural society?

Then there are specific questions about recurring themes such as race, change, foreign policy, health care, and climate change. How can Barack Obama's presidency be defined? How could an African American have been elected and reelected? Was his presidency a success or a failure? What were his successes and failures? Did he change Washington's functioning and ineffective bureaucracy? Did his election bring about change? Has his legacy prevailed? What kind of actions did he take?

How will Barack Obama's foreign policy record be analyzed with the benefit of hindsight? Will it be seen as a failure because of Barack Obama's perceived weakness or will it be seen as an improvement of his predecessors' foreign policy record? How were his world ambitions different from those of his immediate successor? So far, to what extent does Barack Obama's foreign policy record compare to Joe Biden's? How come both Republicans and Democrats criticize his actions on the world stage although they held diametrically opposed views? How come he won the Nobel Peace Prize around eight months after he was sworn in? What was Barack Obama's conviction when it comes to foreign policy? How could the Red Line episode in Syria result in a major deal? What were the effects of the Reset policy in Europe, Russia and the Muslim world? What was Barack Obama's "managed transition"<sup>1</sup> in Syria and what did his "contain and mitigate"<sup>2</sup> mantra consist in? How did Barack Obama's principles that are balance, sustainability, restraint, precision, patience, fallibility, skepticism, and exceptionalism manifest themselves in his foreign policy agenda?

Is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act a success or a failure? What was the original meaning of Obamacare? Have any other presidents tried to overhaul the American health care system? What was Obamacare modeled after? What effects did the stimulus have on healthcare? Was Barack Obama's ambition to overhaul the healthcare system radical in its ambitions and methods? What effects did the individual mandate have on prices? What was Barack Obama's style to have the two pass the two bills become law? What did the Supreme Court do about the law? How many additional Americans gained access to healthcare? How was Obamacare perceived by public opinion? Have penalties paid off?

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<sup>1</sup> CHOLLET, Derek. *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2016, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Part One: A Historic Election

The First Black American President in History

Barack Obama made history despite being the underdog in the 2008 Presidential Elections. He was indeed ranked second in polls in his own party with 18%, behind stalwart Hillary Clinton's 37% but above John Edwards' 12%, John Kerry's former running mate in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama's captivating slogans include "Fired Up!" and "Yes, We Can!"<sup>4</sup> and helped him gather the most votes of all time then.<sup>5</sup> It was only the third instance in American history that a black person was in a good position of becoming the U.S. President—after Shirley Chisholm in 1972 and Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988—and the first time that such a candidate ranked in the top three of voting intentions.<sup>6</sup> Despite being charismatic and a skilled orator, Barack Obama's relative inexperience was a defect compared to Hillary Clinton's thirty years of experience in the White House and in the U.S. Senate, after her election in the state of New York in 2000 and 2006.<sup>7</sup> Barack Obama was a constitutional law teacher turned State Senator in Illinois in 1997 and U.S. Senator representing Illinois in 2004. He brought novelty to the table: he was the one in the Democratic Party's top three to oppose the "dumb war" in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Instead of choosing his running mate John Edwards, John Kerry chose the Illinois orator to deliver a keynote speech in front of the Democratic National Convention in 2004. At the end of January 2008, John Edwards was out of the electoral race and the only candidates who remained were Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.<sup>9</sup>

The former First Lady was a worthy and formidable opponent. At the end of 2007, she was leading by 20% in national polls, and then, after Oprah Winfrey had dubbed Barack Obama "The One" in Iowa, he won the state with 38%, nine more percent than Hillary Clinton who finished third.<sup>10</sup> Iowa was the whitest state of the country and helped Barack Obama be tied with Hillary Clinton as the two candidates won three states apiece in January 2008.<sup>11</sup> On the 28<sup>th</sup> of the same

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<sup>3</sup> MEYER, Alix. *The Obama Presidency* (2009-2017). Paris: Belin Éducation, 2019, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> BRANAA, Jean-Éric (ed.). *La Présidence de Barack Obama*. Paris: Ellipses, 2019, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth (ed.). *La Présidence Obama*. Neuilly: Atlande, 2019, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> MEYER, Alix, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> BRANAA, Jean-Éric, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

month, Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy endorsed Barack Obama, a week before the primaries in that state.<sup>12</sup> Another major ally of Barack Obama's was Tom Daschle, the Democratic Senator Leader during the Bush years.<sup>13</sup> Despite having such important allies, Barack Obama was not yet the winner, for he was neck and neck with Hillary Clinton until Super Tuesday (on February 5<sup>th</sup>), when twenty states chose their Democratic nominee.<sup>14</sup> Hillary Clinton notably won the states of New York, New Jersey, and California, while Barack Obama emerged victorious in the states of Kansas, Idaho, and Utah. Hillary Clinton garnered a little more than 8 million votes and Barack Obama a little less. Barack Obama reigned supreme in 11 of the 24 confrontations held in February but suffered a harsh defeat in Joe Biden's state, Pennsylvania. Candidate Obama also had to deal with problems which could have proved fatal such as Pastor Jeremiah Wright's polemics, his Pastor. Not to take chances, Barack Obama severed ties with him and his church on May 31<sup>st</sup>, after Jeremiah Wright had mocked Hillary Clinton. This proved successful as Barack Obama won against Hillary Clinton, who recognized her electoral defeat on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008.<sup>15</sup> Hillary Clinton was supported by many Latinos who then joined Barack Obama's ranks. Latinos constituted a solid base of Barack Obama's electoral supporters along with African-Americans, young voters, college-educated whites<sup>16</sup> as well as Independents.<sup>17</sup>

Barack Obama then faced Republican John McCain III—the “son and grandson of two four-star admirals in the US Navy”<sup>18</sup>—who became a military hero because he resisted torture in the Vietnam War, which Donald Trump mocked. Despite having a strong résumé, John McCain recognized his major weakness: “The issue of economics is not something I’ve understood as well as I should.”<sup>19</sup> His opponent, Barack Obama, along with his aides, understood the ins and outs of the economic crisis. Thanks to the foundation Obama for America (which became Organizing for America), Barack Obama enjoyed \$650 million in private donations against John McCain's \$190 million.<sup>20</sup> The members of Team Obama were savvy enough to make use of the Internet to promote the ideas of the young Democratic Candidate. Meanwhile, Barack Obama chose Joe Biden, a

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<sup>12</sup> MEYER, Alix, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> BRANAA, Jean-Éric, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> MEYER, Alix, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> MEYER, Alix, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> MEYER, Alix, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

Senior Senator from Delaware to be his running mate on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008.<sup>21</sup> Joseph Biden brought experience to the duo so that the people who had voted for Hillary Clinton would be more likely to choose Barack Obama over Republican John McCain if choosing the Democratic candidate was not the only criterion for them. Soon after, the Clintons endorsed Barack Obama and his running mate Joe Biden on August 28<sup>th</sup>. With all these allies, money, and influence, Barack Obama won the popular vote with 53% as 67 million American voters elected him (against 58 million for the Republican candidate) and won the electoral vote 365 to 173.<sup>22</sup> Barack Obama claimed all the states that John Kerry had won in 2004, to which he added nine more. The advent and presence of a non-white candidate in the top two of a presidential race helped gather five more million voters to vote, which constituted the most important turnout ever. Barack Hussein Obama became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, the first one from Hawaii, and especially the very first colored American President in history. He was introduced by Chief Justice John Roberts on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and took the oath.<sup>23</sup>

Barack Obama succeeded President George W. Bush who did not even know him in 2004.<sup>24</sup> President Obama's first task in office was to stop the bleeding of the American economy. Once that was done, the Democratic President had to nominate Justices to the Supreme Court.

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<sup>21</sup> BRANAA, Jean-Éric, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E. (ed.). *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment*. Princeton and Oxford, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018, p. xi.

<sup>24</sup> BRANAA, Jean-Éric, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

## Part Two: Progress on Several Fronts

### The Supreme Court

Barack Obama's election to the White House was an achievement in itself which could not have been predicted during the Civil War or even during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, a century later. Even though his mother was white, he was labeled as a black<sup>25</sup> President because of his Kenyan origins.

On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009, when President Obama had to fill a vacant seat in the Supreme Court, not only did he choose a woman, which is rare to be underlined, but one woman who came from a minority and who did not have a typical background to become a Supreme Court Justice: Sonia Sotomayor.<sup>26</sup> President Obama could have waited for another opportunity to present itself to appoint someone whose nomination would not make waves in the news. He might have taken into account the coming 2010 Midterm Elections, the 2012 Presidential Elections, or even the 2014 Midterm Elections if he managed to be reelected. However, not taking risks six years into one's presidency (if reelected and not impeached nor removed) is unfathomable since a President is duly elected and is trusted by the majority of electors to enact his program and ideas. Moreover, it sent a strong signal for the change he had promised and promoted during his campaign. Sonia Sotomayor's nomination also responded to the expectations of the public to usher in a new era. Hispanics were a portion of the electorate that was growing in importance, and even Republicans tried to appeal to them and gain their favor.

Barack Obama was the embodiment of hope and he tried to inspire children, girls and boys alike. He wanted to show them that it is normal to have a black president, as well as important offices held by women and minorities or even both as was the case for Sonia Sotomayor. She was the first Hispanic woman to be one of the nine Supreme Court Justices who form the highest court

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<sup>25</sup> SALAMI, Minna. "Why I don't believe the word 'black' should always have a capital 'b.'" June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/03/word-black-capital-letter-blackness>. [Accessed on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023.] / In this work, the adjective "black" will not have a capital 'b' because black President Barack Obama is mixed-race and sometimes does not fit in the category of "African Americans" since his paternal family is African and thus was not in America when slavery was in effect there. Here, the adjective black depicts Barack Obama's complexion, not his identity because he was raised by his maternal family, a white one. Moreover, as opposed to most black Americans, Barack Obama attended prestigious schools and held paramount positions.

<sup>26</sup> Her parents are Puerto Rican and they lived in the Bronx. Sonia Sotomayor studied at Princeton and Harvard before joining the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York. She has been known for her candor and wit. She will be remembered as the first Hispanic woman to be a Supreme Court Justice.

in the United States. She was also the first Hispanic regardless of sex and only the third woman to be a Supreme Court Justice. At the time when this dissertation is being written, there have been six different women who have served in the Supreme Court: Sandra Day O'Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Amy Coney Barrett, and Ketanji Brown Jackson. President Barack Obama appointed two of them, namely Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan. President Obama's female Justices are both still active and two more joined them. The first one—Amy Coney Barrett—was appointed by President Trump in a controversial way that is going to be situated in context. Barack Obama could not appoint Merrick Garland who was a Moderate. He did not bother nominating a liberal nor a progressive Justice because he knew it would further bother Republicans who did not cooperate much in a bipartisan way during Obama's two terms. He hoped a Moderate Judge could be a good compromise, yet Republicans would have none of that. In their mind, a Conservative Justice of their own choice would be better for them. Moreover, the seat was vacant at the end of Obama's presidency and thus Republicans argued it would only be natural for the next president, Republican (as they hoped) or Democratic, to name the nominee of his or her choice. Because of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, Barack Obama could not serve a third term whatsoever as opposed to France where the President cannot serve more than two consecutive terms but can serve a third term in the absolute. For instance, President Macron, who has been elected in 2017 and reelected in 2022, will serve until 2027 and could well run for president five years later, in 2032.

Thus, Republicans had more to gain than lose if their bargain was successful in 2016. And it was fruitful because of Donald Trump's election. President Trump nominated Neil M. Gorsuch whose nomination was then confirmed by the Upper House on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017.<sup>27</sup> The President then went on to appoint Brett M. Kavanaugh on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (who replaced Judge Anthony M. Kennedy, who retired on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018) and Amy Coney Barrett on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (who succeeded another woman, Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg who passed away on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020).<sup>28</sup>

The appointment of Amy Coney Barrett is to be linked to Merrick Garland. As said before, Amy Coney Barrett succeeded a Judge who died more than a month before the 2020 American

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<sup>27</sup> Supreme Court. "Current Members." No date. <https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/biographies.aspx>. [Accessed on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

<sup>28</sup> Supreme Court. "Justices 1789 to Present." No date. [https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/members\\_text.aspx](https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/members_text.aspx). [Accessed on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

Presidential Elections which were held on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup>, November. On the other hand, Merrick Garland was denied the right to be appointed because he was to succeed Justice Antonin Scalia who died on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016. This was around nine months before the election of the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (on November, Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup>). Republicans did not even bother studying Merrick Garland's résumé to see if he had the skills and experience required to be one of the nine Supreme Court Justices. With the benefit of hindsight, Amy Coney Barrett's nomination more than a month before the Presidential Elections and less than three months before Joe Biden was sworn in January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (compared to the nine months before the Presidential Elections and more than eleven months before January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017), it is clear that the argument of the Republicans was biased. Indeed, because it was election year, Republicans claimed it was up to the future President of the United States, regardless of his or her political orientation, to decide whom to nominate a Justice for life. It meant that for months, a tie vote of 4-4 was possible which means that it would result in upholding the decision of the lower circuits, a situation which benefits the Conservatives who are in favor of the status quo as opposed to the Progressives who want things to change for what they believe to be better. It is worth noting that it was the first time since 1895<sup>29</sup> that the President (here, Barack Obama in 2016) had to nominate someone to become a Supreme Court Justice while in an utterly unfavorable divided government for the President. After the 1894 Midterm Elections, President Cleveland, who belonged to what was called the Democratic Party back then, nominated Rufus Wheeler Peckham in 1896 and the same year the new Justice voted in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (along with Justice Edward Douglas White, another Cleveland appointee) in an 8-1 decision which made segregation constitutional.<sup>30</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was only overturned by another Supreme Court decision 58 years later in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In the 2010s, the American government was divided because the Democrats held power at the White House as the Executive Branch (with President Obama) while Congress was in the hands of Republicans (first after the 2010 Midterm Elections when they reclaimed the House of Representatives and then after 2014 when they gained control of the Senate while gaining seats in the House of Representatives).

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<sup>29</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>30</sup> Constitutional Law. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). No date. <https://conlaw.us/case/plessy-v-ferguson-1896/>. [Accessed on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

Once again, the Republicans managed to gain a Judge in a controversial way in 2020 after what had happened in 2016. The privilege of choosing a Supreme Court Judge is rated as one of the most important issues for American voters. If a precedent had been created and respected when Obama was denied the right to have his nominee confirmed by the U.S. Senate, then President Trump would not have shifted the Supreme Court as much as it has until today. If President Obama had appointed Merrick Garland, this would have meant the addition of a non-Conservative Judge to the Supreme Court. Then, President Trump could not have chosen a Justice in 2021 if the 46<sup>th</sup> POTUS was reserved the right to nominate a Justice (since Trump was not reelected after his defeat against Biden) because of the precedent that would have been created in 2017 with Neil M. Gorsuch and Merrick Garland. Thus, in both cases, President Trump would have nominated two Supreme Court Justices instead of three with only Brett M. Kavanaugh remaining in both scenarios. In 2017, President Trump and Republicans were able to steal what was arguably President Obama's due right to nominate a Justice. If Obama had been allowed to do so, he would have replaced late Justice Antonin Scalia who was rather Conservative with Merrick Garland, a rather Moderate Judge. If Merrick Garland had been appointed, he would have shifted the Court towards the left and away from the right. That explains why Republicans preferred to wait for the following Presidential elections. In 2020, President Trump and Republicans were able to bypass what could have been a precedent and managed to have Amy Coney Barrett replace a Liberal Justice, late Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Justice Barrett's appointment was a frank shift towards the Conservative side. It is to be noted that to this day, it has been the only time that a female Justice has replaced another one. Nonetheless, Democrats and Liberals—who are favorable to progress, change, and gender equality—will not particularly remember this historic replacement for that. President Trump thus managed not to have a moderate replace conservative Justice Scalia as well as not to let Democrats choose a favorable replacement after Justice Ginsburg passed away. The impact of Republicans stealing at least one Justice could be felt as of June 2022. Indeed, On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, in a 6-3 decision along partisan lines, the Supreme Court extended gun rights although there were many shootings which had made the headlines in the past few weeks. They included the shootings in Buffalo, New York and in a school in Uvalde, Texas, which is reminiscent of that at Sandy Hook elementary school on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012 which made President Obama cry. As the father of two young girls, he imagined what it was to lose one's children a few days before Christmas Eve due to such lenient laws that do not include background checks before weapons

purchases. All three of Trump’s appointees voted in favor of expanding gun rights while President Obama’s two appointees dissented. On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022 late in the night, the Senate voted in favor of a bill finally including background checks and incentives for further red-flag laws which allow “the police to temporarily confiscate firearms from people who are deemed by a judge to be a danger to themselves or to others.”<sup>31</sup> Once again, on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the three Trump Judges—Neil M. Gorsuch, Brett M. Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett—voted in favor of repealing the decision of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade*, which protected abortion under the due process clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, while Obama’s Justices—Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan—dissented in the 5-4 decision. Had Obama not seen his right to nominate at least one judge refused, then the Conservative Judges would have certainly been in the minority (if Merrick Garland or another judge were not Conservative enough when it comes to abortion rights). Justice Clarence Thomas stated he wanted to overturn landmark rulings that legalized contraception and same-sex marriage. Only time will tell whether the star-crossed destinies of the Judges appointed by Presidents Obama and Trump have radically changed the landscape of American rights, and maybe international rights. For instance, Catholic countries such as Poland may further restrict abortion rights after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling was overturned in 2022. Women, men, and the international community will see if the pro-life stance will prevail (meaning life at all costs even if the child is the result of a rape) or if the pro-choice side (meaning choice in all cases even though there was no sexual aggression leading to the pregnancy and even if the decision to abort goes against the father’s will) is going to continue in the wake it has paved since 1973 even though states have found ways to restrict the definition of abortions rights.

However, the 2016-2017 controversial nomination and appointment process did not create a precedent, a sort of jurisprudence case, for what happened in late 2020. Indeed, the election year argument of 2016, which ultimately benefitted Republicans after their bet, revealed to be successful, was brushed away in 2020 because it advantaged the Republican incumbent. In both cases, Democrats lost. Such loss is especially true for Obama’s nominee, Merrick Garland, who could not have his case defended and even less affirmed by the Senate. History will judge if a precedent has been created since these two nominations have been contentious and subject to

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<sup>31</sup> WILLIAMS, Timothy. “What Are ‘Red Flag’ Gun Laws, and How Do They Work?” August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/us/red-flag-laws.html>. [Accessed on June 24, 2022.]

controversy. Section III of the U.S. Constitution<sup>32</sup> leaves the timing of nominations as well as appointments undecided, and in the hands of future generations. As a former constitutional law professor, President Obama stood on the camp of those who see the Constitution as a living document, one that laid principles a few centuries ago but which must be adapted to the present times. No mention was made at the time that would be in favor of either of the two options. A President can nominate a candidate but it belongs to the Senate to decide if the nominee is up to the task that awaits him or her. President Obama lost against headstrong members part of the opposition when Republicans formed the majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. As a former constitutional law professor, President Obama was somehow beaten at his own game even though it is hard to fight a staunch opposition which had benefitted from the void left in Section III of the U.S. Constitution.

President Obama had appointed two of the four female Justices before President Trump added that number up to five with the controversial appointment of Amy Coney Barrett. President Biden nominated Ketanji Brown Jackson on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the 6<sup>th</sup> female Justice as well as the first African-American woman to be appointed. Her confirmation brought the number of women in the current Supreme Court to four, which was unprecedented in American history. Because the number of Supreme Court Justices, nine, is uneven, parity is difficult to attain. If we count Chief Justice John Roberts out, in some way parity has been reached because out of the eight Associate Justices, four are women. The symbolical mark of five women in the Supreme Court could be reached or a female Chief could be appointed, thus signaling a small step toward gender equality.

It shall be pinpointed that Barack Obama had chosen Joe Biden to be his running mate, in an attempt to make up for his perceived lack of experience in both the U.S. Congress and on the international scene if Barack Obama were to be elected. Barack Obama's bid revealed to be successful. Prior to that, Obama had beaten another rival in the Democratic Party Primaries, former First Lady Hillary Clinton. After Barack Obama won over John McCain, Joe Biden became Vice President and President of the Senate. Later on, Obama's former rival, Hillary Clinton, became Secretary of State even though tensions still persisted over time. Yet, they came to appreciate

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<sup>32</sup> Center for Civic Education. *American Legacy: The United States Constitution and Other Essential Documents of American Democracy*. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 2015, p. 22.

working together, thus paving the way for Obama to endorse her instead of Joe Biden to run for President in 2016.

Joe Biden himself chose Kamala Harris as running mate. He helped her become the first Vice President who is a female, African American, and Asian American in American History as she helped him become the 46<sup>th</sup> American President.

Hillary Clinton's husband had nominated the second woman to the Supreme Court in the person of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 1993. She was Bill Clinton's first nominee and only the second woman to hold that position, after President Reagan's nominee Sandra Day O'Connor in 1981.

What encouraged President Obama (knowingly or inadvertently) to nominate two women to be Supreme Court Justices could be that he has been raised primarily by his Kansan mother and that President Clinton chose a woman as his first nominee. President Obama brought about change by nominating Sonia Sotomayor—the first Hispanic to be a Supreme Court Justice and the only one to his day—as well as Elena Kagan.

Supreme Court cases that marked Barack Obama's presidency include: *United States v. Windsor* (2013), *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014), *King v. Burwell* (2015), *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* (2012), and *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010). The first two cases paved the way for same-sex marriage precisely because they invalidated President Clinton's 1996 *Defense of Marriage Act* (DOMA) which recognized marriage as the union between a man and a woman. It is to be pinpointed that President Clinton had also adopted the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) policy in 1993 which prohibited military officials from asking about the sexual orientation of other members of the military. Despite all, if members of the military revealed their controversial sexual orientation (especially being gay, lesbian, or bisexual), these people could lose their jobs even though they were good elements. The next two cases of 2014 and 2015 helped uphold provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare). Before the decisions on both cases, there was the case *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* (2012). In this 5-4 case, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of Congress to require people to be insured, otherwise, they would have to pay a fine. The individual mandate was defined as the power of Congress to raise taxes.<sup>33</sup> A single swing vote secured a central piece to President Obama's legacy. The individual mandate was indeed the central piece as far as lobbies were concerned because it

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<sup>33</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

assured them millions of new customers. This shrewd justification managed to have prices lowered and to bring millions of new citizens into the American healthcare system. Last but not least, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) stated that subsidizing electoral campaigns was part of the First Amendment's Freedom of Speech and thus that companies as well as people could finance candidates as much as they wanted and could. This certainly has benefitted Republican and Conservative candidates who tend to have more wealthy partners than Democrats and Liberals. Famous examples of subsidizing include the Murdochs as well as the powerful lobby of the NRA, the National Rifle Association.

Despite all, Barack Obama and the Democrats managed to stay in power for four more years. A Republican succeeded him for one term and then former Vice President Joe Biden came to power in 2021.

## The First Presidential Visit to Africa

Now that we have seen the possible influence of his mother upon Barack Obama and his nominees to the Supreme Court, we may look into the clout of his father Barack Hussein Obama, Sr., whom he did not know very well. His father was born in Kenya—formerly British East Africa—and he went on to study in the United States where he met his future wife, Ann Dunham who was born in Kansas. The couple later had one son, Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. After him, his mother gave birth to a girl, Maya Soetoro-Ng, who was the fruit of another union between her and a man from Indonesia, where the four of them lived. Still, despite the fact that he had roots in Africa and that he lived in Asia, the American continent, and the United States in particular, were of paramount importance to Barack Obama, Jr. People could think that the first non-white American President would hold Africa dear but he did not,<sup>34</sup> even though his parents and himself may have lived in Kenya according to Ali Al’amin Mazrui.<sup>35</sup> President Obama did not translate his care and roots into specific policies, just as he did not overtly aim at helping black people in America thanks to Obamacare.<sup>36</sup> He primarily viewed Africa through the security lens as America has had “extensive military cooperation” with many African countries, including South Africa.<sup>37</sup> And even when President Obama chose to work hand in hand with African leaders, it was in the service of the American national interest, notably after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the Boston Marathon bombing on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013.<sup>38</sup> Despite all this cooperation, the United States only possesses one permanent base in Africa: Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti for which President signed a twenty-year lease extension in 2014.<sup>39</sup>

Barack Obama’s objectives did not stop there. Not only did he want to advance peace and security but he also sought to strengthen democratic institutions, spur economic growth, and promote opportunity and development.<sup>40</sup> To do so, Barack Obama visited Africa four times during his presidency. The first time he went there was on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009,<sup>41</sup> and the last time was in July 2015.<sup>42</sup> Barack Obama gauged his popularity and worked on diplomatic relations between the

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<sup>34</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.238.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xi.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.239.

United States and African countries ever since he was a Senator, in August 2006 for instance.<sup>43</sup> At that time, he had already delivered his famous speech at the Democratic National Convention in Boston in July 2004. He went to South Africa and Kenya, his father's home country, in 2006. Local inhabitants treated him like a rockstar and considered him to be the "son of the soil" while the government disparaged him after he had spoken out against corruption, from which his father suffered before he died at the age of 46.<sup>44</sup> President Obama was also the descendant of the Luo ethnic group, whose members usually die earlier than those born in Kikuyuland because of systemic discrimination to find a profession, a house, *et cetera*. Furthermore, the Luo ethnic group had zero president compared to Kikuyuland's four. Despite being paternalistic at times, President Obama was very popular and considered a hero in Africa because he was the leader of the most powerful country in the world. The American President claimed Africans were masters of their own destiny when he declared: "Africa's future is up to Africans" and that the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be shaped by what happens in Africa.<sup>45</sup> Toward the end of his presidency, in 2016, President Obama was less popular than he was in 2012, perhaps because it had become a fact that a black man was the President of the United States.<sup>46</sup> It can also be assumed that some Africans realized that President Obama did not increase relations between America and Africa beyond measure.

What Obama tried to do was less complex and highly symbolic. "His most substantial initiative is Power Africa" and aimed at doubling access to electricity in sub-Saharan Africa from 2013 onwards. President Obama was also involved in the project Feed the Future.<sup>47</sup> He reauthorized this project in 2015 and its objective was to bring Africa a bit more into the world economy so as to empower this continent and free its people from hunger. Trade between the United States and Africa dramatically increased but the share thereof diminished to reach 2% because the United States also significantly increased trade with other parts of the world.<sup>48</sup> What was highly symbolic is the HIV test that Barack Obama took in 2006 in Kenya, one of the three countries he is the most linked with—along with the United States and the state of Hawaii where he was born, as well as Indonesia where he lived with his mother, father-in-law, and maternal half-sister. His wife Michelle Obama also took the test and both HIV tests were negative. The couple—

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.232.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.235.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.237.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

before being the Presidential couple—tried to show the local population that it was okay to take such a test even if people did not think their sexual behavior was at risk.

Despite being part African and black, President Obama did not treat Africa better than other continents simply because he had roots and was highly popular there. For instance, he met Nelson Mandela in Washington on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005 for a visit that was more symbolic than substantial.<sup>49</sup> Nelson Mandela was one great source of inspiration for Barack Obama. However, neither Nelson Mandela nor David Katz (the photographer of the following photographs) really knew who Senator Obama was. The latter had been a U.S. Senator for barely five months. Nelson Mandela and David Katz knew Senator Obama could very well become the first black American President but forgot they had met him. The anti-Apartheid fighter had contemplated not meeting Barack Obama because he was utterly exhausted and had a busy day meeting President W. Bush and Senator Hillary Clinton. Nelson Mandela praised Barack Obama in such words after he became the American President: “Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere in the world should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place.”<sup>50</sup> In 2010, President Obama sent a signed copy of their picture for Nelson Mandela’s birthday which read: “An inspiration for us all!” On the bottom-left hand, Barack Obama appears as a dark standing silhouette on a light background while Nelson Mandela remains in an armchair, close to his crutch. Barack Obama pays his respects to Nelson Mandela who cracks a smile. On the bottom-right hand, Barack Obama—all smiles—bent down to be next to Nelson Mandela, where both men are well-lit.

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<sup>49</sup> HENNESSEY, Kathleen. “The Obama-Mandela dynamic reflected in a photo.” <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-xpm-2013-jun-25-la-na-obama-mandela-20130625-story.html>. June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013. [Accessed on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>50</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 234.



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Many people will not know about or remember Barack Obama's relation to Africa and Kenya, but it is interesting to study this symbolic chapter in his political life when he was a Senator and the President of the United States.

Barack Obama dealt with his African origins in Africa as well as with Blackness. Even in the United States, President Obama came to deal with Blackness as the events which led to the Beer Summit exemplified. If President Obama's friend and colleague—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—had been white, perhaps Henry Louis Gates would not have had any problems with the police and Barack Obama would not have antagonized a part of the population with his comments.

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<sup>51</sup> SHEAR, Michael D. "In Mandela, Obama Found a Beacon Who Inspired From Afar." July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/world/africa/mandela-obama-africa.html>. [Accessed on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023.] / © David Katz. May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> DADO, Koli. "Centenaire de la naissance de Nelson Mandela : Barack Obama en Afrique du Sud!" July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.koldanews.com/2018/07/17/centenaire-de-la-naissance-de-nelson-mandela-barack-obama-en-afrique-du-sud-a859232.html>. [Accessed on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023.] / © Unknown, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

## The “Beer Summit”

Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr.—an eminent Harvard University historian—was arrested by a white police officer after Mr. Gates had lost his keys and tried to find a way to go inside his home. A neighbor called the police after he had witnessed the suspicious behavior of the black professor. It was legitimate for the police to come and see if anything odd was indeed happening in front of the house. President Obama reacted to this event and said the “police [had] acted stupidly” because losing one’s keys can happen and above all because Henry Louis Gates, Jr. told the police officer that this was his own house. Barack Obama spoke his mind about the incident but outrage ensued in the whole country. He inadvertently let people interpret his statement as rebuking police forces. Nonetheless, particularly because Barack Obama is black, he tried not to appear as too black, as too much keen on only helping black people or people from other minorities. An example of this kind of colorblind policies can be found in the *Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act* itself—Obamacare—where he overtly aimed at helping the poorest, a lot of whom happened to be black. This spontaneous reaction of his served as a lesson because the Obama White House “vowed to never speak without thoughtful deliberation on racial matters again.”<sup>53</sup> The Obama Administration was then quite young, rather inexperienced and learnt the hard way not to offend a part of the Un-United States of America.<sup>54</sup>

On July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009, President Obama invited both Henry Louis Gates, Jr, and Sergeant James Crowley, the white police officer who had arrested him. Vice President Joe Biden was also convened to this modest reunion on the South Lawn. The meeting went down into history as the “Beer Summit.” Was this shocking statement detrimental to President Obama’s image or was it beneficial knowing that he ended up winning the Nobel Peace Prize a few weeks later? This event was highly symbolic and is a testimony of Barack Obama’s personality as well as that of Joe Biden. Both men are serious yet they can be relaxed and enjoy being in the company of others, even when it is part of their job. Incidentally, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was a friend of Barack Obama’s. Their common *alma mater* was Harvard University and both were Professors at one point of their careers.

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<sup>53</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>54</sup> This is a pun based on the communication of the university of Berkeley which coined this phrase. University of California, Berkeley. “The Un-United States of America.” March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://olli.berkeley.edu/blog/un-united-states-america>. [Accessed on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

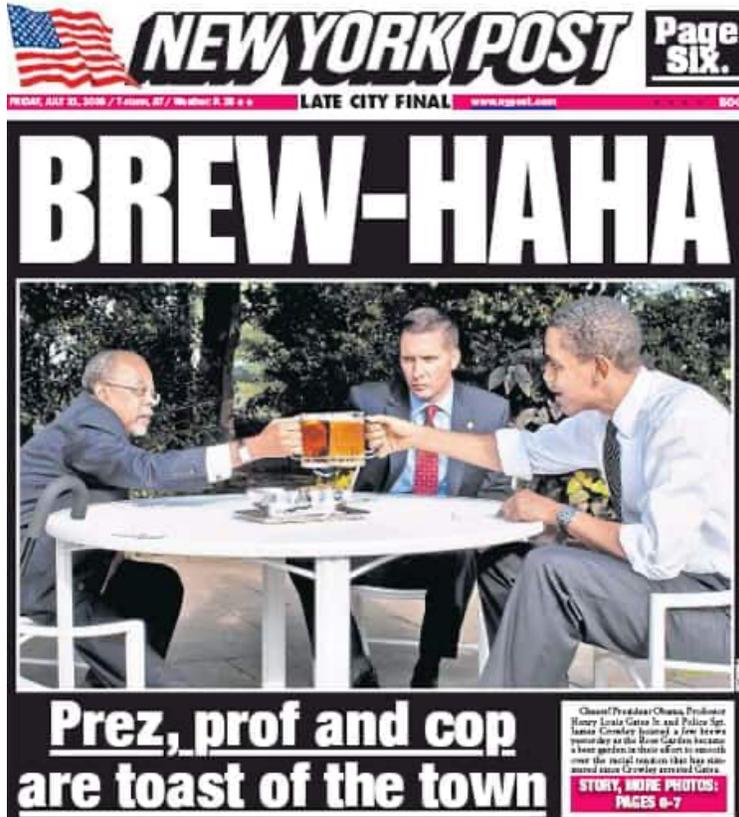


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This photograph was taken at the right time and shows the four protagonists—President Barack Obama; Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; Cambridge police Sergeant James Crowley and Vice President Joe Biden—enjoying their Thursday over different types of beers whose different colors echo the diversity of the color of their skins. The two Washington officials are the more laid-back ones: they only wear white shirts that let their wrists visible. Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also wears a white shirt but he is clad in a suit just like the antagonist he faces, if we may say so. The distinguished professor seems to be smiling in a reserved way while it seems that Cambridge police Sergeant James Crowley is making a point and is thus much more serious. All eyes and gestures naturally seem to be converging toward President Obama who is all smiles and beaming with joy. He seems to look with complicity at Joe Biden who was first a strategic choice to be his running mate and who became a true friend of his.

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<sup>55</sup> Boston.com. “The White House ‘beer summit.’” No date. [http://archive.boston.com/news/politics/gallery/073009\\_beer\\_summit\\_obama/](http://archive.boston.com/news/politics/gallery/073009_beer_summit_obama/). [Accessed on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]



The photograph above is part of the front page of the *New York Post* whose headline reads: “BREW-HAHA: Prez, prof and cop are toast of the town.” The primary title in bold-faced capital letters is a pun based on the verb “to brew”<sup>57</sup> but more especially on the noun “brew” which means “beer” or more broadly “beverage.” Beers are produced in breweries. The other word in the compound noun is “haha” which suggests it was a pleasant moment full of laughs for the “Prez” (whose abbreviation is written as pronounced), the “prof” (the capital letter and the false suffix -essor have been dropped and the resulting word is the same as in French and Italian), the “cop” (when said in an informal or even impolite way) without forgetting about the “vice-prez” to continue in the same vein. The resulting word is “brouhaha” which is synonymous with “hubbub,” “hurly-burly,” “hullabaloo” as well as “din,” “racket” and “uproar” for words that are not based on onomatopoeias. Then, the phrase “toast of the town” is quite familiar yet the four men really

<sup>56</sup> Towleroad. “Obama, Gates, Crowley Hold ‘Beer Summit’ Over Gates Arrest. July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009. <https://www.towleroad.com/2009/07/obama-gates-crowley-hold-beer-summit-over-gates-arrest/>. [Accessed on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

<sup>57</sup> To brew especially refers to drinking tea, which would have appeared to be more British and perhaps less American and manly in a society that values virility, all the more so in 2009 compared to nowadays.

drank a toast. However, Washington, D.C. is not really what we could call a town. Maybe the choice of the word “town” has to do with that of “toast” to produce an alliteration in /t/ and because the writers were witty enough when they came up with the aforementioned pun. The “toast of the town” pun refers to the uproar President Obama caused when he reacted to the arrest of his friend Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

In this photograph, the three main protagonists stretch their arms to bury the hatchet and send a strong message to the rest of the country. The date, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009, is also symbolic since Congress recesses during the month of August. President Obama did not have to work as much on first-order files as he used to during his first few months. He could instead improve and work on his image, diplomacy, and race relations. The two part-black men sat in front of each other. If the American people wanted one photograph of the Beer Summit, it would have certainly been this one where the three of them are raising a toast and putting their differences aside. Even for this particular moment, the President was laid-back and did not wear a suit as opposed to his two counterparts because it was certainly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them whereas it was almost another day in office for President Obama.

A few months after the Beer Summit, President Obama was then awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009. It could be argued that the Beer Summit had a minor role to play when checking Barack Obama’s résumé and promises to maintain peace, though at a small scale and in a highly symbolic way. The meeting, although largely remembered,<sup>58</sup> did not suffice to end or lessen the tension between white, black and all other minorities in America.

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<sup>58</sup> It was Professor John T. Matteson—when he came to the University in Saint-Étienne—who spoke about this event, among many others of course, which marked the Obama Presidency.

## The Nobel Peace Prize

Receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is no trifling matter. It can be awarded either to people or organizations. It is supposed to reward the one or those who have done much at their scale. For instance, some famous people who were awarded this prestigious international prize include: former President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 (who is one of the four Presidents carved into Mount Rushmore along with George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln); former President Woodrow Wilson in 1919 after the foundation of the League of Nations; Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964 for being the leader of a non-violent movement during the Civil Rights era to help African-Americans get more recognition and rights; former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (who served under Presidents Nixon and Ford) for negotiating a ceasefire in Vietnam in 1973 (the War began in 1955 and ended in 1975); Desmond Tutu in 1984; the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in 1989; Mikhaïl Gorbachev in 1990 (one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 11/9 and one year before the end of the Soviet Union); Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991; Nelson Mandela in 1993 who fought against Apartheid in South Africa; former President James Carter in 2002 (when the President was George W. Bush); and Al Gore in 2007 (still when George W. Bush was President) who was a Presidential candidate and is the former Vice President of Bill Clinton.<sup>59</sup>

President Obama joined this prestigious and aforementioned group of people who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He became the third sitting president to receive this prestigious prize. He did so on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009, less than eight months after he entered office. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi never received this prize although he was nominated oftentimes and was an emblematic peace figure in the world and in particular in India.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, President Obama was nominated, whereas he had escalated the conflict in Afghanistan and “ordered a dramatic surge of unmanned drones over the skies of Pakistan.”<sup>61</sup> President Obama was nominated and chosen because he had denounced unjust and bad wars, was the leader of the most powerful country in the world, and would strive to use force to ensure peace if diplomacy, cooperation, and dialogue were not enough. Barack Obama as a man was uncomfortable and considered rejecting this honor but thought it would be rude and inappropriate to do so. He was aware that awarding

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<sup>59</sup> Nobel Prize. “All Nobel Peace Prizes.” No date. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-peace-prizes/>. [Accessed on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* “Mahatma Gandhi.” No date. <https://www.nobelprize.org/?np-keyword=gandhi>. [Accessed on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>61</sup> BAKER, Peter. *Obama: The Call of History*. New York: New York Times and Calloway, 2017, p. 53.

him this prize was highly symbolic since it would reward words over actions, and the status of the United States with a wholesome leader as capable of ending conflicts thanks to democracy and deterrent weapons.

President Obama was savvy when he delivered his speech to receive the prestigious prize when he declared: “A non-violent movement could not have halted Hilter’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince Al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms.”<sup>62</sup> Despite pledging that the United States would pull out of Iraq, President Obama did not give up on tracking al-Qaeda leaders. Fewer than two years after, he ordered a team of NAVY Seals to take risks and eliminate al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, in Pakistan, who was the mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Even though the threat of al-Qaeda was not utterly diminished, Osama bin Laden’s death symbolized a new era. Namely that al-Qaeda as it was on 9/11 had lost its boss. Obama’s win over Osama was symbolic. The loss of one man could not make up for the deaths of almost three thousand people, but one decade after the terrorist attacks, Americans rejoiced at the death of the terrorist. Little by little, President Obama more and more deserved the Nobel Peace Prize. Eliminating the headmaster of such a threat proved America was ready and could get rid of enemies—who were utterly hiding, even years after they became infamous—far from its borders.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

## The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)

Arms reduction treaties did not consist in anything new for the United States and Russia in 2010. Agreements were signed by both parties such as President Kennedy's 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; President Johnson's 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; President Nixon's 1972 SALT I (the Strategic Arms Limited Talks which was composed of the Treaty on Anti-Ballistic Missiles and the Protocol on Limitation of Strategic Offensive Weapons); President Carter's 1979 SALT II; President Reagan's 1982 negotiations which resulted in President H. W. Bush's 1991 START I; President H.W. Bush's 1993 START II; and President W. Bush's 2002 SALT III which was signed along with President Putin.<sup>63</sup> Most of these accords were signed in the context of the Cold War or shortly after. Vladimir Putin was not so far from power—he was Vice President of Russia—when President Obama signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with President Dmitri Medvedev on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, in Prague (in the Czech Republic) and on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, in the Oval Office.<sup>64</sup> Reaching such an agreement was part of President Obama's "RESET" strategy with Russia which consisted in extending a hand toward Moscow. The New START process was justified in the name of the partnership with Russia in Iran and Afghanistan, and in terms of performance where the limits are lower than those of the aforementioned Treaties and Talks.<sup>65</sup>

Russia and the United States agreed to reduce their nuclear stockpile within seven years, that is before 2017. In 2017, President Obama left office and was replaced by someone who was less hostile to Russia: Donald Trump. This accord was Barack Obama's last arms-control agreement, not the beginning of a peaceful era with Russia as some people thought it would be at the outset of his first term.<sup>66</sup> What is symbolic in the Treaty is that it made on-site inspections a new requirement so that both countries would trust facts, not words. However, inspections fizzled out as the original START treaty expired. In order to bury some of the bad memories of the Cold War between the two hegemonies, President Obama had come to agree to spend \$85 billion in one decade—to modernize American nuclear facilities, to deter countries from attacking the United States, and to prevent risks of accidents—in order to have Republican support in the Senate. Thirteen Republicans voted in favor of New Start in the 71-26 vote. Nonetheless, on February 21<sup>st</sup>,

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<sup>63</sup> ROBERT, Frédéric. *La Civilisation américaine par les textes de 1494 à nos jours*. Paris: Ellipses, 2003, p. 289-290.

<sup>64</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. xii-xiii.

<sup>65</sup> White House. "The New START Treaty: Signed." February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/02/02/new-start-treaty-signed>. [Accessed on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>66</sup> BAKER, Peter. *Obama: The Call of History*. New York: New York Times and Calloway, 2017, p. 92.

2023, President Putin announced that he was about to suspend his participation in the New START process, one day after President Biden visited Kyiv and met President Zelensky, and three days before Russia celebrated the first-anniversary invasion of Ukraine.<sup>67</sup> President Putin then signed a law which suspended this major nuclear treaty with the United States on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.<sup>68</sup>

President Obama never wanted to start wars but was ready to flex muscles to deter other superpowers from doing so without facing consequences. He truly believed in diplomacy and strove to make it succeed to build a better and safer world. Unfortunately, Russia remained strong enough, may it be before the New START process (when Russia invaded Georgian regions) or after, when Ukraine was invaded (Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk). It may be argued that intention is what counts when assessing President Obama's résumé, but his intention was not enough. In the face of dictators, it is complicated to accomplish much without sparking a world conflict with democratic allies. Nonetheless, dictators either end up being toppled or dead.<sup>69</sup> What is harder to change is the fate of the citizens of autocratic countries in the long run.

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<sup>67</sup> BORGES, Julian., and ROTH, Andrew. "Putin says Russia will halt participation in New Start nuclear arms treaty." February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/21/putin-russia-halt-participation-new-start-nuclear-arms-treaty>. [Accessed on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>68</sup> TASS Russian News Agency. "Putin signs law to suspend Russia's participation in New START." February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1582823>. [Accessed on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>69</sup> As we are going to study, Bashar al-Assad still is the Syrian President in 2023, after what happened in his country less than a decade ago.

## Part Three: Facing Several Setbacks

### The “Shellacking” of the 2010 Midterm Elections

The 2010 Midterm Elections exemplify President Obama’s strengths and weaknesses. In 2008, Barack Obama enjoyed a comfortable majority in Congress. More than 50% of the voters had chosen Barack Obama as he gained 365 presidential electors against 173 for John McCain.<sup>70</sup> The 2010 Midterm Elections saw the Democrats and President Obama lose 63 seats in the House of Representatives, the worst defeat since 1938—that is after the Great Depression and before World War II—and 6 seats in the Senate while the Republicans enjoyed their largest majority since 1948.<sup>71</sup> The Democrats who lost paid the price for being on the party of the President and for supporting some of Obama’s policies such as the healthcare reform. The reaction of the far-right Tea Party reigned supreme and the Obama Administration suffered the consequences because they had not succeeded in explaining the benefits of what President Obama and his team thought to be good policies.<sup>72</sup> It is quite telling that even the artist at the origin of the posters HOPE, Shepard Fairey (also known as Obey), lost hope.<sup>73</sup>

President Obama did struggle to point out the benefits of his policies. However, he did not shrink back when he had to point out what did not work when he rebuked those who always saw the glass as half-empty.<sup>74</sup> Barack Obama even went to take advice from Bill Clinton, whose wife he had faced and defeated in the Primaries in 2008. Barack Obama was not even a fan of Bill Clinton’s, who had suffered from the Republican Revolution of 1994 in the Midterm Elections and who was a real moderate with his Third Way to triangulate the policies of the country.

Perhaps the backlash was inversely proportional to the success of the popular momentum from which Obama had benefitted in 2008. Barack Obama’s influence in the Midterm Elections was enormous because voters reacted to what Conservative people deemed as liberal policies. What is more, in books, the harsh defeat of the 2010 elections is referred to as a shellacking just as in President Obama’s words: “I’m not recommending for every future president that they take

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<sup>70</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> JOHNSON, Richard. “‘Hope’ poster artist Shepard Fairey has lost hope.” September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <https://pagesix.com/2015/09/18/hope-artist-shepard-fairey-has-lost-hope/>. [Accessed on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>74</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

a shellacking like I did last night.”<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, partly because of the killing of Osama bin Laden, Barack Obama managed to be resilient as he bounced back and won the 2012 Presidential Elections against Mitt Romney and the Tea Party. Indeed, even the day after the shellacking, President Obama was very determined and pumped up: “We got our butts kicked, but we’ve got a lame-duck session here, and I’ve got a lot I want to get done.”<sup>76</sup> After this debacle, the President got back up and was reelected.

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

## Chapter 2: Recovering from the Post-Shellacking Malaise of the 2010 Midterm Elections and Becoming the First African American President to be Reelected

### Part One: The Arab Spring, the Global War on Terrorism and Al-Qaeda, the Death of Public Enemy Number One, and the End of the War in Iraq

#### The Arab Spring

Oftentimes are these events referred to as the Arab Springs, as several countries experienced their own Arab Spring. This “cascade of crises”<sup>77</sup> began in Tunisia in late 2010 and then spread across the Arab World. Someone who had traveled there both before and after the start of the Arab Spring would have been struck by the difference between the luxurious hotels—whose grass was luxuriant—and the outside, the real part of Tunisia with arid places and people who did not enjoy the sultans’ standards of living. The spark of the snowball effect that started in Tunisia was one particular event, that of a young man who set himself on fire and then died from the consequences of his being scorched. On January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in Doha, Qatar: “In too many places, in too many ways, the region’s foundations are sinking into the sand.”<sup>78</sup> The Arab Spring was a moment unparalleled since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, because of its magnitude and reach. Its consequences still can be felt nowadays because of corrupt regimes which are thriving at the expense of the people whose menial daily doing is not seen at its fair value. The riches are concentrated in the hands of a few powerful men. Their model is that of an oligarchy mixed with despotism or limited democracy, if democracy has really existed and been implemented. Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt falls within the model of an oligarchy, the power of the few, and even an autocracy to some extent. After the Arab Spring’s first wave of chaos, President Obama asked Hosni Mubarak “to step aside in early 2011”<sup>79</sup> after a thirty-year reign as the 4<sup>th</sup> Egyptian President. Hosni Mubarak had even been very close to such an amount of power before 1981: he had been the Egyptian Vice President from 1975 to 1981, and then Prime Minister for a short period of time. Egypt is often considered to be the cornerstone of the Middle East. President Obama’s Cairo speech had a particular echo throughout the Arab world in 2009 and afterward. Egypt’s Tahir

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<sup>77</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>78</sup> NPR Wire Reports. “Clinton To Arab Leaders: Reforms Needed Now.” January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/01/13/132888303/reforms-needed-now-clinton-tells-arab-leaders?t=1660655337622>. [Accessed on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

<sup>79</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

Square embodied the craving for change of “young people [who] cramm[ed there] to demand political change” because democracy is supposed to make it hard—if not impossible—for a man to rule with an iron fist for three long decades. Hosni Mubarak’s time in power is proof that Egypt was an autocracy. Hosni Mubarak and his Vice President—Omar Suleiman—ended up resigning. President Obama’s involvement in sharing his views and convictions certainly had an impact on the youth in multiple countries in the Middle East. Egypt’s army Chief, Field Marshal Mohammed Tantawi was the interim leader after Hosni Mubarak suddenly resigned in February 2011; Egypt then experienced its first democratic election for president.<sup>80</sup> However, Mohammed Morsi—a Muslim Brotherhood leader—was elected in June 2012, making it harder for the United States and other occidental countries to freely communicate with Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood “rejected the existing regional security order, especially with Israel,”<sup>81</sup> which is the biggest ally of the United States in the region. The relationship between Israel and Palestine is arguably the one in the world that could be labeled as thorny. The Muslim Brotherhood is considered by some to be a terrorist organization, which is different from simple political parties which try to achieve their aims through different means (for instance, the Irish Republican Army’s actions were miscellaneous during the Troubles at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its aims were political). Handling and helping the new government were tough tasks for the Obama Administration due to the fact that “Morsi and his team made mistake after mistake, blaming everyone else for their problems.”<sup>82</sup> The United States tried to work on mutual interest with Egypt such as border security, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. However, the Egyptians preferred flashy and expensive weapons such as jet fighters and tanks that are not the most effective in their arid country, particularly against terrorists in the Sinai along the border with Israel.<sup>83</sup> Fighting terrorism in the Sinai was also supposed to benefit Israel. Cairo was aware of this fact, Egypt “had suffered several attacks on their border, [and] yet the Egyptians did little to thwart them.”<sup>84</sup> There used to be a “cold peace” between Egypt and Israel under Hosni Mubarak which enabled the two countries to cooperate and coordinate security efforts. Everything changed under Mohammed Morsi who ended the cooperation, and “whenever we pressed him to do more to control the situation, he dismissed the problem as

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>83</sup> One can both say Sinai (as the notion because of the zero article) or *the* Sinai, which is specific because of the use of the article “the.”

<sup>84</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

overblown.”<sup>85</sup> The “cold peace” was no longer and the Israelis grew worried and confessed to the Obama Administration that they were strongly considering getting to the root of the problem. Israel also sent a similar message when Iran’s nuclear stockpile became more and more considerable. Israel was ready to attack shortly so as not to let the region and the world face a bigger threat later on. By the summer of 2013, the address President Obama delivered during his Cairo Speech in Egypt’s Tahir Square came once more to life and the prospect of a civil war was not unthinkable. In the end, the military intervened and removed Mohammed Morsi from power, and Defense Minister General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi succeeded him. Violence was ubiquitous in that outing as action was taken against pro-Morsi protestors, in which about a thousand of them died and many more were injured. “US-Egypt relations fell into its greatest crisis since the 1970s”<sup>86</sup> notably after the 1973 oil crisis. Their relations were made of many lows but it seems that this low moment was memorable enough in Washington. However, the Obama Administration had to make an effort to put up with President al-Sisi because the United States fares better when Egypt is its ally in terms of security matters, and since other regional allies “were very supportive of al-Sisi.”<sup>87</sup> President Obama and his Administration tried to show they were not totally happy with the direction taken by the Egyptian government by “canceling a major military exercise and withholding certain items of military assistance.”<sup>88</sup> The United States used to give “\$1.3 billion per year of guaranteed support for Cairo as a result of the 1978 Camp David Accords and Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel.”<sup>89</sup> Egypt is still receiving “far more military assistance than any other country after Israel.”<sup>90</sup> Being second only to Israel testifies that Egypt is still a centerpiece in the Middle East and is considered to be the cornerstone there because of its prominence and geographical importance with the Suez Canal, the passage from Europe and the Mediterranean Sea to the East. On the other hand, President al-Sisi used what little leverage he had to upset the United States by getting Egypt closer to Russia (what remains of the East Bloc, and the one historic rival of America). To ease tensions and reward Egypt for respecting the peace treaty with Israel, President Obama “decided to allow delivery of the weapons [th]e[y] had withheld for a year and a half.”<sup>91</sup> Multiple groups

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

rebuked the Obama Administration for its handling of the situation, arguing that the United States should not have suspended its support towards Egypt; others claimed President Obama abandoned democracy by letting Presidents Mubarak, Morsi, and al-Sisi thrive; while other people posited that President Obama's quest for agreement and Third Way "created another irritant with countries like Saudi Arabia, the U[nited] A[rab] E[mirates], and Israel."<sup>92</sup> Derek Chollet recognizes that all "three of these critiques are justified"<sup>93</sup> and thus true to a certain extent. Derek Chollet could have chosen to use "those," which is more pejorative. It is a well-known fact that President Obama welcomed divergent opinions in his team so as not to exclude options and to analyze the data at his disposal. To make mistakes is human and human relationships as well as diplomacy are demanding. The United States wanted Egypt to be a peaceful cornerstone and a model for the African continent. The partnership between Egypt and the United States is based on common values, but they are not sufficient for the United States to be stress-free. Nonetheless, President Obama and his Administration managed to make American-Egyptian military ties strong and even more favorable to the United States by "fundamentally changing the ways it is financed and spent."<sup>94</sup> The leverage the Obama Administration reinforced and the impetus created was a good point for a semblance of stability in the Middle East, or at least in this cornerstone of Africa—Egypt. Moreover, President Obama succeeded in resuming the military partnership Egypt wanted thanks to American know-how and superiority. Defense may well be the best offense as well as the sinews of war. America's overwhelming hard power enabled the Obama Administration to make peace and try to bring stability in the world's most unpredictable region.

The "demand for change and threat of unrest [ensued] in Libya, Bahrain, and Jordan."<sup>95</sup> Among those three countries, the most telling example is that of Libya. That country, alongside Egypt and Syria, was one of the countries in that region of the world which was a handful for the Obama Administration. Tunisia was the country where the Arab Spring started but it did not reach its apex just yet. The fate of Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was different from that of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and that of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. The tactics employed by Muammar Gaddafi were not the same as those of the other two. The Libyan leader was probably the one out of them who was the most vocal, or at the least the one we know the most about. Toward the end of his

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

time in power, he shared his firm resolve to stay in power. It can be argued that Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi were the most at risk of being expelled from power.<sup>96</sup> Libya was a “Srebrenica on steroids”<sup>97</sup> according to officials.<sup>98</sup> Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi had claimed he would not back down and promised he would slaughter anyone who stood in his way. Muammar “[G]addafi went to the airwaves and pledged ‘no mercy,’ threatening that his troops would go house to house looking for ‘traitors’ and ‘capture the rats.’”<sup>99</sup> The city of Benghazi and its almost 700,000 inhabitants were particularly at risk in 2012. The Obama Administration watched the situation evolve with a cautious eye. They wondered what would happen if Muammar Gaddafi and his regime managed to crush and hush the rebellion, thinking it would halt the momentum of regional political change. Indeed, for some countries, violence is the option of last resort but for other regimes, violence as well as hard power are what makes it possible for them to thrive and stay in a position of power for years and years if not decades.

America’s soft power had already had an effect abroad but what about America’s hard power during Obama’s tenure? “By March, key American partners—especially the British and the French, and even the Arab League—were calling for military intervention.”<sup>100</sup> The British and the French were in favor of establishing a no-fly zone and all eyes were turned toward the United States, which had ceased to be an isolationist country after the Bush years which had been highly tainted by the 9/11 tragedy. America had restored its world leadership and image after the Bush years and Barack Obama had a preponderant role in that change. Because of the breakaway from the isolationist stance, Britain and France looked up to the United States to know if their no-fly zone was a real possibility or not. The intelligence the United States had accessed to made the Washington officials decide it would be inefficient and useless because the Libyan regime mainly used combat troops and tanks, not so much aircraft. Pressure could also be felt at home: hawks were still eager to show the world that the United States still had overwhelming firepower and could impose the right way onto far-off countries. The Senate had also “unanimously passed a

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<sup>96</sup> Bashar al-Assad, although known to be highly cruel toward his own people, was savvy enough to test his chemical weapons, and the willingness of the United States to intervene or not. Then Bashar al-Assad—relatively unscathed—relinquished them, without repairing the harm he had done nor giving back life to those he had savagely sacrificed and slaughtered

<sup>97</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>98</sup> Srebrenica is a place in Bosnia and Herzegovina where Muslim civilians were butchered in 1995.

<sup>99</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 96-97.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

resolution urging the UN to protect civilians from attack, including through a no-fly zone.”<sup>101</sup> A no-fly zone would show the world the might and technology of world powers without putting many lives on the line on land where the enemy would have a certain strategic advantage because of their tanks and knowledge of the territory. President Obama did not want to be all-show and no-go. The trauma of the Bush years and the bad war in Iraq still could be felt. The spendings due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still heavy to bear for the U.S. economy which was still recovering from the effects of the Great Recession. Barack Obama certainly did not want to leave such a debt to repay to his successor nor was he willing to be held accountable for all the ills of the United States because the Great Recession and the deficit would make unnecessary spendings a scourge. The stakes were so high that Secretary of State Robert Gates later confessed that he “[had] considered resigning over the decision to intervene.”<sup>102</sup> The other options consisted in letting the Europeans handle the situation on their own since they had interests in the region of the Mediterranean Sea, “enlarg[ing] the military objective to protect civilians by attacking Libyan forces on the ground, which would require a more robust intervention and therefore more risk” as well as “attempt[ing] to evacuate thousands of innocents from Benghazi, what we dubbed the ‘Dunkirk Option.’”<sup>103</sup> The Europeans made clear that the presence of the United States in the mission was not a prerequisite for them to act. President Obama cared more about the innocent and the local populations than about leading any operation through and through as was the case after the Cold War, in the Balkans or Iraq during the first Gulf War, when the United States was an undisputed superpower. President Obama is often portrayed as a pragmatist, who wants to think about all the possibilities in all regards so as to decide on an informed choice that would have positive effects. According to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, President Obama admitted it was a 51-49 call, a very close one. Obama being someone who thinks things through, he proposed a hybrid approach: the United States would take care of the civilians by keeping the Libyan forces busy on the ground (“some called it a ‘no-drive zone.’”<sup>104</sup>) This hybridity signaled a break with the either-or choices of his predecessor. President Obama wanted to show that the United States could work hand in hand with other powers without being the only reliable one or that his country did everything on its own, or did not when isolationism reigned supreme. The coalition made up

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

of America, France, the United Kingdom, and other allies “bombed Libya, conducting nearly 10,000 airstrikes”<sup>105</sup> in seven months and even Gaddafi’s palaces and military headquarters were targeted. Norway, which was very active during the mission, destroyed Gaddafi’s residence in Tripoli.<sup>106</sup> Yet, even when playing second fiddle, the United States proved the gap between its ability to sustain the operation and that of the European countries.<sup>107</sup> The analyst Gideon Rose dubbed the Libya episode the “immaculate intervention”<sup>108</sup>—in reference to the immaculate conception of Jesus whose mother remained the Virgin Mary—because the operation consisted in striking the Libyan regime. The United States—although showing it still had the most powerful firepower—let the allies take the lead in conducting “nearly 90 percent of the airstrikes” while the “entire campaign cost just over \$1 billion (which at the time represented what the United States spent per week in Iraq or Afghanistan).”<sup>109</sup> By way of comparison, the 8-year-long Iraq war cost over \$ 1 trillion, which means the average cost for each year was well over \$ 100 billion (around \$ 2 billion for each week). The fact that one week of war in Iraq cost around \$ 2 billion while 7 months of airstrikes in Libya cost twice as less can be explained by the lesser involvement of the United States, and because the US shared the mission with the international community. In August 2011, the rebel forces stormed Tripoli and overthrew the powers that be and on October 20<sup>th</sup>, the self-declared “King of Kings” met his demise “when he was found on the run, hiding in a sewer pipe, and killed by rebel forces.”<sup>110</sup> The one who announced he would chase out rats and slaughter them was he who ended up hiding as such an animal in such a twist of fate. More than five months after the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Middle East lost another figure of violence. Nonetheless, it was far from being the last time President Obama would have to brood over what to do in the Middle East, as we are going to see with the example of Syria.

President Obama managed to show the Washington officials he had his own free will when he created his own Third Way—not unlike that of President Clinton who was not a socialist nor a liberal either. Barack Obama’s pronounced personality as well as his strong convictions helped him weather criticism and do what he judged was right. In a way, he could feel he partly had the

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96, 100-101.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

fate of the world in his hands and thus had a burden to bear. So, eight years at the head of the world's greatest power must be demanding for one's body, even when granting oneself to play golf and basketball every now and then. President also resisted the call of the "so-called 'realists' who believed that Libya was not worth it, and those 'interventionists' who asserted that the United States needed to go all the way."<sup>111</sup> Nonetheless, even with all this, the intervention in Libya did not turn the country into a totally peaceful place. Barack Obama later admitted that Libya after that was still a mess and that the intervention did not work as expected. In 2016, the country was tormented and became a hotbed for terrorists. Even after the death of the emblematic Muammar Gaddafi, a lot of families were fleeing a terrible plight in hoping to live a better life abroad, which was at the origin of a massive refugee crisis in Europe and on the Italian island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, while Libya was still a threat since its already considerable and conventional weapon stockpile was proliferating. Not only that but extremist groups benefitted from the power vacuum to grow in prominence.

The events in Libya profoundly marked President Obama. Although he was already reluctant to wage wars at every turn, he became even more so. He said that Libya was one of his biggest regrets: their "coalition could have and should have done more to fill a vacuum left behind"<sup>112</sup> even though "things would have been worse had the United States not intervened."<sup>113</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to reflect on what could have been done. But even now, there is no real and simple answer: perhaps the situation was brought to a standstill and it was the last straw that broke the camel's back. The country was unstable and even if Muammar Gaddafi had passed away of old age a few years later, it would not have been impossible for a despotic—and perhaps worse—leader to come to power and lead the country to a bloody civil war or massacre. Derek Chollet confirms that violence did hang over Libya: "in the White House, we had overwhelming evidence of [G]addafi's intent on mass slaughter."<sup>114</sup> One day or another, the United States and its allies would have had to consider all the options to save as many people as possible from tyranny despite massive opposition at home. The international community wanted regime change in Libya. We could argue that the United States and its allies precipitated the death of Muammar Gaddafi, along with his own doing of course, because he was widely known to have

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

sponsored terrorism in the past which led to the killings of Americans. Global envoys and diplomats tried to convince Muammar Gaddafi that it was in his best interest to step down, yet not once did he seriously consider that option under any circumstance.<sup>115</sup> After the tumultuous Arab Spring episode, some Libyan officials stated that “at no point during the bombing did [G]addafi’s family or inner circle think they would be defeated” and that they suffered from “supreme arrogance and miscalculation.”<sup>116</sup> It is common sense to think that if you can hear bombs or see their effects, then one of them can hit you especially if you are in a position of power and responsible for the fights to occur. By way of comparison, Volodymyr Zelensky stayed in Ukraine which was under attack in 2022 but he knew he could be killed and assassinated by Wagner.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps Muammar Gaddafi thought he and his army were in the overwhelming majority and that they would crush the rebels, the so-called traitors, and honorably resist the airstrikes of a vast coalition of rich countries. Because of his old age, he apparently became madder and madder, which can be illustrated by his statements of wanting to kill the ones who did not share his views in his country and who let it know that they were fed up with him. The question of morality mattered to President Obama. The United States and democratic powers could not turn a blind eye to what was bound to happen in Libya, especially with other countries in Europe and in the Middle East calling upon the United States to intervene to help show genocides are not acceptable. The context around the situation in Libya was that in “the spring of 2011, President Obama was criticized more for acting *too slowly* to confront [G]addafi than for acting at all.”<sup>118</sup> President Obama could have been set aside by the international community thus once more endangering America’s position in the world after the Bush years. A ceasefire could have been negotiated and maybe obtained but nothing would have been sure as to whether it would have been a ploy on Gaddafi’s part or whether he would have upheld his end of the bargain. In recent years, ceasefires in various countries were not respected. Ceasefires are proof that peace is utterly fragile such as in Israel. The international coalition as well as the Gaddafi regime left Libya in a poor state. After the Libyan Arab Spring, the United States was not there to help run and rebuild the country as

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106-107.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>117</sup> President Zelensky also decided to stay in his home country even though he had the possibility to leave Ukraine for the United States and be safe from armed soldiers (yet not from spies or militia men). The Ukrainian President could have led from behind like Charles de Gaulle in his time. Volodymyr Zelensky knew it was an all-out war between Ukraine and the invader, Russia, and that he had to lead by example.

<sup>118</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

opposed to post-Saddam Hussein Iraq or post-Taliban Afghanistan.<sup>119</sup> Unlike the previous administration, the Obama team prepared the transition from Gaddafi Libya to post-Gaddafi Libya whereas the Bush Administration did not plan what would and could happen afterward in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>120</sup> What was hard to guess was that Libyans were proud (and thus wanted to rebuild their country themselves) yet they asked for more help from the United States and the international community.<sup>121</sup> The United States was disappointed “with the Europeans who were the most enthusiastic about getting involved [and who] left many promises unfulfilled.”<sup>122</sup> Because of the previous Administrations, from Reagan’s to that of Bush 43,<sup>123</sup> the United States did not have an embassy in Libya from 1980 to 2006. Thus, there were few experts and diplomats who had lived and served there as openly Americans.<sup>124</sup> Despite this tumultuous past and the troublesome aftermath of the Libyan Arab Spring, Libya “held its first democratic election in fifty years”<sup>125</sup> in 2012. However, 2012 was also a perilous year because the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya was attacked on the infamous day of September 11<sup>th</sup> on which Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed by terrorists although “they were far outnumbered by security personnel.”<sup>126</sup> Ambassador Christopher Stevens had just arrived in Tripoli in the summer of 2012. He was one of the few diplomats in Libya because there were limited slots due to the small footprint approach in Libya. American embassies, ambassadors, and diplomats were frowned upon in many countries in the Middle East where terrorist attacks were carried on. In his book, Derek Chollet reflects that “it is difficult to conceive how American interests would have been better served if the administration had overridden the objections of the Libyans and the international community and deployed ground troops to enforce peace.”<sup>127</sup> A lot of experts would tend to agree with him because an American embassy was attacked on that infamous date. This happened although the United States tried to find a balance and respected the will of the Libyan people by letting the local government rule. It certainly would have been worse if America

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<sup>119</sup> The Taliban did come back in power after the United States left in 2021 under President Biden. They made promises they did not uphold and implemented Sharia law anew.

<sup>120</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>123</sup> George W. Bush was the 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States while his father George H.W. Bush was the 41<sup>st</sup>.

<sup>124</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

antagonized the local populations who wanted and needed limited help. What is more, it was not in the interest of the United States to turn a new ally into an enemy anew.

The phrase “leading from behind *the scenes*”<sup>128</sup> encapsulates the mode of operation used by the United States in Libya. America was often derided for it yet Derek Chollet points out that President Obama followed a tradition which had been implemented by Dwight D. Eisenhower when it was dubbed “hidden hand”<sup>129</sup> leadership. Despite all of that, in her memoirs, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed it as a “silly phrase”<sup>130</sup> particularly because the United States was made fun of when cooperating with other countries and institutions.

Syria then went on to become the international community’s center of attention. The situation which was slowly brewing there was to become a conundrum or a “wicked problem”<sup>131</sup> in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s words. Either the United States would do nothing and watch from afar while thousands of people might be killed or the United States would intervene and risk further escalation and possibly spark another world conflict (or quagmire). The Obama Administration also considered sending aid and money to Syria. However, the risk that it could end up being in the hands of extremists, who resort to violence, was too big for them. In case it backfired if such news spread all over the globe, it would endanger America’s position on the world stage. President Obama also favored diplomacy, which was one of the reasons why he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. However, the risk of a Russian veto at the United Nations Security Council was too big since unanimity is required. Thus, diplomacy seemed to be the least viable option as a first-resort measure. There was a precedent in terms of military invasion: further instability ensued even though there were interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The military operations there went sour after the powers that be were toppled. The Obama Administration and hawks in Washington knew they had a great chance of annihilating the Syrian military, thus begging the question of the price to pay both in terms of casualties and credibility. President Assad and his predecessors built their stocks although such weapons are far deadlier than traditional ones. If he had used his chemical weapons in self-defense, the casualties could have been so high that a lot of Syrians—his fellow citizens—would have perished. In such a scenario, the first event to occur would have been the American intervention. Indeed, President Obama had

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

warned the Syrian regime of a Red Line not to be crossed. The surviving U.S. soldiers could have suffered from post-traumatic stress such as former Vietnam soldiers (American Combat Veterans of War) who did not fit into American society when they came back. Once again, President Obama wanted military intervention to be the last-resort option and to act wittily because what had happened in Libya profoundly marked him. In the words of Derek Chollet, the Obama Administration “wanted to give the Syrian opposition a stake in the outcome and establish the context for the international community to provide support.”<sup>132</sup> President Obama wanted to act along with multiple allies, states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Congressmen. Security interests were to be met in the Middle East, more than commercial ones. The United States was even willing to invest billions of dollars in key countries such as Egypt and Israel to try and contain violence. It seems that unlike Egypt’s former President Hosni Mubarak, President Bashar al-Assad was never tempted to leave power even though “most officials believed Assad lacked the necessary cunning and fortitude to stay in power.”<sup>133</sup> Yet he proved that he knew how to create a mess and stay in power while being at the origin of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Obama Administration’s strategy was nicknamed: “Managed Transition.” President Obama only began to use that term in the fall of 2015.<sup>134</sup> The juxtaposition of these two words can be seen as an oxymoron because a transition is a passage from one state to another which includes risks; all transitions do not go smoothly. That is why the Obama Administration used the term “managed” because they tried to oversee, handle, and manage the events that happened in Syria. A transition is all the more difficult when it is desired and supposed to happen elsewhere, under an entirely different regime. To create such a transition, President Bashar al-Assad had to be removed, may it be by diplomatic efforts and persuasion or by force. The two options which were considered the most by the Pentagon were to create a “‘no-fly zone’ over Syria and a ‘buffer zone’ (or safe area) inside Syria, along the border with Turkey.”<sup>135</sup> Both options happened to be the most popular ones among commentators and American allies. The latter option would have benefited the international community in that it would have permitted the Syrian opposition to be strong in numbers. The former option, however, was not flawless as seen with Iraq “for over a decade after

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

the first Gulf War [because] this did not ease concerns about Saddam 's effort to develop W[eapons of] M[ass] D[estruction]" and "Bosnia in the 1990s, [where] the NATO-enforced no-fly zone did not prevent ethnic cleansing on the ground."<sup>136</sup> In the 2010s, a no-fly zone over Libya would not have prevented Gaddafi's forces from attacking and chasing the so-called "traitors" of the authoritarian regime. One White House official compared the safe zone to a "tethered goat" that the United States would have to defend if they were attacked. One key component of the Syrian territory resided in the fact that the country possessed a lot of dangerous chemical weapons, including sarin gas, which President Bashar al-Assad used against his own people with no regard for human life and to test other world powers. In Washington, officials vividly remembered the looting that happened in Iraq's museums and government buildings after Saddam Hussein's fall. In Syria, if a power vacuum ensued, chemical weapons could be on the loose while rebels, terrorist organizations, and belligerent countries such as Iran could try and steal them. This would represent an even bigger threat because the Islamic Republic of Iran was already developing weapons of mass destruction such as the atomic bomb. Because of the War in Crimea in 2014, a lot of weapons and mines are still scattered there. The Cold War and its subsequent wars in the Balkans and in the Middle East have let dangerous arms and bombs that could explode anytime (such as those of World War Two) on the loose and accessible to anyone willing to go there. War zones in general are to be protected so that weapons do not become untraced or falsely traced, because otherwise they would end up in the hands of a third party. Thus, the United States did not want chemical weapons to be on the loose in a country where the police includes corrupt members and where terrorist organizations have influence similar to the powers that be, especially in the case of a power vacuum. From 2011 to 2014, "chemical weapons were seen as a higher priority for America's security interests."<sup>137</sup> To everyone's surprise, President al-Assad relinquished his chemical weapons arsenal thanks to a deal made with Russia. One could already guess that Russia and Syria, and more particularly Presidents Putin and al-Assad, were conniving. Russia held the much-dreaded right of vetoing in the United Nations which endangered the power of diplomacy to resolve the Syrian conflict. However, diplomacy unexpectedly turned out to be the solution to deal with the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal. Surprisingly enough, President al-Assad managed to forego his weapons after he had used some of them—including sarin gas—without suffering

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130-131.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

from the consequences of his deadly impulses and bloodthirst. It was certainly thanks to his biggest and most important ally, Russian President Vladimir Putin, that he stayed in power. On the one hand, Russia could not risk losing a powerful ally in the region, all the more so since Syria is a state that is geographically rather close to Europe. On the other hand, the United States was strongly interested in not making Russia angry by removing its ally, or puppet as some would say. In hindsight, it is all the more true because President Putin is a belligerent man with expansionist objectives.<sup>138</sup>

The other goal of the Obama Administration was to “contain and mitigate”<sup>139</sup> the dangers inherent to Syria. To do so, humanitarian support was a key component. America provided more than “\$ 4.5 billion in relief for those displaced inside Syria and the refugees flooding into neighboring countries.”<sup>140</sup> First, the United States wanted to strengthen countries around Syria, including their own partners and allies such as Jordan and Turkey. President Obama did not want Syrian President al-Assad to attack neighboring countries because they looked weak to the Syrian leader. The United States was ready to spend money to deter Syria from invading Jordan and Turkey, where Uncle Sam “stationed Patriot anti-missile systems” and “each required several hundred troops to operate and protect.”<sup>141</sup> America also sided with Jordan and American sky fighters trained with Jordanians. Between 2012 and 2015, the United States spent “\$ 3.6 billion in military assistance to Jordan, especially to help it address critical needs like intelligence and border security.”<sup>142</sup> By 2015, about 2,200 troops were stationed in Jordan, which was not a secret in itself but the Jordanians preferred it not to be brought to light lest it would draw al-Assad’s ire. Then, the United States would strengthen the opposition forces in Syria which went hand in hand with the Obama Administration’s fight for democracy. It turned out to be a challenging goal because the Syrian opposition was no homogenous entity. There was also “poor leadership, little organization, and bitter internal rivalries” in the Syrian opposition forces.<sup>143</sup> There was rising

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<sup>138</sup> Before the Red Line episode in Syria, President Putin was behind the scenes when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. He also decided that Russia had to claim what was hers: Crimea in February 2014 and the rest of Ukraine in February 2022. During those years, Russia also violated the airspaces of multiple of her neighboring countries and intimidated several countries, including in the Baltic states and in Scandinavia. President Putin also made powerful economic and military allies such as China and North Korea. The stakes were too high to risk triggering another world conflict that would be devastating because more and more countries have obtained nuclear weaponry.

<sup>139</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

concern about the presence of extremists in the opposition who could have been affiliated with al-Qaeda. It was almost impossible for the U.S. to be sure that their weapons would never end up in bad hands. Some rebels could be influenced or play fast and loose. Terrorist groups could pick up weapons from dead soldiers. It was a conundrum which explained why President Obama favored diplomacy and peaceful departures of American troops. By the summer of 2012, the Obama Administration was contemplating the idea of arming the Syrian opposition<sup>144</sup> only to brush aside that suggestion a few months later after careful consideration in the fall of 2012.<sup>145</sup> Finally, in 2013, after reports of chemical weapons being used, “the White House announced that the United States would provide direct military assistance to the rebels.”<sup>146</sup> Then in the spring of 2014, the United States decided “to equip and train the Syrian rebels against terrorist organizations, not the Assad regime.”<sup>147</sup> The turn of events compelled the United States to consider intervention whereas in 2012 officials were reluctant to intervene in a much more expensive manner. When considering the Syrian opposition, the Administration was divided about the time on which to train and arm them: training them to get to know them, trust them and then arm them, or trusting them to train them and arm them but without knowing them. Derek Chollet wrote that it was a “chicken/egg situation”<sup>148</sup> which can testify that although these discussions were taken seriously, one could sense humor in that the conundrum is similar to a dog biting its own tail. To relieve some of the pressure and build some chemistry in their team, humor and complicity must have been essential, as was the case between President Obama and Vice President Biden who nonetheless were distant at first. The same thing is true to a lesser extent for the relationship between President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in their team of rivals—or even dream team as some Democrats could say because of the prestige of their names, even back in the 2010s.<sup>149</sup>

Derek Chollet’s book is entitled *The Long Game* because President Obama cared more about long-lasting results than short ones.<sup>150</sup> President Obama was anxious about the fate of his country and that of the whole world. Outing President al-Assad (a despot toward his own people

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>149</sup> President Obama rooted for and publicly supported Democratic Candidate Hillary Clinton in the 2016 campaign against Republican Donald Trump, in which she lost despite winning the popular vote with around 3 million more votes.

<sup>150</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

whom the Syrian leader viewed as expendable) would have been quite a feat if the United States led the way without much of the help of other countries. If it had turned out that the United States prevented Bashar al-Assad from committing genocide with chemical weapons and sarin gas, thus saving the lives of entire cities' inhabitants, then it could have boosted President Obama's popularity in Syria, the Middle East, and the world in general. However, this probably would have angered President Putin's Russia. American involvement in Syria would have represented the fourth instance in just one decade of war in a Muslim country after Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.<sup>151</sup> It is also highly probable that the United States would have made enemies with the local populations. Syrian inhabitants would not have been privy to all the details because of propaganda and lack of information. Thus, people may not have perceived President al-Assad as a blood thirsty tyrant who was not that much of a leader nor particularly renowned for being a good president. Some there would not have looked favorably upon lengthy American occupation, and for good reason, because it would have meant that the Syrian government—or what was left of it—was not sturdy enough compared to the interim management of the United States. America is a far-off country with a different culture and some different values. A long military settlement would have implied heavy costs and casualties. Once more, President Obama would not have delivered on his promises. He would have further drawn comparisons with George W. Bush's way of dealing with Middle Eastern countries. However, the Obama Administration did not lie about why they had to intervene and intervened without putting soldiers in harm's way in other conflicts. The U.S. economy would have been further doomed and President Obama would have been held responsible for the deaths of U.S. soldiers in the service of their country (yet Barack Obama arguably would have saved many more Syrian lives). At that time, the Iraq war was over, yet American forces had to stay to train Iraqi troops so that they could protect their country themselves. President Obama agreed with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates who said in a speech in 2011 that anyone who supported sending a massive contingent of American forces back into the Middle East "should have his head examined."<sup>152</sup> As a matter of fact, the Obama Administration and high officials wanted President al-Assad not to be in power anymore, yet they did not want to wage an all-out war against Syria and provoke the ire of the Russian bear. That was the Syrian conundrum in those troubled times.

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

America knew all too well what it meant not to intervene as was the case in Rwanda in 1994 as well as in Srebrenica, Bosnia in July 1995 when “Bosnian Serb forces killed nearly 8,000 innocent Muslim civilians.”<sup>153</sup> Because of the genocide in Rwanda that was not prevented,<sup>154</sup> the United States tried to save face and intervened in Bosnia by “launching airstrikes and negotiations that led to the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords.”<sup>155</sup> The United States was successful at putting a close to a war in the Balkans, which spurred their leadership in the world, less than a decade after the end of the Cold War. Those events surely influenced the Bush Administration in their reflection about whether to invade Iraq or not, which they ended up doing under false pretenses. The Iraq war was a “never again”<sup>156</sup> moment which propelled young Barack Obama to stardom and later compelled President Obama to think things over, thus influencing him in the decisions about Egypt, Libya, and Syria. The new President learnt from the mistakes of his predecessors and understood even more that such massive operations engender risks, and require discipline, thought, truthfulness, as well as clear objectives.

More than 300,000 people were killed, many more were injured and a massive refugee crisis ensued with millions of Syrians who fled their homeland. The Islamic State<sup>157</sup> benefitted from this power vacuum because they faced less resistance than could have been. The Islamic State rose to prominence in the worst of times in that region. As far as the United States and the West were concerned, terrorist organizations had to be toppled, dismantled; and their members eradicated while President Bashar al-Assad had to be removed. This was the objective of the Obama Administration because Bashar al-Assad was the main person responsible for the chaotic state of Syria. It can be argued that Bashar al-Assad was the first domino to be toppled and that the actions he had taken against his own people led to a massive exodus which facilitated the spread of the Islamic State. The consequences of the Syrian war are quite mixed. On the one hand, Syria lost its arsenal of chemical weapons but did not lose its know-how in producing such weapons. On the other hand, the one person responsible for the butchery in Syria—Bashar al-Assad—has remained their President and still is nowadays (he has assumed the presidency for

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>154</sup> For instance, France and the United States were blamed for failing in their duties.

<sup>155</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>157</sup> The Islamic State is also known as Daesh, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), or ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, a region which englobes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine as well as some parts of Turkey, which are stopovers for terrorists in search of training).

more than 22 years since July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2000).<sup>158</sup> Moreover, hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives or were severely wounded, may it be physically or mentally speaking. Now that the threat of chemical weapons has been taken care of, a new world threat has emerged—or rather re-emerged—even though it had not disappeared entirely: that of terrorism with the fulgurant rise of the Islamic State. In hindsight, we now know all too well the impact that the terrorist organization of ISIS has had in the world, especially in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

We tend to only remember the terrorist attacks that happened in Europe such as the Île-de-France attacks of January 2015 which include the Charlie Hebdo shooting and the Hyper Cacher siege; the Thalys train attack of August 2015 when American tourists saved the day by limiting the damage and casualties that could have been inflicted; the Paris attacks on the notorious date of November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015 where more than one hundred people died; the Brussels bombings in March 2016 which occurred in an airport and at a metro station; the Nice truck attack on Bastille Day on the famous Promenade des Anglais in 2016; the Berlin truck attack a few months later at a Christmas market; the Manchester Arena bombing after a concert by Ariana Grande in May 2017; the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks in August 2017; the Strasbourg attack at a Christmas market in December 2017; the Reading stabbings in England in June 2020; the murder of a history teacher, Samuel Paty, who was beheaded after school because he had showed cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his pupils in a middle school a few days before in October 2020; and the murder of David Amess, a British Conservative Member of Parliament, at his permanency in October 2021.<sup>159</sup>

Of course, the list goes on and Russia and Turkey<sup>160</sup> were also severely hit, yet they did not receive as much media coverage in France. The same applies to the plots of imminent terrorist attacks which were prevented.

In order to conclude about the conflicts that the United States had to face in the Middle East, a colleague of Derek Chollet's, Philip Gordon, has very well summarized what the United States did or did not do: "In Iraq, the US intervened and occupied, and the result was a costly conflict whose consequences America will grapple for a generation. In Libya, the US intervened

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<sup>158</sup> Bashar al-Assad still is the President of Syria when this dissertation is being written, proof-read, and prepared to be defended, in the middle of 2023.

<sup>159</sup> Wikipedia. "Islamic Terrorism in Europe." No date. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_terrorism\\_in\\_Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_terrorism_in_Europe). [Accessed on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.]

<sup>160</sup> Some could argue that Russia and Turkey are Asian states because some parts of these two countries are really close to Asia and considered to be the gateway to Asia.

but did not occupy, and the result is chaotic instability. And in Syria, the US neither intervened nor occupied, and the result has been catastrophic for the Syrian people and the region.”<sup>161</sup> Instability bred further chaos and terrorist organizations rose to prominence. Terrorism is one of the many scourges of the twenty-first century. Although neither terrorism nor its origins—religious wars for instance—began at the turn of the century. The Global War on Terrorism, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State ensued in the Middle East and on other continents after the beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in late 2010.

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<sup>161</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

## The Death of Public Enemy Number One and the End of the War in Iraq

Osama bin Laden was the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks that hit the United States in 2001. The World Trade Center attacks changed the destiny of President Bush's presidency. There is even a before and after 9/11 in literature just like there was a period before and after the terrorist attacks in politics. The operating mode of these attacks was new and unprecedented on such a scale in only one day. The terrorists hijacked planes and used them as weapons of mass destruction to do as much damage and casualties as possible. When one goes to the United States nowadays, the direct consequences of the fateful events of 2001 still can be strongly felt.<sup>162</sup> In airports, agents are very careful and inquisitive so as not to let anybody enter the country.<sup>163</sup>

The attacks began very early that day. The first plane hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:45 a.m.<sup>164</sup> Then, the South Tower was struck at 9:03 a.m. and was the first one to fall at 10:05 a.m. The North Tower collapsed at 10:28 a.m., less than two hours after the first crash. Most people remember the 9/11 attacks as the ones which brought down the Twin Towers of the World Center, yet the terrorists used other planes to annihilate other targets. For instance, another major attack is that of the Pentagon in Virginia which occurred at 9:53 a.m. The building was partly demolished. The least remembered attack is the one which happened near Pittsburg in Pennsylvania where the hijacked plane crashed into a field at 10:40 a.m. thanks to the passengers who rebelled and managed to resist. These four attacks in three different places all occurred in the East of the United States, the entry to planes coming from Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Almost 3,000 people died that day, several other thousands were injured and many more suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic diseases, illnesses and lung cancers because of the amount of dust and pollution after the towers collapsed in New York City that day. Moreover, the cost to repair after the attacks has been enormous to partially restore America's greatness in the eyes of the world.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> In airports, security has been tightened and many inhabitants developed incurable diseases and cancers because of the smoke in New York City after the Twin Towers collapsed. It is often said that everyone remembers where he or she was when discovering the news of the terrorist attacks, as with President Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963.

<sup>163</sup> Discrimination was widespread in President Trump's populist discourse, which led him to issue an Executive Order known as the Muslim Travel Ban as though all Muslims were terrorists. It would be equal to saying that all Christians want to wage a holy war to have many more converts in the Middle East for example.

<sup>164</sup> ROBERT, Frédéric, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>165</sup> The void left by the towers is now known and commemorated as Ground Zero.

For ten long years, the mastermind of the terrorist attacks, Osama bin Laden, escaped justice and lived a hermit's life. When he lived in his compound in the Middle East, a mysterious person who was known as the walker or the Pacer by the high officials in the United States was revealed to be the world's most wanted man. He was the leader of the terrorist group called al-Qaeda. He was long thought to live in Pakistan which was a sort of haven for terrorists. High-ranking officials suspected that he was hiding near the Afghan border in Western Pakistan. Yet, it was not far away from the Indian border that Osama bin Laden resided.<sup>166</sup> Osama bin Laden and his relatives were living in "Abbottabad, a city 35 miles northeast of Islamabad, the Pakistani capital."<sup>167</sup> The White House even declared that Osama bin Laden had been living in "plain sight" because his compound was less than a mile away from a military academy of the Pakistani army. This explains why American officials quickly ticked off the list the option of working with Pakistani to capture and kill Osama bin Laden. It was suspicious that the inhabitants of such a house should have not been particularly worried by the local authorities although the army was nearby. The compound had high walls and barbed wires although it was located on a dirt road in an isolated place. It was obvious that important people lived there. If the United States managed to have suspicions in a decade, why would Pakistan leave alone people who feared for their security? Maybe because Osama bin Laden inspired respect, had allies and resources at his disposal, he was protected from afar since he lived in a predominantly Muslim country. Some may have seen him as a martyr who recruited other ones to try and spread the benefits, advantages, and values of Islam—while actually only terror was spread, resulting in discrimination towards Muslims. Moreover, the compound in Abbottabad was oddly cut off from the outside world and precautions were taken so as not to leave many traces.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, there was no phone line or internet access there. The United States Department of Defense released an image of Osama bin Laden watching television, far from the belief that he was living in a sort of cavern in mountains along with the Taliban.

Not all of the American high officials were in favor of intervening in a remote country to eliminate someone who was not totally confirmed to be Osama bin Laden. As Barack Obama once

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<sup>166</sup> On independence, India was partitioned and three separate countries were created in 1947: India, Pakistan (formerly West Pakistan), and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan).

<sup>167</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p.104.

The name of the capital itself, Islamabad, includes the name of the religion—Islam—which is one of the reasons why relations between Pakistan and India—a Hindu country (except for bordering Kashmir)—are tense.

<sup>168</sup> The name of the city Abbottabad includes the Christian term "abbot."

said in a speech, there were patriots who supported the Iraq war and patriots who did not. It was the same thing with this special operation. Some were aware of the risks but decided it was worth it such as the President himself and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Others were more reluctant and wanted to be sure that the Pacer was indeed Osama bin Laden and that the raid would not result in another failure after the 2010 Midterm Elections, and before the 2012 Presidential Elections in an era of utter polarization and gridlock. Those who were reluctant, including Vice President Joe Biden, had in mind past failures, how they had affected past presidencies, and America's exceptionalism as well as prestige abroad. The blunders that tarnished the first world power include the hostage crisis in Iran in 1980—before Reagan's Iran Contragate in 1986<sup>169</sup>—and “the ambushed effort to capture warlords in Somalia that resulted in the downing of Black Hawks helicopters and a deadly standoff in 1993.”<sup>170</sup> If President Obama had not given the order to have “Geronimo EKIA,” which means Enemy Killed in Action, while having this much intelligence about Osama bin Laden's possible whereabouts, then Republican hawks would have lashed out on him.<sup>171</sup> In President Obama's team of rivals, Hillary Clinton was in favor of the intervention while Vice President Joe Biden was reluctant. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates acknowledged: “I worked for a lot of these guys and this is one of the most courageous calls...that I think I've ever seen a president make.”<sup>172</sup> With hindsight, we take for granted the efforts made by Presidents Bush and Obama as well as the latter's decision to take the matter into his own hands by sending troops. It can be argued that Obama could have been a one-term U.S. President if Osama bin Laden was not sure to be dead or was alive. The same applies if a lot of innocent children were killed—or maybe worse as far as the American public opinion is concerned—if American Navy Seals were captured or killed. None of the above-mentioned possibilities happened. Nonetheless, Osama bin Laden was not the only one to be killed. Three other men and one woman were killed during the 40-minute raid, which Barack Obama confessed were the longest forty minutes of his life.<sup>173</sup> The special operation did not happen without a hitch for the group of Navy Seals. Their helicopter could not take off anymore so they destroyed it so as not to have their technology fall into the wrong hands. However, they managed to get out of the

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<sup>169</sup> The suffix -gate comes from President Nixon's own scandal, the Watergate

<sup>170</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>171</sup> Republican hawks are very often in favor of intervening whatever the circumstances.

<sup>172</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>173</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

compound safely because they had a backup helicopter, were heavily armed and trained, and were equipped with infrared glasses to see much better than their enemy, Osama bin Laden, who was taken by surprise. Another issue was that the Navy Seals forgot to bring a tape measure to verify if the height of the man corresponded to the estimation of that of Osama bin Laden. Thus, one Navy Seal lay down next to the best-known terrorist's corpse to have an idea of his height. Before the raid, intelligence analysts said that the probability that the Pacer was indeed Osama bin Laden was fifty-fifty. Then the probability that the picture of the corpse was Osama bin Laden's was 95%. Finally, they managed to take his DNA and compare it to their data to conclude that it was "a 99.9% match"<sup>174</sup> to almost entirely elicit doubt as to whether they had finally caught their prime target.

There was no blue America and red America for a while, there was the United States of America to cite Barack Obama's words.<sup>175</sup>

Some mocked Obama because his name was similar to bin Laden's first name, Osama. Moreover, Barack Obama's middle name, Hussein, did not help. A lot of Americans thought this Arab name was synonymous with and went in hand with Islam, radicalism and even the holy war. President Obama was thought to be a Muslim even though he was not. Once again, because he used to live in Indonesia, a country where a majority of believers are Muslims, this influenced what the American people thought and its "collective unconscious," to borrow a term of Carl Gustav Jung's.

The special operation was well documented in the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, meaning thirty minutes after midnight. The movie came out the following year, in 2012, which shows the hype and the effervescence around that operation which ended the manhunt in a symbolic way on a foreign land favorable to terrorists, fewer than ten years after the 9/11 attacks. It was important for Hollywood to produce a blockbuster after such a large-scale operation to ride the wave of the big item of news.

President Obama was lucky to have the opportunity to eliminate public enemy number one during his tenure. President George W. Bush oversaw the hunt of the persons responsible for the attacks for seven long years, and Osama bin Laden managed to stay concealed somewhere in the world. The timing of the successful mission could not have been better for Obama. Indeed, the

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

2010 Midterm Elections shellacking had already happened and when the 2012 Congressional Elections took place, the enthusiasm of the operation had already dissipated. Even with all the anxiety around this mission of utmost importance, President Obama and his team only enjoyed a brief enchanted parenthesis which closed the chapter begun almost ten years before. During the 2012 Presidential campaign, the incumbent President (Candidate Barack Obama) boasted: “Osama bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive,”<sup>176</sup> for on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009, the American government took control of GM and Chrysler to protect historic national companies to save face and induce patriotic fervor.<sup>177</sup> President Obama realized that the terrorist threat did not disappear whatsoever when ISIS emerged in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2014.<sup>178</sup> When discussing the United States during the Obama presidency, the killing of Osama bin Laden may be a recurring element for those who follow politics from afar. It is to be noted that Geronimo’s death—Osama bin Laden’s code name—following Renegade’s order—President Obama’s nickname—to eliminate the terrorist leader cannot be overturned by any future President nor anyone else.<sup>179</sup>



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This photograph was taken on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011 in the Situation Room during the raid that ended up eliminating Osama bin Laden whose code name was Geronimo. The Situation Room is one small basement room in the White House. It is especially small for such an emergency meeting.

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>177</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. xi.

<sup>178</sup> The terrorist threat still remains strong nowadays.

<sup>179</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>180</sup> White House. “President Obama Receives an Update in the Situation Room.” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/photo/2011/05/president-obama-receives-update-situation-room>. [Accessed on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.] © Pete Souza / White House.

The photographer was in a small corner of the room taking pictures without disturbing the others which may explain why it seems as though the onlooker was living this firsthand without the others noticing. Because of the size of the room, the more important officials were close to the screen and could sit. Among those seated are Vice President Joseph Biden; President Obama; Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (with the white shirt and the red tie). Among those standing are National Security Advisor Tom Donilon (with crossed arms and the blue shirt); Anthony Blinken, National Security Advisor to the Vice President (with a blue shirt, between the woman and the man with the blue tie and his suit; he is now President Biden's Secretary of State); and John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism (whose mouth is half opened and whose shirt is white) among others. This is one iconic picture of Barack Obama's presidency. This photograph encapsulates the tension and anxiousness that reigned during this high point of Barack Obama's presidency. We may assume that this photograph was taken after the helicopter crashed because of Hillary Clinton's face which is partly covered by her hand and also because of President Obama's focused look. Furthermore, Anthony Blinken tries to see what is happening because he is standing at the back of the room and cannot really witness what is underway. Almost all eyes are looking at the screen. The man who has a lot of military insignia showing on his jacket does not seem particularly fazed. Maybe he knew that the operation was only beginning, that there was no need to fret about the crash since they had prepared a backup helicopter in case things went wrong. Matters did not go for the worse, at least not for the United States and President Obama. In the Situation Room, the group of select officials was watching a live feed from an unmanned drone flying overhead. During his presidency, Obama had many targets eliminated thanks to Predator drones, and he paved the way for his successors to rely on this kind of equipment especially abroad.<sup>181</sup>

Because it was night in Pakistan (and around 4:30 p.m. Eastern Time in the White House), the quality of the video feed must not have been the best. It was especially because it was night in the Middle East that the Navy Seals attacked. In fact, they retaliated against America's most sought-after enemy ten years after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Osama bin Laden was killed by a bullet

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<sup>181</sup> For instance, on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, under Joe Biden—another Democratic President—it was announced that the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri had been killed in an airstrike in Kabul, Afghanistan thanks to a drone. Ayman al-Zawahiri had also been one of the masterminds behind the 9/11 attacks and had become al-Qaeda's leader after Osama bin Laden's death, eleven years before when he was also killed by the United States.

which blasted his skull above his left eye and “at least one more piercing his chest.”<sup>182</sup> The Navy SEALs were aware that if they managed to succeed in their mission, they would still have to be careful not to wage war against Islam and Muslims. Osama bin Laden’s corpse was washed and placed in a white sheet, the color associated with purity, “in keeping with Muslim tradition”<sup>183</sup> so as not to make further waves. The remains of former public enemy number one were thrown into the sea, in a weighted bag, never to be seen again. High officials thought about the procedure to be followed before the special operation was carried out. President Obama had certainly his say in the matter as Americans did not want to let Osama bin Laden’s tomb become a sacred haven for jihadists since he may have already been considered a martyr by some. If a sanctuary had been created, Obama’s image would have been tarnished, especially if ISIS members had claimed that place as theirs, and if the burial site had become a *passage obligé* and a prerequisite for religious fighters.

After the news spread out, Americans flowed into cities and in front of the White House, honked and crowds cheered and proudly shouted “U.S.A! U.S.A!” as the nation closed a chapter and brought what they thought was justice. The sheer happiness that day was somewhat similar to the wave of enthusiasm stirred when Barack Obama was elected. These are the two events when Barack Obama enjoyed maximum popularity. Some pictures taken that day speak for themselves: we can see many American people exultate. The joy experienced by some of the younger Americans—who were young on 9/11—is immense, and the need for communion is to be pinpointed. They rallied as though a historic election had taken place or if their national team had won a major title.

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<sup>182</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.



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This is one of the rare photographs where we can see a sign on which Barack Obama's name is written. A lot of quite young people are exulting with several American flags—star-spangled banners—in the background. These people are raising their hands and fingers which point toward the sky and the White House. Young men and women flowed into the cities alike. Perhaps more than Election Day, the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden brought Americans of all stripes, colors, and ideologies together and gave the illusion that a sense of unity had been attained. The White House was not only Barack Obama's house, it was also the symbol and the emblem of American power throughout the world. The people who appear in this photograph are for the most part spontaneous and are not posing for this particular photographer at this particular moment. There are two distinct groups in this picture: those who are facing the White House and those who are facing the photographer and are too far to see if someone is coming out of the White House. The photograph is made of the contrast of the darkness in the background, and the light in the foreground as well as in the very background with respectively the cheering crowd and the White House. The darkness could symbolize the dark days which followed the terrorist attacks while the light could be the symbol of the glory of the United States and its attempt to reconstruct itself thanks to the targeted assassination of Osama bin Laden.

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<sup>184</sup> CBS News. "Day in Pictures." May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/day-in-pictures-2-5-11/>. [Accessed on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022.] © Manuel Balce Cenata / Associated Press.

In stark contrast to the bliss outside, the President kept his composure in public. He had to be up to the function he embodied. Getting their hands on public enemy number one was quite a feat *per se*, but one ought not to forget that almost three thousand people died because of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 followed by many others because of diseases due to the pollution caused. President Obama even called his predecessor who was a Republican. It was a transpartisan attention which is not farfetched. President George W. Bush had been the one in office when the four attacks occurred in 2001. That day changed George W. Bush's presidency. The efforts he deployed bore fruit ten years later, two years and a half after Barack Obama was sworn in. George W. Bush was criticized for being in favor of torture and harsh interrogation techniques, which President Obama promised he would put an end to. The 44<sup>th</sup> President issued an Executive Order banning such interrogation techniques yet he could not close Guantánamo although he had promised to. Guantánamo is an infamous prison where harsh interrogation techniques were used, as in the jail of Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Former President George W. Bush was certainly the one who could best comprehend the difficulty of the task that had been ahead of President Obama. He was certainly prepared to take the same decision that President Obama took, that is to have Geronimo assassinated. President George W. Bush was more inclined to wage war indiscriminately, which he did in Iraq in 2003—after what had happened in the First Gulf War under the Reagan administration. President Obama called the Iraq war the archetype of the bad war, waged under false pretenses.

The operation which eliminated Osama bin Laden helped Barack Obama be reelected. However, it did not prevent further setbacks as was the case with the launching of the website HealthCare.gov and the Sandy Hook school shooting.

## Part Two: The 2012 Presidential Election and the Home Front

### Grief after a School Shooting

One month after he was reelected, Barack Obama experienced the worst day of his presidency.<sup>185</sup> A man entered a middle school with a semi-automatic rifle and killed twenty children of six and seven years old as well as six adults. That was—and still is—the most dramatic mass shooting of all time in a school.<sup>186</sup> The attack occurred on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut,<sup>187</sup> a few days before Christmas and New Year’s Eve. On the personal side, Barack Obama could empathize as a father of two young daughters. As President, he had to react and condemn such barbarous violence. His speechwriter, Jon Favreau, recalled how Barack Obama was unusually abnormal: “I had never seen him like that as long as I’ve known him.”<sup>188</sup> Jon Favreau also remembered how the President “was sitting at his desk and he was looking down at the statement and he was making some edits and he was barely looking up at us and his voice was the most somber and the most halted I had ever heard” and how “everything kind of weighted on him.”<sup>189</sup> As a parent, Barack Obama was devastated. However, he knew that he had to be firm to denounce such cruelty as well as demand more laws regulating the sale and purchase of weapons. One can say that President Obama had in mind how stoic and firm President W. Bush was when he had to deal with the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and then with the consequences of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans. The President addressed the media by himself, without the help of Joe Biden who confirmed that Barack Obama “was having real trouble.”<sup>190</sup> The American President reflected how the victims of the Sandy Hook shooting (especially the twenty children) “had their entire lives ahead of them” and should have had the right to enjoy “birthdays, graduations, weddings, kids of their own.”<sup>191</sup> Vice President Biden is also someone who is known for being compassionate. However, if the President and the Vice President had both been on the screen, it could have seemed very formal, and emotions could have seemed shallow and harder to share. President Obama appealed to *pathos* when he mentioned his

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<sup>185</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150. Recently, the mass shooting in a school in Uvalde, Texas shook the United States on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022 when 21 people were killed.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

wife Michelle Obama to mourn the loss of 26 people in an American school: “Our hearts are broken today.”<sup>192</sup> Barack Obama had been accused of being too cold and insensitive, unable to convey essential messages to the American people. When addressing Americans, he drew a parallel between the Obamas and their fellow citizens, by portraying his own family as many others when he announced: “This evening, Michelle, and I will do what I know every parent in America will do, which is hug our children a little tighter, and we’ll tell them that we love them and we’ll remind each other how deeply we love one another. But there are families in Connecticut that cannot do that tonight.”<sup>193</sup> After struggling to hide his emotions by keeping silent for many seconds, President Obama tried to use his influence to get Congressmen’s and public opinion’s approval to support stricter laws to prevent further slaughters. Despite being emotional, President Obama stayed clear-headed and savvy enough when he recognized that: “No single law, no set of laws, can eliminate evil from this world or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society.”<sup>194</sup> However, President Obama pulled the rug out from under the feet of his critics by using one of the main arguments of the defenders of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to affirm that: “that can’t be an excuse for inaction” and that Americans: “can’t accept events like this as routine.”<sup>195</sup>

Even though background checks are no routine in ammunition shops, President Obama surely built himself the positive image of a good man regardless of his political positions and beliefs. Nowadays, President Joe Biden—and his Vice President Kamala Harris—are continuing this trying fight so that mass killings become rarer. President Biden is much like Barack Obama in that he does not try to entirely repress his emotions, for he suffered the loss of several of his kins. On the contrary, President Trump—a Republican—repeatedly mocked minorities such as LGBT members, handicapped people, and prisoners of war. Another Republican President, George W. Bush, followed a very serious statement about the hunt of those responsible for the 9/11 attacks by saying: “Now, watch this drive” when he was playing golf.<sup>196</sup> Although he was clumsy and mocked for his bragging about his average grades at university, it can be argued that he was human about the suffering caused by the 9/11 attacks by making a pause in his speech before resuming what he

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150-151.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>196</sup> ALAN İŞİK, Arda. “Now watch this drive!” November 17th, 2015. <https://www.dailysabah.com/sports/2015/11/17/now-watch-this-drive>. [Accessed on May 14th, 2023.]

was doing in his free time. Indeed, President Bush's time in office was marked by the terrorist attacks.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Another President who communicated with the American people in a rather private sphere was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Indeed, he held "Fireside Chats" in which he addressed his fellow citizens after Wall Street's crash on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1929 (Black Tuesday) and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

## Chapter 3: The Implementation of Obama’s Signature Law, the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and Race Problems in the United States

### Part One: The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

#### From the Affordable Care Act to Obamacare: The Reform to be Repealed by Republicans

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PP&ACA) was signed into law on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010, a little more than one year after President Obama had entered office. Thus, the PP&ACA marked the first two years of his term. Historians study the first two years of Presidents quite a lot because these samples tend to be very meaningful. Indeed, presidents are elected (on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008 for Barack Obama), then are sworn in a few months later (on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009 for him) and tend to enjoy the peak of their popularity toward their people as well as a comfortable number of seats in both Houses of Congress (in the House of Representatives and in the Senate). For instance, President Obama’s first two years have been compared to those of Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Baines Johnson. This was no easy feat when thinking about the hype which engenders high expectations as well as the hatred that he had to deal with after his surprise ascendancy to power because he was not white. During his first two years in office up until the 2010 Midterm Elections, President Obama and the Democrats enjoyed a majority of 255 members<sup>198</sup> in the House of Representatives (even though they were 256<sup>199</sup> at the beginning of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress) as well as 57 members in the Senate (made up of 55 Democrats plus 2 Independents who caucused with them).<sup>200</sup> Thus, for most of the time in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Democrats did not have the 60-seat supermajority in the Senate which would have enabled them to supersede a Republican filibuster.

For instance, in his first two years, President Obama recorded 16 legislative successes out of 21, second only to President Johnson’s 17 victories out of 20.<sup>201</sup> From President Eisenhower to President George W. Bush, President Obama ranks second in terms of percentage with 76% behind—once again—President Johnson’s 85% of legislative wins in his first two years.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> MEYER, Alix, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> OWENS, John E. A “Post-Partisan” President in a Partisan Context. In THURBER, James A., *Obama in Office*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011, p. 116.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

President Obama and his administration were ambitious since they proposed 16 bills, which had been unprecedented since the 1960s and President Johnson. Yet, the Obama administration managed to accomplish much, in part because the Democrats had a unified government where they held the White House and majorities in both Houses of Congress.

Obamacare was one of President Obama's most successful pieces of legislation—if not *the* most—he managed to sign into law. He had promised during the 2008 Presidential Campaign that he would improve healthcare. Even passing a healthcare bill in one of the two Houses of Congress was no easy feat at all because Presidents Truman, Johnson, Nixon and Clinton had failed major overhauls of the American healthcare system before him.<sup>203</sup> Three of them were Democrats. However, President Nixon was not the only Republican who was interested in reforming the American healthcare system. Another rather famous politician managed to overhaul the healthcare system at the local level. It was Mitt Romney who did so in the state of Massachusetts. His overhaul program came to be known as Romneycare. The Obama Administration modeled its healthcare plan after Romneycare. The name Romneycare refers to healthcare. As for what came to be known as Obamacare, the term was first coined by Republicans to disparage President Obama when he planned to overhaul the healthcare system. The rebuke highlighted President Obama's perceived Liberal, Socialist, and Communist ideas although he was somewhat of a centrist. In more ways than one, he adopted Third Way positions which made him criticized by the right—as almost always—and by the left which claimed he was too much bent on compromising and not enough willing to bring about change. It was true that President Obama tried to compromise as much as he could as well as lay a hand to work in a bipartisan way, and even in a trans-partisan and post-partisan one.

However, even though votes and partisan polarization did not materialize the end of partisanship and gridlock, in a way he managed to embrace what came from the Republican side. First of all, as aforementioned, Obamacare was based on a local initiative, Romneycare. Mitt Romney, who was the Governor of Massachusetts, ran for President in 2012 and the incumbent President, Barack Obama won his second presidential bid. Then, President Obama embraced the term Obamacare which was supposed to be derogatory at first. Now, the appellation is widespread

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<sup>203</sup> CHAIT, Jonathan. *Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied his Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail*. New York, NY: Custom House, 2017, 240 p.

and commonly referred to as a way of talking about the overhaul of the American healthcare system.

Obamacare managed to get more than 20 million people into the healthcare market. Some went as far as saying that more than 30 million Americans<sup>204</sup> benefitted from the implementation of Obamacare, including the President himself. It is considerable when thinking that 30 million people represented about 10% of the American population *circa* 2010. All sources agree on stating that more than 20 million Americans were welcomed into the American healthcare system, which sometimes paradoxically excluded them because they were not healthy enough and thus too costly for the system that was supposed to heal. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was signed into law on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010. However, the beginning of online enrollment on HealthCare.gov only began and failed on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. It was the very first day of the website launching and the same one when the Federal Government shut down because Congress refused to pass legislation which would have lifted the debt ceiling.<sup>205</sup> The Obama Administration managed to raise the bar as Medicaid expansion and insurance subsidies under the PP&ACA went into effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, almost four years after Obamacare was signed into law, but only two months after the website crashed.

To compromise with the Congressional Republicans, President Obama and the Democrats had to let go of the public option. This mainly obscured Barack Obama's record because the public opinion mainly focused on the loss of the public option instead of the actual improvements that the law engendered. Obamacare was going to help save many lives and better many other ones. Nonetheless, people doubted that the law was going to better things much more, and even feared that Obamacare would be a step backward. Uninformed people feared that the new healthcare system would cost a lot (which it did, yet in the long run it happened to be beneficial) and benefit mainly others, the lazy; President Reagan called such people the "Cadillac queens" and the "Welfare queens."<sup>206</sup> They were seen as people reaping what others sowed. Some could earn enough money to feed their families while others struggled to make both ends meet by working. Inequalities were further exacerbated during Obama's Presidency and are likely to worsen.

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<sup>204</sup>FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 96.; VERGNIOLE DE CHANTAL, François (ed.). *Obama's Fractured Legacy: The Politics and Policies of an Embattled Presidency*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, series 'New Perspectives on the American Presidency,' 2020, p.57.; *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>205</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>206</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

Furthermore, the Obama Administration struggled and failed to communicate the beneficial impacts of the law's implementation. Thus, many people who benefitted from expansions in the American healthcare system voted for Republican candidates who clearly wanted to imperil the quality of the lives of those who were integrated into these expansions. Many Republicans, including 45<sup>th</sup> President Trump, wanted to repeal the law, which would have been a step backward for millions of Americans.

## Part Two: The Invasion of Crimea by Russia on the International Scene

### Ukraine and Russia's Common Past and the Aftermaths of the Soviet Union's Collapse

Barack Obama thoroughly studied the relations between Russia and Ukraine to best know the origins of the conflict between them as well as to analyze how both countries could react and escalate matters from 2014 onwards. Moreover, before the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, President Obama had witnessed Vladimir Putin and Russia's deeds and had read notes about Russia to understand the threat its government pose. Nowadays, the former American President follows the news of what is happening between Russia and Ukraine and reacts to these pieces of information. Moreover, he has been banned from entering Russian soil.<sup>207</sup> His former Vice President, Joe Biden, continues to face the consequences of the 2014 invasion and is taking less lukewarm decisions than his predecessors toward Russia and in favor of Ukraine.

In the 2014 dictionary *Le Robert Illustré*, Russia is described as a country in which 79.8% of its inhabitants are Russian and 2% are Ukrainian—who thus represented the second minority behind the Tatars who accounted for 3.8%. Ukraine is depicted as comprising 78% of Ukrainians, and 17% of Russians (and a small percentage of Tatars in Crimea).

Ukraine and Russia have had a complicated relationship and a tense common background, to say the least. If people outside of the USSR know that Ukraine and Russia were part of the same union, they would say that Ukraine was part of Russia. This would especially be true for young people who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “Born Free Generation,” which wants Ukraine to join Europe.<sup>208</sup> Ukraine used to be the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (after gaining independence in 1918 thanks to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, becoming the Ukrainian SSR in 1921, and being “subsumed into the Soviet Union” in 1922).<sup>209</sup> On the other hand, Russia used to be the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the head of the USSR. However, historians

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<sup>207</sup> Reuters. "Obama among 500 banned from Russia in retaliation for US sanctions." May 19th, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/19/obama-banned-russia-us-sanctions-ukraine>. [Accessed on May 21st, 2023.]

<sup>208</sup> CONANT, Eve. “Russia and Ukraine: the tangled history that connects—and divides—they.” February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/russia-and-ukraine-the-tangled-history-that-connects-and-divides-them>. [Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>209</sup> MPOKE BIGG, Matthew. “A history of the tensions between Ukraine and Russia.” March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/26/world/europe/ukraine-russia-tensions-timeline.html/>. [Accessed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

recall that Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, “is sometimes referred to as ‘the mother of Russian cities,’”<sup>210</sup> for Kyiv was the capital of “the first Slavic state, Kyivan Rus” (which is also spelled Kievan) in the last millennium.<sup>211</sup> The “medieval Kyivan Rus commonwealth” is where Eastern Slavs like Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians originate from,<sup>212</sup> “the eastern Slavs’ first great civilization,” as historian Anna Reid points out, and was at the time the “largest kingdom in Europe.” Then, Russia referred to Ukraine as “Little Russia”<sup>213</sup> while Belarus was dubbed “White Russia.”<sup>214</sup> Russia has tried to dismiss Ukraine as being the chicken that comes from the Russian egg by eliminating Ukrainian identity. During the years of Russification, Ukrainians “were pressured to convert to the Russian Orthodox faith,”<sup>215</sup> and in 1863, the “minister of internal affairs issued a decree [...] banning publication and instruction in the Ukrainian language that remained in force until 1905”<sup>216</sup> while near the end of his reign, Tsar Alexander II signed the *Ems Act* in 1876 “which banned *all* publishing in the Ukrainian language.”<sup>217</sup> However, those 42 years of censorship were not enough to eradicate the Ukrainian language. To be quicker and more efficient, Joseph Stalin “orchestrated a famine that resulted in the starvation and death” of millions of Ukrainians in 1932-1933 and then “imported large numbers of Russians and other Soviet citizens—many with no ability to speak Ukrainian and with few ties to the region—to help repopulate the east.”<sup>218</sup> Joseph Stalin also initiated what became known as the Great Purge by getting rid of “perceived enemies from throughout the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, either executing them outright or shipping them off to Gulag labor camps.”<sup>219</sup> The terror or the great famine of the Holodomor (which means

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<sup>210</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan. “Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia.” October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>. [Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>211</sup> CONANT, Eve, *op. cit.*

<sup>212</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey. “Russia’s War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict.” April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>. [Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

<sup>213</sup> History. “Ukraine Has Seen Centuries of Conflict.” October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.history.com/news/ukraine-timeline-invasions>. [Accessed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>214</sup> HOLROYD, Matthew. “Belarus or “White Russia”? How the country’s name is dividing Europe.” August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/21/belarus-or-white-russia-how-the-country-s-name-is-dividing-europe>. [Accessed on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>215</sup> CONANT, Eve, *op. cit.*

<sup>216</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>217</sup> YEKELCHYK, Serhy. “Russia-Ukraine crisis: 9 milestone moments in history that explain today’s invasion.” February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/general-history/russia-invade-ukraine-history-relationship-cremea-why-conflict-facts/>. [Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>218</sup> CONANT, Eve, *op. cit.*

<sup>219</sup> History, *op. cit.*

“murder through starvation” or “murder by hunger”<sup>220</sup> and is written “голодомор” in Ukrainian) killed around 4 million Ukrainian peasants who were supposed to be the Russians’ “younger brother[s]”<sup>221</sup> through Stalin’s policy of collectivization.<sup>222</sup> This taboo period in Ukrainian history has increasingly been recognized as a genocide throughout the world but the Russian Federation refuses to acknowledge it as such. Thus, even though Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 (which was anecdotal at the time because Crimea stayed in the USSR) to shore up the “brotherly ties between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples”<sup>223</sup> and to prove the relationship of “eternal friendship”<sup>224</sup> both peoples shared. Despite all of these efforts, the Ukrainian people chose to vote in favor of independence via a referendum which was approved by “92.3 percent of voters; even in Russian-speaking regions of eastern Ukraine, large majorities support[ing] independence” in 1991.<sup>225</sup> The Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster in 1986 “is often blamed for hastening the Soviet Union’s demise”<sup>226</sup> because the Soviet authorities tried to cover up the accident by underplaying the spread of radioactive particles. This is not unlike the secret operation that had former Russian agent Alexander Litvinenko poisoned by polonium 210 in London in 2006. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989, Ukraine greatly participated in dealing the finishing blow to the USSR in 1991, since Ukraine was the second biggest, most populous, and most important only to Russia, out of the 15 Soviet republics.<sup>227</sup> In 1994, after negotiations with the United States and Russia, Ukraine forfeited its nuclear arsenal— under the Budapest Memorandum along with Belarus and Kazakhstan<sup>228</sup>—in exchange for the Russian bear to respect “existing borders.” The agreement brought plenty of American aid to Ukraine.<sup>229</sup> The United States wanted Russia to be the only former Soviet Socialist Republic to retain nuclear weapons while Russia desired to be the

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<sup>220</sup> GESSEN, Keith. “Was it inevitable? A short story of Russia’s war on Ukraine.” March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/was-it-inevitable-a-short-history-of-russias-war-on-ukraine>.

[Accessed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>221</sup> YEKELCHYK, Serhy, *op. cit.*

<sup>222</sup> MPOKE BIGG, Matthew, *op. cit.*

<sup>223</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

<sup>224</sup> History, *op. cit.*

<sup>225</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>226</sup> History, *op. cit.*

<sup>227</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

<sup>228</sup> BORGER, Julian. “Putin offers Ukraine olive branches delivered by Russian tanks.” March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/04/putin-ukraine-olive-branches-russian-tanks/>. [Accessed on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>229</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

undisputed local military power and a hegemon equal to the United States. Ukraine had a massive number of nuclear warheads: the country “had more nuclear warheads than China, the UK and France combined, making it the third-largest nuclear power in the world.”<sup>230</sup>

Before Nikita Khrushchev gave away Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 to make up for Joseph Stalin’s misdeeds (to say the least), Crimea was Ukrainian. Indeed, “Russian Czarina Catherine the Great annexe[d] the Crimean Peninsula and secure[d] access to the strategically important Black Sea” in 1783 (before French Emperor Napoleon invaded Ukraine in 1812) as part of the young Russian Empire which appeared in 1708.<sup>231</sup> However, the first Russian leader to claim a part of today’s Ukraine was Ivan III, the first tsar, in 1476. In the last years of the USSR, Russian speakers were more numerous “in most of Ukraine’s eastern oblasts” whereas, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ukrainian speakers outnumbered Russian speakers “except in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk” (the last two forming the region known as Donbas, those regions being next to Russia and the sea of Azov, just like the Crimean Peninsula).<sup>232</sup> It is no surprise that Russian leader Vladimir Putin chose to invade and annex both the regions of the Crimean Peninsula and then of the Donbas in 2014 because he did not accept that those regions were not part of Russia.

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<sup>230</sup> Sky History. “RUSSIA'S 2014 INVASION OF CRIMEA - A SHORT HISTORY.” No date. <https://www.history.co.uk/articles/putin-s-gamble-russia-s-2014-invasion-of-crimea>. [Accessed on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>231</sup> History, *op. cit.*

<sup>232</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

## The Orange Revolution and the 2014 Conflict

More than midway between the end of the USSR and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, several events occurred and led to Russia resorting to force. Vladimir Putin became President of the Russian Federation and the Ukrainian language became the most used in Ukraine. In 2004, Ukrainians flocked to Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Майдан Незалежності in Ukrainian, which means Independence Square) to show their discontent vis-à-vis the fraudulent election, and their gathering came to be known as the Orange Revolution (after the Revolution on Granite on the same square in October 1990).<sup>233</sup> Incidentally, Georgia experienced its Rose Revolution in 2003 while Kyrgyzstan underwent the Tulip Revolution in 2005.<sup>234</sup> Ukrainians had to vote again and the result of the election did change as “pro-western candidate Viktor Yushchenko, who survived a near-fatal poisoning attempt during the campaign, defeat[ed] pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich.”<sup>235</sup> However, President Yushchenko both “struggled with infighting”<sup>236</sup> and popular discontent with the Orange government and Viktor Yanukovich did come back and became President in 2010.<sup>237</sup> At the end of 2013, President Yanukovich was in a delicate situation for he was “acting under pressure from his supporters in Moscow.” They did not want him to make a deal with the European Union so as not to better the Ukrainian economy at the expense of Russia; the Kremlin wanted Ukraine to “join the not-yet-formed EAEU,” the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>238</sup> Many Ukrainians were not happy with their President opposing the deal with the EU. Ukrainians did not want to provoke the ire of Moscow even though they were suffering from a difficult transition to capitalism and democracy<sup>239</sup> as well as to a market economy<sup>240</sup>. This partly explains why many Ukrainians still desired the sort of stability they enjoyed under the USSR. Yet, the Ukrainians rebelled all over the country and sparked the Euromaidan protests to better their lot. Russia ignited anti-Euromaidan and secessionist movements which led to armed fights.<sup>241</sup> In

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<sup>233</sup> Maidan Museum. “The revolution on granite.” No date. <https://www.maidanmuseum.org/en/node/361>. [Accessed on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>234</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

<sup>235</sup> History, *op. cit.*

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> CONANT, Eve, *op. cit.*

<sup>240</sup> MPOKE BIGG, Matthew, *op. cit.*

<sup>241</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

2014, the Euromaidan demonstrations bore fruits since they obtained President Yanukovich's departure as he fled to Russia, which comforted protestors that he was a corrupt puppet of the Russian government.<sup>242</sup> Indeed, Viktor Yanukovich accepted a "\$15 billion bailout from Moscow" to "revive economic ties" with Russia; President Putin even went as far as promising President Yanukovich "to buy \$15 billion of Ukrainian debt and to slash by a third the price of Russian gas supplies to Ukraine" which Ukraine partly received on December 24<sup>th</sup> with the "first \$3 billion tranche of Russian bailout" (a symbol of Russia's will to buy and conquer the West on Christmas that Russians celebrate on January 7<sup>th</sup>) and then with another \$2 billion on February 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>243</sup> The number of demonstrators peaked on December 8<sup>th</sup> when 800,000 rallied in Kyiv and toppled a statue of Lenin. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, President Yanukovich signed laws which banned anti-government protests and soon people were killed in demonstrations. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, Russia invaded Crimea, which supported President Yanukovich.<sup>244</sup> On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Verkhovna Rada—the Ukrainian Parliament—voted to remove President Yanukovich from office and he was indicted for "mass murder" because of the effect of his laws. However, he was on the run and he claimed that he had health problems. The "nationalist candidate and chocolate billionaire" Petro Poroshenko (who owns the brand Roshen, whose name is written in the Latin alphabet, not in Cyrillic) succeeded the Russia-backed president and signed the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014 which went into effect in 2017, the same year President Obama left office.<sup>245</sup> In the meantime—while sheltering Viktor Yanukovich—Russia mobilized 150,000 troops and "little green men" without insignia who were armed, took control of the Crimean Parliament and raised the Russian flag.<sup>246</sup> Armed men fighting for the same interests also seized two strategic airports in the Peninsula on February 28<sup>th</sup>. There was no doubt at this point that it was the United States and Ukraine's historical rival that was at the head of those operations. Notably, a plane flying over Eastern Ukraine was shot down on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and none of the 298 people on board survived.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> History, *op. cit.*

<sup>243</sup> Reuters Staff. "Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea." March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline-idUSBREA270PO20140308>. [Accessed on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>244</sup> Sky History, *op. cit.*

<sup>245</sup> GESSEN, Keith, *op. cit.*

<sup>246</sup> Reuters Staff, *op. cit.*

<sup>247</sup> LEWIS, Robert. "Malaysia Airlines flight 17." September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Malaysia-Airlines-flight-17>. [Accessed on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

Even though it was the second crash in 2014 involving Malaysia Airlines (after flight 370 disappeared on March 8<sup>th</sup>), Russia took no chance by vetoing a resolution of the United Nations that would have created a tribunal to convict those who were accountable for mass murder. And indeed, a court found three Russian men (including one former FSB agent) and one Ukrainian man, fighting for Russian interests, guilty in November 2022. After claiming strategical and symbolical premises, Vladimir Putin won “parliamentary approval to invade Ukraine”<sup>248</sup> on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. The reaction from the West did not wait long as the European Union pledged 11 billion euros in aid to Ukraine, but the United States did not participate in giving this sum of money because President Obama thought Europe had more stakes in trying to curtail the Russian Federation on European soil. The very same day, John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, denounced Russia’s “incredible act of aggression.”<sup>249</sup> On March 6<sup>th</sup>, the Crimean Parliament voted to join Russia and set a referendum on March 16<sup>th</sup>. President Obama—who was a former constitutional law teacher—warned against the referendum and its result. Indeed, conditions were not met to constitute a perennial situation since the referendum violated international law and thus would not be recognized either way, especially if the result of it was in favor of adding Crimea to the Russian Federation. President Obama wanted more sanctions against the Russian state and on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014—just like French President Macron did after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022—he spoke to President Putin for hours on the phone and the latter said they were “still far apart.”<sup>250</sup> On March 16<sup>th</sup>, the results of the controversial referendum were made known with a turnout of 83%, around 95.5%<sup>251</sup> to 97% of whom voted in favor of Crimea joining Russia anew following the two options on the ballot.<sup>252</sup> This was enough for President Putin who claimed he would respect the democratic choice of the people. However, many people boycotted that referendum and others were intimidated to vote where the only options were to join the Russian Federation in one way or another: either as a Federal Subject (just like when the USSR still existed) or as part of Russia by

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<sup>248</sup> Reuters Staff. “Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea.” March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline-idUSBREA270PO20140308>. [Accessed on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>249</sup> The Week Staff. “A timeline of Crimea’s annexation.” March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.theweek.co.uk/news/world-news/russia/956112/a-timeline-of-crimeas-annexation>. [Accessed on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>250</sup> Reuters Staff, *op. cit.*

<sup>251</sup> Sky History. “RUSSIA'S 2014 INVASION OF CRIMEA - A SHORT HISTORY.” No date. <https://www.history.co.uk/articles/putin-s-gamble-russia-s-2014-invasion-of-crimea>. [Accessed on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>252</sup> The Week Staff, *op. cit.*

restoring the 1992 Crimean Constitution.<sup>253</sup> The United States immediately reacted via Jay Carney, the White House Press Secretary at the time who stated: “We reject the ‘referendum’ that took place today in the Crimean region of Ukraine.”<sup>254</sup> On March 17<sup>th</sup>, the Crimean Parliament published its Declaration of Independence. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, Vladimir Putin signed the Treaty of Accession with Crimean officials. Even though the international community did not recognize Crimea as being part of Russia, the currency that was in circulation from March 24<sup>th</sup> onwards was the rouble (also spelled as “ruble”)—which did not benefit those who had savings, salaries, and pensions—and Crimea changed time zones on March 30<sup>th</sup> by skipping forward two hours to join Moscow’s time zone. Vladimir Putin, who had opposed Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, probed the possibility of accepting it if the West “accepted Crimean independence or annexation by Russia.”<sup>255</sup> On April 11<sup>th</sup>, the members of the Crimean Parliament adopted a Kremlin-backed Constitution which stated that there would be a period of transition until the beginning of 2015, when Crimea would be fully Russian. To limit the number of casualties—as well as to try and resolve the conflict in Luhansk and Donetsk—Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany brokered the Minsk Agreements on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, and February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015<sup>256</sup> which many viewed as ambiguous.<sup>257</sup> Indeed, the Minsk Protocol of 2015 did not enter into force because certain conditions were—and still are—considered to be unacceptable either to Ukraine or to Russia.<sup>258</sup> The countries failed in their duties and it is mindboggling that the Minsk Accords did not materialize on the ground as the fighting “between Russian-supported separatists and Ukrainian government forces has continued in the Donbas for the last eight years” even though the armistice “called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of all foreign armed groups and constitutional reform recognising the special status of Donetsk and Luhansk.”<sup>259</sup> President Obama let European powers handle the talks and negotiations but stated that the United States supported the ceasefire

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<sup>253</sup> Sky History, *op. cit.*

<sup>254</sup> The Week Staff, *op. cit.*

<sup>255</sup> BORGER, Julian. “Putin offers Ukraine olive branches delivered by Russian tanks.” March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/04/putin-ukraine-olive-branches-russian-tanks/>. [Accessed on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> MPOKE BIGG, Matthew, *op. cit.*

<sup>258</sup> YEKELCHYK, Serhy, *op. cit.*

<sup>259</sup> WALKER, Nigel. “Ukraine crisis: A timeline (2014 - present).” April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9476/>. [Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

process.<sup>260</sup> President Putin did not respect his end of the bargain because he set his sights high and wanted Crimea, the Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk), as well as the rest of Ukraine—if not more—as he further exemplified in 2022 and in 2023. Ukrainian Presidents Poroshenko and Zelensky did not make “a serious effort to implement the provisions of the February 2015 Minsk II ceasefire agreement requiring the Ukrainian legislature (Verkhovna Rada) to adopt a ‘law on special status’ for the occupied regions and to implement a constitutional provision on decentralization.”<sup>261</sup> “Amnesty was also given to the pro-Russia separatists involved in the fighting” but President Putin did not withdraw heavy weapons nor did he let Ukraine freely control its border with Russia; and on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022—one month to the day after the celebration of Ukrainian Unity Day<sup>262</sup> and two days before Russia invaded Ukraine—he made a point of clarifying that the Minsk Accords “no longer” existed after he recognized the Independence of Luhansk and Donetsk.<sup>263</sup>

After the Revolution of Dignity (another appellation for the Maidan or Ukrainian Revolution) during which about a hundred perished in February 2014, the fights in the Donbas continued “until the fall of 2015, with renewed escalation in 2017 and early 2020”: roughly 1.5 million persons were displaced while more than 14,000 people (soldiers and civilians) perished.<sup>264</sup> The war in the Donbas is the “bloodiest conflict in Europe since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.”<sup>265</sup> Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States partly boycotted the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics—for instance, the United States refused to send a presidential delegation—but all three countries sent teams nevertheless.<sup>266</sup> On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the Group of Eight (made of the G8 members) became the G7 after Russia was removed from the G8 and suspended “from its ranks indefinitely”<sup>267</sup> following the cancellation of the G8

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<sup>260</sup> HADDAD, Benjamin., and POLYAKOVA, Alina. “Don’t Rehabilitate Obama on Russia.” February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/02/28/dont-rehabilitate-obama-russia/>. [Accessed on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>261</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>262</sup> Embassy of Ukraine to Arab Republic of Egypt. “January 22 - Ukrainian Unity Day (Den' Sobornosti).” January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017. <https://egypt.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/53901-22-sichnya-deny-sobornosti-ukrajini>. [Accessed on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>263</sup> The Week Staff, *op. cit.*

<sup>264</sup> YEKELCHYK, Serhy, *op. cit.*

<sup>265</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

<sup>266</sup> Sky History, *op. cit.*

<sup>267</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

Summit that was to be held in the same city of Sochi in June 2014.<sup>268</sup> 2014 was a turning point in asserting Ukrainian civic identity in response to President Putin’s annexation of Crimea and his March 2014 Speech in front of the Russian Parliament (the Duma) where he claimed that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people, a single whole”<sup>269</sup> yet he had said in 2008 that Ukraine “is not even a country.”<sup>270</sup> An unprecedented impetus to make Ukraine part of the European Union and NATO took form even if it did not materialize into membership yet. Ukraine was a Soviet satellite closer to Russia than the Baltic countries were, which are formed of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and which all became members of the EU and NATO in 2004 while only Estonia was part of the USSR. For instance, Ukrainian support for NATO membership improved from 28% (less than one third) when President Yanukovitch was still in power in 2012 to 69% (more than two-thirds) in June 2017<sup>271</sup> and Ukrainian support for EU membership was about 68% in early 2022.<sup>272</sup> On the other side, Russia felt emboldened when seeing that Crimea had been annexed rather easily. The Kremlin was once more convinced that Ukraine was not a real state but an artificial and shallow construction. Thus, Russia tried to extend its influence in Ukraine but failed in “the Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk), Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.”<sup>273</sup> Nowadays, Ukrainian people even begin to reject the Russian language little by little and practice their own—even in the East and South—as “more than two-thirds of Ukrainian citizens claim Ukrainian as a native language” and are bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian despite past Russian attempts to eradicate Ukrainian.<sup>274</sup> As Ukraine tried to recover the “Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic”<sup>275</sup> (DNR and LNR), Russia invaded the rest of the Ukrainian territory in August 2014.<sup>276</sup> This resulted in further consolidation of the Ukrainian national and patriotic feeling where the people and the government made their contribution. For example, the Ukrainian people used the Ukrainian

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<sup>268</sup> Sky History, *op. cit.*

<sup>269</sup> CONANT, Eve, *op. cit.*

<sup>270</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>271</sup> POLITYUK, Pavel, and ZINETS, Natalia. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-nato-idUSKBN19V12V>. “Pledging reforms by 2020, Ukraine seeks route into NATO.” July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017. [Accessed on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>272</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> MPOKE BIGG, Matthew, *op. cit.*

<sup>276</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

language to denounce Russian aggression while President Poroshenko signed a language law in 2019 (five days before leaving office) which aimed at fulfilling the promise of further “‘Ukrainify[ing]’ education, media, and administration.”<sup>277</sup> Around 61% of Ukrainians favored measures protecting the Ukrainian language; around the same number of respondents (60.1%) asserted that they wanted to see Ukraine (whose name can be translated by “borderland” or “on the edge”<sup>278</sup>) become a monolingual country while the south and east parts of Ukraine (60.7 and 60.5%, respectively) were in favor of bilingualism in Ukrainian and Russian.<sup>279</sup> This shows that stark divides still exist “between western[, as well as southern] and eastern Ukraine—starker even than the divides between blue and red states in the United States” according to Jeffrey Mankoff, who holds a Ph.D. in Diplomatic History from Yale.<sup>280</sup> Ukrainianization was “not considered a top priority among Ukrainian voters” back in 2019 but no doubt that more and more people are accepting this symbolic policy in the wake of the Russian invasion and violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.<sup>281</sup>

Ukrainians changed their minds and so did Vladimir Putin after the end of the Cold War. At first, he was an FSB agent in Dresden in Germany, then the leader of this agency. Following this, he became the right-hand man of the mayor of Saint Petersburg (the new name of Leningrad, where Putin was born), Prime Minister, and finally President. It would seem hard to believe nowadays that after he became Prime Minister in 1999, he “flirted with the idea of joining NATO but eventually decided to focus on reasserting Russia’s standing within the world.”<sup>282</sup> Even American President Bill Clinton noticed it in June 2000, when he praised the newly elected President as capable of “creating a strong and prosperous Russia.”<sup>283</sup> What did not change is Vladimir Putin’s handling of dissenters as former President Obama recalled in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: “He was always ruthless. You witness what he did in Chechnya;

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> History, *op. cit.*

<sup>279</sup> KUDRIAVTSEVA, Natalia. “Ukraine’s Language Law: Whose Rights Are Protected?” July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraines-language-law-whose-rights-are-protected>. [Accessed on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>280</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>281</sup> KUDRIAVTSEVA, Natalia, *op. cit.*

<sup>282</sup> Sky History, *op. cit.*

<sup>283</sup> CNN. “Putin’s first stint in the Kremlin came in 1996, when Sobchak lost power.” No date. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/profiles/putin/putin.bio.html>. [Accessed on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

he had no qualms about crushing those who he considers a threat. That’s not new.”<sup>284</sup> Indeed, early on, two days before he was appointed Prime Minister in August 1999, Vladimir Putin sent troops into Chechnya—a part of Russia where there are many Muslims—at the beginning of the second Chechen War (2000-2009) even though it was Boris Yeltsin who was acting as President).<sup>285</sup> Vladimir Putin was also the mastermind when Russia invaded the two regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia of Georgia in August 2008 even if Dmitry Medvedev was acting as President.<sup>286</sup> President Putin was also responsible for the cyber-attack against Estonia in 2007, three years after the Baltic country had joined NATO and the European Union. President Putin was energized and transcended by the military victories in Chechnya, Georgia (which Russia won in only five days after NATO countries had promised in April 2008 in Bucharest, Romania that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become NATO members), Crimea, and Syria. Those military victories led Vladimir Putin to have realistic views on Transnistria and the Donbas (made up of Luhansk and Donetsk). Located between Moldova and Ukraine, Transnistria is considered part of Russia but Mother Russia has not recognized its independence yet, in the hope of claiming Moldova as a whole eventually. In June 2022, Moldova was granted European Union candidate status along with Ukraine, and Russia’s answer did not take long as “Russian Major General Rustam Minnekaev even said publicly that Transnistria was one of the targets of Moscow’s ‘special military operation.’”<sup>287</sup> Former satellites of Russia experienced bloody conflicts such as the one between Azerbaijan and Armenia (which was supposed to have stopped in 2020) as well as that between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (even though both countries belong to “the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization.”<sup>288</sup>) All of this worried former members of the Obama Administration such as Ben Rhodes (President Obama’s foreign policy adviser) who claimed that the Capitol storming on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (in 2014 and 2022) “most clearly manifest the dangers to democracy in the world today.”<sup>289</sup> Barack Obama himself

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<sup>284</sup> MERICA, Dan. “Obama: Ukraine war is a reminder of US complacency, taking democracy and ‘rule of law’ for granted.” April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/06/politics/barack-obama-putin-russia-ukraine-war/index.html>. [Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>285</sup> CNN, *op. cit.*

<sup>286</sup> GESSEN, Keith, *op. cit.*

<sup>287</sup> SOLOVYOV, Vladimir. “Ukraine War Risks Repercussions for Transnistria.” September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87986>. [Accessed on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> STEIN, Sam, and TANI, Max. “Obama to deliver warning of democracy’s peril against twin backdrops: Jan. 6 and Ukraine.” June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/09/obama-copenhagen-russia-climate-00038265>. [Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

kept his distance from President Trump and discussed President Putin and Ukraine in multiple interviews after the end of his mandate. It was months after the invasion of the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 that President Putin gathered forces around the border with Ukraine.<sup>290</sup>

Full-scale sanctions were not deployed against President Putin after Russian agents Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun administered polonium 210 to former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 which poisoned him and proved fatal.<sup>291</sup> Nor were sanctions put into action after the war against Georgia (which is a foreign country as opposed to the Russian region of Chechnya). World powers underplayed Russia's actions in that Crimea and the Donbas housed many ethnic Russians and the Russian Federation played its irredentist card. However, this does not constitute an excuse because the Soviet Union was very large. Thus, after the collapse of the USSR, borders had to be respected as Russia promised to when signing the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which made Ukraine weaker against Russian nuclear threats—for Ukraine forfeited its nuclear arsenal (*cf.* p. 73). However, President Putin denied the legitimacy of any Ukrainian government: “We didn't sign any documents with this government.”<sup>292</sup> It was hard for the United States and European nations to agree on how to react against Russia because the United States did not depend as much as Europe on Russia's exportations of gas.<sup>293</sup> President Obama also displayed paternalism toward Ukraine and the Ukrainian government. He declared that they had to “move forward with reforms, they move forward with elections and they start getting their economic house in order – that's what's going to solve the problem”<sup>294</sup> after he had rightly lashed out at President Yanukovitch's handling of the peaceful protests of the Maidan Revolution.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, Russia consistently denied being involved in the Donbas (unlike Crimea with which

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<sup>290</sup> DRAPER, Robert. “This Was Trump Pulling a Putin.” April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/11/magazine/trump-putin-ukraine-fiona-hill.html>. [Accessed on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>291</sup> HARDING, Luke. “Alexander Litvinenko: the man who solved his own murder.” January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/19/alexander-litvinenko-the-man-who-solved-his-own-murder>. [Accessed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>292</sup> BORGER, Julian, *op. cit.*

<sup>293</sup> ACKERMAN, Spencer, LEWIS, Paul, and ROBERTS, Dan. “Obama: Russia's actions in Ukraine put Putin on the 'wrong side of history.’” March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/russian-sanctions-likely-putin-ukraine-crimea>. [Accessed on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>294</sup> MCCARTHY, Tom, and TRAN, Mark. “Ukraine crisis: Obama says Russia has 'hand' in 'disruption and chaos.’” April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/17/ukraine-diplomats-meet-in-geneva-in-bid-to-ease-crisis-live-coverage>. [Accessed on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>295</sup> LEWIS, Paul, OLTERMANN, Philip, and ROBERTS, Dan. “EU and US consider sanctions against Ukraine as death toll reaches 26.” February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/19/eu-us-consider-sanctions-ukraine-protest-deadly-violence>. [Accessed on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

they would constitute “New Russia” as far as Vladimir Putin is concerned). This changed when Russia annexed Ukraine as a whole in 2022<sup>296</sup> and Vladimir Putin only recognized that Russians had operated in Crimea before and during the Crimean Referendum.<sup>297</sup> Serious sanctions toward the Russian regime only appeared after the 2022 large-scale invasion. Defenders of democracy and partners of Ukraine were reluctant to provide Ukraine with lethal material in 2014. Perhaps the fact that Russia invaded Georgia, attacked Ukraine not once but twice in less than a decade made world powers react against Russian imperialism and irredentism by shoring up Ukraine’s defense capabilities more and more. However, Russia reduced its “vulnerabilities to western pressure and leverage” while increasing Russia’s leverage over foreign countries<sup>298</sup> thanks to Iranian officials and businessmen who explained President Putin how sanctions had afflicted their economy.<sup>299</sup>

As President Obama praised President Poroshenko as a “wise selection” made by the Ukrainian people (perhaps because world leaders needed to acknowledge the choice of democracy to contrast with Russia). The American President did not want to criticize Ukraine’s leader while offering help as he pledged to send “an additional \$5m (£3m) in equipment,” body armor, night vision goggles, uniforms, and helmets for the first time. The United States used to only provide clothes, food, radios,<sup>300</sup> medical supplies, water purification devices and generators, which are not objects related to war or fighting.<sup>301</sup> But times and again, President Obama resisted sending lethal aid, such as guns, ammunition, jet fighters, troops, or tanks.<sup>302</sup> President Biden changed this by sending tanks to Ukraine to help defend their territory and the sovereignty thereof.

However, President Obama was adamant in making it clear to President Putin that: “The strong condemnation that Russia[...] has received around the world indicates the degree to which Russia is on the wrong side of history”<sup>303</sup> and that Western countries could isolate Russia if the latter continued to break international laws and kill civilians. President Obama also stated that

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<sup>296</sup> MASTERS, Jonathan, *op. cit.*

<sup>297</sup> MCCARTHY, Tom, and TRAN, Mark, *op. cit.*

<sup>298</sup> ACKERMAN, Spencer, LEWIS, Paul, and ROBERTS, Dan, *op. cit.*

<sup>299</sup> MCCARTHY, Tom, and TRAN, Mark, *op. cit.*

<sup>300</sup> Associated Press. “Obama says Ukraine can thrive with the world's backing.” June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/04/obama-ukraine-can-thrive-petro-poroshenko>. [Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>301</sup> MCCARTHY, Tom, and TRAN, Mark, *op. cit.*

<sup>302</sup> BERTRAND, Natasha. “‘A four-week window’: Biden aims to learn from Obama’s mistakes with quick moves to deter Putin from invading Ukraine.” December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/19/politics/joe-biden-russia-ukraine-obama-2014/index.html>. [Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>303</sup> ACKERMAN, Spencer, LEWIS, Paul, and ROBERTS, Dan, *op. cit.*

Russia—a country whose GDP is similar to Spain’s and whose share of the global GDP represents less than 1.5% compared to America’s 25%—“was acting out of weakness” and that the Kremlin’s actions indicated “less influence, not more” in refusing to start a fruitful dialogue with the Ukrainian government and the international community.<sup>304</sup> President Obama also analyzed President Putin’s traumas—notably the “loss of the Soviet Union”—as well as his Cold War methods. President Obama indicated the United States’ intentions as well as his: he wanted to work with partners to ensure that people’s rights are respected: “What I have repeatedly said is that he may be entirely misreading the west. He’s certainly misreading American foreign policy. We have no interest in circling Russia and we have no interest in Ukraine beyond letting Ukrainian people make their own decisions about their own lives.”<sup>305</sup> Barack Obama had also carefully chosen his words so as not to provoke President Putin frontally. Nonetheless, the American President made clear that NATO should help the Ukrainian army and accept more countries in Europe to oppose Russian imperialism (including Georgia and Moldova which are desired by Russia out of irredentist claims) and did so in Tallinn, Estonia, 200 kilometers away from the Russian border.<sup>306</sup> President Obama did not only make vague allusions but cited precise examples of countries by claiming that: “we’ll be here for Estonia[...], Latvia[, and] Lithuania,” and that they would never lose their independence anymore with NATO.<sup>307</sup> President Obama sided with democracy whereas President Putin aligned himself with despotism by making gas supplies a coercive weapon. The American President praised democracy as the only lasting solution: “Citizens like nations will never settle for a world where the big are allowed to bully the small. Sooner or later they fight back. Democracy will win.”<sup>308</sup> And indeed, countries both smaller and less powerful than Russia chose to join an alliance bigger and more potent than Russia and its satellites: NATO.

Along with Chancellor Merkel, President Obama made it clear “that the 21st century cannot stand idle and simply allow the borders of Europe to be redrawn at the barrel of a gun” and that Germany would not serve as the intermediary between the United States and Russia, not after

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<sup>304</sup> HADDAD, Benjamin., and POLYAKOVA, Alina, *op. cit.*

<sup>305</sup> Agence France-Presse in Washington. “Barack Obama: Russia must pull back troops from Ukraine border.” March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/28/barack-obama-russia-must-move-back-troops-ukraine-border>. [Accessed on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>306</sup> LEWIS, Paul, and ROBERTS, Dan. “Obama calls on Nato to strengthen Ukrainian military against Russia.” September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/03/obama-nato-support-ukraine-military-russia>. [Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

what the USSR had inflicted upon Germany during the Cold War.<sup>309</sup> The United States was still part of the world and Russia would have to deal with it, especially when Vladimir Putin wondered if Russia could claim Alaska.<sup>310</sup> Both Western leaders were nonetheless cautious; they preferred the option of helping Ukraine fight Ukrainian separatists but not Russia head-on, just as during the Cold War. In 2014, Vice President Biden had wanted to arm Ukraine and impose utterly strict sanctions against the Russian regime but President Obama largely overruled these initiatives.<sup>311</sup> He did so lest it would provoke another world conflict even though the Cold War between the United States and Russia still remained or evolved into a “Cold Peace” as Boris Yeltsin—the first President of Russia—put it in 1994.<sup>312</sup> President Obama’s cautiousness—after a year of conflict—reaped 38% of support against 46% of people who disapproved yet 56% of Americans agreed with the sanctions “leveled against Russia by the U.S. and other European countries” and 65% of the American people were not in favor of providing military aid and weapons to Ukraine, which President Obama did not provide.<sup>313</sup> Perhaps his status as the receptacle of anger and his being a Democratic President put him in a rather delicate situation where the American people said they did not approve of his actions, yet he did what most Americans wanted him to do. Furthermore, a comfortable majority of 57% of Americans thought that the situation in Crimea—and by extension in the Donbas—was beyond the control of the United States. President Obama and other European leaders knew this, yet they tried to reduce Russia’s leverage.

Some harshly criticized President Obama because he led the hegemon of the west and the world. He was blamed since he did not obliterate Russia nor deter it from continuing its deeds in the neighboring country of Ukraine. For instance, some call on not to forget “the Obama Administration’s weak and underwhelming response” as, according to them, President “Obama consistently underestimated the challenge posed by Vladimir Putin’s regime.”<sup>314</sup> It is true that the Obama Administration did not prevent Russia from slaughtering civilian populations. However, it is also true for all the administrations of the time. What Barack Obama can be blamed for is his cautiousness. He did not want to plunge the world into another world conflict, which could happen

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<sup>309</sup> ROBERTS, Dan, and TRAYNOR, Ian. “Obama sidesteps Ukraine military option but backs German diplomatic effort.” February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/feb/09/obama-support-german-effort-russia-ukraine-military>. [Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>310</sup> MCCARTHY, Tom, and TRAN, Mark, *op. cit.*

<sup>311</sup> BERTRAND, Natasha, *op. cit.*

<sup>312</sup> GESSEN, Keith, *op. cit.*

<sup>313</sup> ROBERTS, Dan, and TRAYNOR, Ian, *op. cit.*

<sup>314</sup> HADDAD, Benjamin., and POLYAKOVA, Alina, *op. cit.*

quickly between the United States and Russia. President Obama tried to distinguish himself from the isolationism of President George W. Bush. The Obama Administration can be rebuked for forfeiting one drone (an unmanned aerial vehicle, a UAV) in the Iranian desert because President Obama did not want the Iranians to get wind of this American covert operation before signing the Iran Nuclear Deal also known as JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). However, the damage was already done and President Obama's bet became a failure. Similarly, when the United States was surveilling Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan, America used a drone on a surveillance mission but the drone crashed. President Obama considered: sending a Navy SEAL team (such as when Osama bin Laden was eliminated) to blow the drone up—so that its technology would not fall in the hands of members of the Axis of Evil as option A; relying on Iranian allies to find the drone as option B; launching an airstrike to destroy the remains of the UAV as option C; yet President Obama “chose option D-do nothing” and a few days after his decision, “the Iranians paraded the drone through the streets of Tehran, a propaganda victory.”<sup>315</sup> American officials did not think that the Iranians could replicate the technology of the drone this easily and thus barked up the wrong tree. Indeed, Iran had replicated the technology thereof by 2016 and after this, such Iranian drones were being used by Russia against Ukraine in 2022 and 2023.

Moreover, the Syrian conflict, the Paris terrorist attacks on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and “wavering support from European allies eager to move past the conflict” complicated matters.<sup>316</sup> Indeed, President Putin used Russia's attacks in Syria to prove that they were helping France, Europe, and the United States' fight against the Islamic State to alleviate global sanctions against Russia.<sup>317</sup> However, as soon as Russia bombed Syria in September of 2015—after the rise of ISIS and the January attacks in Paris in 2015—it was clear that Russia helped President Bashar al-Assad and bombed rebels, not ISIS members.<sup>318</sup>

Others praised President Obama's resolve and quiet strength as President Putin would have felt “an outsize sense of menace” coming from President Obama because Vladimir Putin “thinks

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<sup>315</sup> Washington Free Beacon. “Obama's Weakness Comes Home to Roost on the Battlefield in Ukraine, Again.” December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://freebeacon.com/issues/obamas-weakness-comes-home-to-roost-on-the-battlefield-in-ukraine-again/>. [Accessed on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>316</sup> CROWLEY, Michael. “Obama's Ukraine policy in shambles.” February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/obama-ukraine-russia-putin-219783>. [Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>317</sup> CROWLEY, Michael. “Obama to Hollande: Stay the course against Russia.” November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015. <https://www.politico.eu/article/obama-hollande-news-russia/>. [Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

that he was defeated by President Obama in Ukraine” as the latter did not underestimate the former.<sup>319</sup>

Conflicts which involved the USSR/Russia and the West have been long-lasting. Indeed, the Soviet Union sent tanks to Hungary during Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s term (a man who was a hero of the military) and martial law was declared in Poland when Republican Ronald Reagan was President. When George W. Bush was in power, Russia invaded and obliterated Georgia’s defenses. When Barack Obama was President, Russia annexed Crimea and invaded the Donbas (and later on, Russia invaded all of Ukraine when President Biden was in power).

Thus, the situation was not about if President Obama—a Democratic President who was against unjust wars and not particularly a military hawk—was historically weak compared to Russia which violated agreements and rules of war. President Obama’s biggest failure in regard to Ukraine came to light in 2022 with the technology of the drone that was forfeited and copied by Iran, sold to Russia, and used against Ukraine.

President Obama tried to share leadership with Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and other European nations while respecting what the American people wanted: namely not to be too much involved in the war in Ukraine. The American people elected him knowing he was not very keen on fighting each and every war that did not involve the United States directly. What is more, President Obama further sanctioned the Russian state and prevented espionage by expelling 35 Russian diplomats and shutting down two Russian government compounds in 2016.<sup>320</sup>

Even though President Obama clearly stated that violating Ukraine’s sovereignty was “not in the interests of Ukraine, Russia or Europe” and that “there will be costs for any military intervention in Ukraine”<sup>321</sup> (although sanctions were rather minimal in 2014), President Putin defied conventions in an unorthodox way. Indeed, Russia sent more than 200 lorries to eastern Ukraine in 2014, with supposedly “more than 1,800 tonnes of aid, without the permission of Kiev and without Red Cross monitors.”<sup>322</sup> Experts worried that if an attack on the convoy happened,

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<sup>319</sup> DOVERE, Edward-Isaac. “Politics of blaming Obama on Ukraine.” March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/democrats-obama-ukraine-russia-crimea-104322>. [Accessed on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>320</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>321</sup> BBC News. “Ukraine crisis: Obama warns Russia against intervention.” March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26394846>. [Accessed on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>322</sup> WEAVER, Matthew. “Obama ramps up Russia rhetoric.” August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/29/obama-russia-troops-ukraine>. [Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

Russia would use this as a pretext to send troops to eastern Ukraine. Indeed, President Putin uses a lot of pretenses to justify what he wants to do.

## The Aftermaths of the 2014 Annexation

Eight years before what he dubbed the “special operation,” Vladimir Putin launched against the former Soviet Country of Ukraine, he had invaded Crimea which used to belong to Russia. In both cases, Vladimir Putin ordered to invade Ukraine just after the Winter Olympic Games. In 2014, the Winter Olympics were held in the Russian city of Sochi, and then in the Chinese city of Beijing (also known as Peking). Accounts specified that President Xi Jinping was aware of the subsequent annexation of Ukraine in 2022 and did not want President Putin<sup>323</sup> to launch the operation before the Winter Olympic Games were over. The Chinese leader was afraid of the fact that the news of the sports event could be concealed because of what would happen further West.

After the events in 2014, Montenegro joined NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020 after years of discussion and concern because of Russian threats. They are reminiscent of those NATO members and applicants have faced in 2022 and 2023 after Russia invaded its neighbor under false pretenses. President Vladimir Putin falsely claimed that Ukraine was the home of Neo-Nazis while it is Russia that has historical ties to Nazi Germany. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Finland became the 31<sup>st</sup> country to join NATO, thus strengthening the alliance just west of Russia.<sup>324</sup>



<sup>323</sup> President Putin changed laws to be President at least until 2036 although he is going to be 84 years of age at the end of his extended term.

<sup>324</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. "Finland joins NATO as 31st Ally." April 4th, 2023. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_213448.html](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_213448.html). [Accessed on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>325</sup> BUCHHOLZ, Katarina. "Will NATO Expand North?" *Statista*. May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/chart/26674/european-countries-by-year-of-joining-nato/>. [Accessed on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

<sup>326</sup> BUCHHOLZ, Katarina. "Finland Becomes 31<sup>st</sup> Member of NATO." *Statista*. April 4th, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/chart/26674/european-countries-by-year-of-joining-nato/>. [Accessed on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

The reset strategy of the American eagle towards the Russian bear was all the more endangered as soon as Vladimir Putin regained power when he stopped being behind the scenes. Vladimir Putin was leading from behind under President Dmitri Medvedev, became President anew, and went from darkness to light. It did not take long for Vladimir Putin to exert authority with an iron fist in the region after he reclaimed power. He had already been Prime Minister under President Boris Yeltsin. Then he went on to become the Russian President from 2000 to 2008. Because of the Russian Constitution—that he has now changed to become a tsar, not unlike Ivan the Terrible—he had to step down and he became Dmitri Medvedev’s Prime Minister. However, President Obama and multiple Washington insiders claimed that everybody knew it was Vladimir Putin who was in charge behind the scenes. The 2008 invasion of Georgia occurred when Vladimir Putin was pulling the strings from afar. It occurred only a few months after he became Prime Minister anew. In all recent Russian conflicts, Vladimir Putin was involved either as Prime Minister—with the example of Georgia—or as President, notably twice with Ukraine. In 2012, after one term of Dmitri Medvedev, President Putin was reelected, the same year as President Obama.<sup>327</sup> Two years after that, President Putin decided to invade Ukraine to take Crimea, which used to be Russian before it was left to Ukraine in 1954 partly because Ukraine was closer to Crimea than Russia was. However, Russia kept another far-off territory with the enclave of Kaliningrad which is located between Poland on the South, and Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on the North. Kaliningrad is a strategic place which gives direct access to the Baltic Sea. Less than two years after he regained power, President Putin tried to reclaim what belonged to Russia in his mind and what should have always stayed Russian: Crimea.

2014 was a busy year on the international scene with the invasion of Crimea and the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Afghanistan. All eyes were turned toward President Obama. He had wanted to reestablish American leadership and renew with multilateralism after the isolationism of the Bush years that bore the taint of the World Trade Center attacks. However, President Obama wanted the greater good. He thus wished to avoid waging wars all over the world where victories could become bitter with time, such as some during George W. Bush’s Presidency.

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NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was looking forward to Sweden joining the alliance so that Scandinavia would virtually be protected against Russia, unless Russia is willing to spark a world conflict.

<sup>327</sup> Barack Obama was reelected President for the one and only time because of the immutability of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the American Constitution as opposed to the Russian Constitution which has been changed oftentimes according to the desires of the Russian leaders.

Sometimes replacing a totalitarian regime can lead to a worse one, as was the case with the instability which ensued Saddam Hussein's Iraq. President Obama was sometimes labelled as anti-war yet he was conscious of the difference between the bad war—such as that in Iraq—and the good or necessary war, such as the war on terror, against extremist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS (the Islamic State—IS—ISIL or Daesh) and Boko Haram.

Russian whistleblower Alexei Navalny compared Crimea to a sandwich which had belonged to Russia and Ukraine, which is now in Russia's hands and should not change sides anymore.<sup>328</sup> The opponent of the Russian regime described Crimea's annexation as a good thing because the South and East of Ukraine look up to Russia rather than to Europe. However, even though Navalny is known for having “unapologetic nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric,”<sup>329</sup> he states that: “Politically, this will bother us, Ukraine, and Europe for a long time” when discussing the consequences of Ukraine's loss of Crimea for Russia first, Ukraine, the members of the European Union without even mentioning the United States which is the historic rival of the former USSR and the Russian Federation. Not only was Alexei Navalny in favor of Russia bullying Ukraine but he “also supported Russia in its war against Georgia in August 2008.”<sup>330</sup> Another famous opponent of the regime—Mikhail Khodorkovsky—wrote on Twitter that he agreed with Alexei Navalny and that if he were President of the Russian Federation, he would not give Crimea back. By giving a more diplomatic answer, he tweeted: “Only a dictator will be able to return Crimea to Ukraine in the coming decades. Not a single law will work without power, and if a president uses power to force a society to do what a society categorically does not support—he is a dictator,” thus implying that he would not be a dictator for his own country when considering the Crimean Peninsula.<sup>331</sup> Both supported the Kremlin's policy of territorial expansion, yet both were on Vladimir Putin's black list. Indeed, Alexei Navalny was poisoned in 2020 while Mikhail Khodorkovsky “spent eight years in labor camps before receiving a pardon in December 2013.” If even opponents of the Russian regime did not desire to give Crimea back in 2014, how can random civilians—who watch Russian news controlled by the Russian

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<sup>328</sup> TOLER, Aric. “Russian Opposition Leaders Support Ukraine, But Crimea Is Not Coming Back.” October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014. <https://globalvoices.org/2014/10/21/russia-opposition-ukraine-crimea-navalny-mbk/>. [Accessed on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> COALSON, Robert. “Is Aleksei Navalny a Liberal or a Nationalist?” July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/is-aleksei-navalny-a-liberal-or-a-nationalist/278186/>. [Accessed on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>331</sup> TOLER, Aric, *op. cit.*

government—would like to stop the special operation in Ukraine? With the example of those two prominent opposition figures, one can guess that it is far from impossible in Russia to become a *vatnik* which is “a derogatory term for fervently patriotic Russians.”<sup>332</sup> Nothing is wrong in being patriotic when it comes to sports or when there are conflicts of interest between several countries including the land where one was born and raised. In the context of the English-speaking world, jingoism, bellicism, nationalism, and chauvinism have prevailed. It can be argued that the inhabitants who fled Russia after the invasion of Ukraine love their country but probably not their corrupt government because these Russian citizens are more educated and critical of the decisions of the Russian government. Moreover, nowadays fewer and fewer people are ready to fight in wars in an interconnected world where it is easier to change countries and enjoy a peaceful life. However, President Putin’s approval ratings were over 80% after the “wildly popular annexation of Crimea.”<sup>333</sup> In Russia, there were more than 140 million inhabitants in 2014 which was about 100 million more than in Ukraine whose size is about that of Texas.<sup>334</sup> Vladimir Putin resorted to “little green men,” “special forces, without insignia”<sup>335</sup> who wanted to put a pro-Russian regime into place. A referendum violating international law was held—23 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union—whose result led Crimea to be ceded to Russia since many Russians and Russian-speaking people lived there. Around the Verkhovna Rada—the Ukrainian Parliament—masked men with clubs and bats—made their presence felt.

The problem with such moves is that other countries are encouraged to resort to force and break international laws to obtain what they want, in defiance of diplomacy. For instance, Ali Khamenei repressed protests in Iran and Xi Jinping had China flex their muscles in 2022 to obtain Taiwan; both events occurred after the Russian invasion in Ukraine which garnered most of international attention.<sup>336</sup> China also illegally used spy balloons over the United States and South America in February 2023, claiming that they were weather balloons gone with the wind.

After the end of President Poroshenko’s presidency, another pro-West President—Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian—succeeded him in 2019 by winning 73% of the popular

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<sup>332</sup> TOLER, Aric, *op. cit.*

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup> BRET, Stephens. “Putin Is Starting to Do What Won Him a War 7 Years Ago.” November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/opinion/ukraine-war-russia-putin.html>. [Accessed on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>335</sup> TOPOL, Sarah A. “The Chocolate King Who Would Be President.” May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/the-chocolate-king-who-would-be-president-106998/>. [Accessed on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>336</sup> BRET, Stephens, *op. cit.*

vote and “left in place the language law signed at the end of Poroshenko’s term.”<sup>337</sup> Even though they shared common views, President Zelensky charged his predecessor with treason.<sup>338</sup> The main aims of the former actor are at odds with one another, namely to “make peace with Russia and restore Donbas” to Ukraine.<sup>339</sup> After the Russian meddling during the 2016 American Presidential Elections, the disclosure of the conversation between Presidents Trump and Zelensky led to the former’s impeachment hearing.<sup>340</sup> Volodymyr Zelensky won against Petro Poroshenko (and his slogan of “Army! Language! Faith!”) as a pro-peace candidate. Despite this, Ukraine was invaded by Russia anew.<sup>341</sup>

President Biden—who was Barack Obama’s Vice President—knows how President Putin can behave and thus is certainly more prepared and has more power to act along with his international allies. Despite his age, Joe Biden’s ideas have stayed rather the same as he promised the same weapons that he had wanted to give in 2014. Moreover, President Biden thinks like Barack Obama that it is in the interest of the United States to work along with the European Union and NATO. The intelligence service and the Obama Administration were “caught off guard” and learnt too late what Russia had schemed in 2014.<sup>342</sup> Fewer and fewer American troops are stationed in Europe but more and more drills are put into place with European partners to protect NATO members, especially against the threat of nuclear Russia.<sup>343</sup>

President Obama was aware that troops were necessary in Europe. He had the United States lead joint military exercises even though they did not mean war but protecting local civilians and showing partners that they can rely on the United States, even after the period of isolationism designed by President George W. Bush.<sup>344</sup> Once again, despite the fact that the majority of Americans thought the way Obama did, the President failed to explain the American people what the stakes were between Russia and Ukraine and how that could impact them in a country where

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<sup>337</sup> MANKOFF, Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>338</sup> GESSEN, Keith, *op. cit.*

<sup>339</sup> MPOKE BIGG, Matthew, *op. cit.*

<sup>340</sup> DRAPER, Robert, *op. cit.*

<sup>341</sup> GESSEN, Keith, *op. cit.*

<sup>342</sup> BERTRAND, Natasha, *op. cit.*

<sup>343</sup> COCHRAN, Amanda. “Obama calls on Putin to move troops from Ukraine border.” March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-calls-on-vladimir-putin-to-move-russian-troops-from-ukraine/>. [Accessed on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>344</sup> Associated Press, *op. cit.*

people feared Communists and Russia.<sup>345</sup> President Obama surely knew about the details of the recent history between Ukraine, Russia and its other former satellites, and he experienced things that shaped his judgement yet he did not symbolically explain the ins and outs of this conflict to his fellow citizens. Barack Obama reacted multiple times to what Russia was doing in Ukraine but did not satisfy some experts. Despite being known for his eloquence and seriousness, he did not use these elements to convince the American people that the United States and Europe had to work together to preserve world stability. One can speculate that President Obama did not want to endanger his Reset strategy nor lead people to put into question his will to de-escalate with Russia after signing the START treaty on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011.<sup>346</sup> However, Barack Obama is a man who cares about the lives of others as can be seen with the tears he shed after the Sandy Hook massacre which resulted in the deaths of multiple children and adults. Furthermore, President Obama—and his European counterparts—faced many more challenges than President Putin. It can be argued that the American President had more stakes to deal with than Vladimir Putin, that Barack Obama inherited more pressure because of America’s standing in the world, that he could not lie to garner support as opposed to the Russian President, and that he had to face checks and balances at home with Republicans and some Democrats who opposed what he did and did not do.<sup>347</sup> For instance, Senator John McCain—whom he faced in the 2008 Presidential Elections—declared: "The Ukrainians are being slaughtered and we're sending them blankets and meals. Blankets don't do well against Russian tanks,"<sup>348</sup> even though the GOP would not have fared better. If the Obama Administration had escalated matters, the President would certainly have been rebuked for that because the United States would have sacrificed soldiers on the field in a far-away country.

Many years later, Barack Obama still took time to discuss the events that involved Russia and Ukraine. He reflected on Vladimir Putin and admitted he was not sure “that the person [he] knew is the same as the person who is now leading this charge” and that: “For him to bet the farm in this way, [Barack Obama] would not have necessarily predicted from him five years

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<sup>345</sup> BRZEZINSKI, Zbigniew. “What Obama Should Tell Americans About Ukraine.” May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/what-obama-should-tell-americans-about-ukraine-106277/>. [Accessed on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>346</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p.xii-xiii.

<sup>347</sup> DOVERE, Edward-Isaac, *op. cit.*

<sup>348</sup> BBC News. “Ukraine conflict: US 'may supply arms to Ukraine.'” February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31279621>. [Accessed on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

ago,” which corresponds to the end of Barack Obama’s Presidency.<sup>349</sup> Age, the pandemic, and isolation must have further altered the Russian President who saw his hopes of strengthening Russia shrink. When Vladimir Putin is no longer of this world, a symbolic page will turn and a new chapter of the relations between Russia, the United States, and Europe will begin, may it be synonymous with war or relative peace. The world may see so as Ukraine, Russia, and the United States will hold Presidential Elections in 2024.

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<sup>349</sup> MERICA, Dan, *op. cit.*

## Part Three: Race Problems in the United States

### The Deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Eric Garner

Expectations were high when Barack Obama became President of the United States. They were so high that it would have been difficult for most Presidents—if not any President—to live up to them. Some put all their trust in President Obama to try and solve many of the race issues that had plagued the United States. However, even though Barack Obama was black himself, he had to face several notable killings of African Americans during his tenure. For the first time in American history—and still the only one to this day—the man in the Oval Office looked like the black people who were being killed. The President even drew comparisons with Trayvon Martin, a young black man killed on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012,<sup>350</sup> whose murderer was acquitted in July 2013. The President stated: “if I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon”<sup>351</sup> and: “Trayvon Martin could have been me thirty-five years ago.”<sup>352</sup> Barack Obama rightfully drew the comparisons and truly meant what he said. Symbolically, even though it could not make up for the deaths of young black people, he confided his experience to the public sphere such as when he was being followed in a supermarket (because black men are more likely to be suspected of stealing products) and when he could hear car doors lock while moving closer to some cars.<sup>353</sup>

Another black death was followed by the acquittal of the police officer who took away the life of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014<sup>354</sup> despite previous evidence that the young black man of eighteen years of age had his hands up. Such evidence was then utterly contradicted and the police officer claimed that he had been afraid of the unarmed boy.<sup>355</sup> It seemed that the white establishment had prevailed over President Obama. Indeed, white people held more power, occupied more important jobs, and their voice was shared by the media (whose owners were rich white men, such as the Murdochs).

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Freddie Gray was arrested by the police of Baltimore, fell into a coma in custody, and died seven days later. These events sparked civil unrest.<sup>356</sup> On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Eric

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<sup>350</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

<sup>351</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>355</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>356</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. xv.

Garner—a black man who was illegally selling cigarettes in New York City—died even though he had repeated multiple times: “I can’t breathe” to police officers.<sup>357</sup> All of this was videotaped and Black Lives Matter protests ensued. Other marking deaths during that period include those of Oscar Grant in Oakland and twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland.<sup>358</sup>

President Obama’s approach was ambivalent and consisted in pointing out facts as well as calling on everybody’s responsibility. He pointed out that systemic racism still prevailed even though the highest-ranked person in America was himself a black man who had been democratically elected and re-elected. He also adopted a paternalistic tone when he criticized “criminals and thugs” who took advantage of the situation by wreaking havoc during protests.<sup>359</sup> President Obama was thus criticized by activists because his adversaries could use his statements to say that even the black President lumped all blacks together although that was not his intention nor what he thought. Because he was black himself, he did not want to specifically better the lot of only black people lest his policies would easily be repealed. Moreover, during his first term, he was cautious to speak his mind for fear he might not be reelected, he who wanted to help Americans get out of misery.

Once more, his style was decried all across the political spectrum. From being viewed as too cautious and lukewarm by black activists and the left, and as an extremist and a socialist by the right, President Obama was too moderate to please a strong political base. This is symbolic since he is mixed race and halfway between black and white because of his Kenyan father and his mother from Kansas.

Barack Obama’s election and style epitomize the reactions of the American population. In surveys, black and white respondents alike declared that race relations were worse than what respondents had said they were in 2009, at the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency.<sup>360</sup> Indeed, at the end of his tenure, more people answered that relations were bad, while fewer responded that they were generally good.

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<sup>357</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>358</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>359</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p.306.

## Part One: Progress under Obama

### The Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage

Barack Obama was quite conservative when it came to marriage, yet he was in favor of civil unions for gays and lesbians, thus he did push legislation allowing LGBTQIA+ to serve openly in the military,<sup>361</sup> and refused to have his Justice Department defend the Defense of Marriage Act.<sup>362</sup> Barack Obama thus refused to recognize marriage as the union between one man and one woman while he did not want to say that he was in favor of same-sex marriage in public. The Defense of Marriage Act “prohibited the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages validly performed under state laws.”<sup>363</sup>

What changed everything is the following statement by Vice President Biden on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012: “I am absolutely comfortable [...] with the fact that men marrying men, women marrying women and heterosexual men and women marrying one another are entitled to the same exact rights.”<sup>364</sup> President Obama’s aides warned him and he agreed to change his public position toward marriage. Indeed, he was privately in favor of same-sex marriage. Moreover, Barack Obama had to say something in response to what his Vice President had stated. Finally, it would be a symbolical turning point that would follow the evolution of the American public’s opinion on the subject. When he campaigned for the first time for the Illinois State Senate in 1996, Barack Obama “returned by fax a questionnaire from a gay newspaper, on which he had written, ‘I favor legalizing same-sex marriages.’”<sup>365</sup> There is one thing even more inconceivable than a President changing his mind, and that is the Church of England which publicly declared that same-sex couples would also be blessed.<sup>366</sup>

President Obama declared that he had evolved: “I’ve just concluded that for me personally[,] it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be

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<sup>361</sup> President Clinton’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy prohibited LGBT members from openly serving in the military.

<sup>362</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>363</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>364</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 130-131.

<sup>365</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>366</sup> CHAPPELL, Bill. “Church of England OKs blessings for same-sex couples, but it still won’t marry them.” February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/09/1155695894/church-of-england-same-sex>. [Accessed on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]

able to get married.”<sup>367</sup> He only engaged his own responsibility by using the pronouns “I,” “me,” and the adverb “personally.” He judged that it was a low-risk high-reward move. Indeed, there was a bit of a risk since a few days beforehand, voters in North Carolina—which was to hold the Democratic National Convention—had approved a ban on same-sex marriage.<sup>368</sup> However, those who voted against were primarily Republicans and Conservatives of this state while nationally, most Democrats (around 65% of them) supported same-sex marriage. Thus, it was a high-reward situation for him to speak out in order to shore up his popularity.

For Jonathan Chait, the credit for the legalization of same-sex marriage should not go to President Obama. He argued that the Judges that President Obama named to the Supreme Court—and who participated in the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling—replaced liberal judges who would have certainly voted the same way.<sup>369</sup> Nonetheless, it would have been inconceivable for a President in recent history to have five of his judges—or more—to vote at the same time out of the nine Supreme Justices. Moreover, one could have still argued that the President would have replaced liberal justices with other Liberals in case the President had appointed five or more Supreme Court Judges. In the 5-4 decision, the Court held “that all states must permit same-sex couples to marry, and must also recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.”<sup>370</sup>

Besides nominating a couple of Justices who voted in favor of same-sex unions and speaking out on this very subject, President Obama gave his approval to light the White House in the colors of the LGBT flag in 2015 after the Supreme Court decision was published. When Barack Obama entered office, same-sex marriage was legal only in Massachusetts.<sup>371</sup> For instance, in April 2010, President Obama symbolically “extended hospital visitation rights to same-sex partners” and the Justice Department “concluded that the *Violence Against Women Act* protects same-sex partners” and simply defines spousal violence.<sup>372</sup> The Obama Administration “enacted a vast array of gay- and transgender- inclusive federal policies”<sup>373</sup> and President Obama nominated “four openly gay major campaign donors, all white men, to ambassadorships”<sup>374</sup> during the second term.

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<sup>367</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>369</sup> CHAIT, Jonathan, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>370</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Even though the credit does not entirely go to Barack Obama, his presidency saw major changes in terms of same-sex relationships. More people could share their feelings on the Internet and pressure was applied so as to witness a semblance of equality between heterosexual and LGBT people. People linked on social media and gathered around the White House to celebrate a turning point in LGBT history. The 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision was 5-4, but in the end, love won and people demonstrated in front of the rainbow-lit White House with “LOVE WINS” letters.



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<sup>375</sup> KORTE, Gregory. “White House turns to rainbow after gay marriage ruling. June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2015/06/26/white-house-rainbow-gay-marriage/29374471/>. [Accessed on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.] ©Mladen Antonov, AFP/GETTY IMAGES.

## Part Two: The Renewal of the Relationship with Cuba and the Iran Nuclear Deal

### Cuba

There were still many challenges to be faced on the international scene during Barack Obama's time at the White House. First of all, the relations with Cuba were tense. The climax of those tensions first occurred in April 1961, under President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, with the Bay of Pigs Fiasco. Fidel Castro had just arrived at the head of the country and was pro-communist in the context of the Cold War that occupied a large part of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The CIA had been involved in the Bay of Pigs initiative and the aim of the mission was to overthrow Fidel Castro with the help of a group of Cubans. Castro's army had captured a lot of prisoners and the attempt had thus been thwarted. President Kennedy, who was quite a young President, accepted to be held accountable for the failure.

Then, in October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis took place and the prospect of World War III had never been so close. Fidel Castro grew closer to the USSR whose leader was Nikita Khrushchev and who had promised to help protect the Island of Cuba, the Isle of Youth, and the other archipelagoes that form the country of Cuba.<sup>376</sup> The strategic importance of this country in the Gulf of Mexico was paramount since Cuba's Havana and Florida's Key West are about 90 miles apart. The CIA suspected that something abnormal was occurring South of Florida. President Kennedy decided not to invade nor strike but to impose an embargo on Cuba that largely remained in place for the following 60 years.

At the time Barack Obama entered office, the diplomatic and economic sanctions against Cuba remained even though the Cold War had come to an end first with the Fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989, then with the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. However, President Obama inherited the relations of the ten previous Administrations from Dwight D. Eisenhower's to that of the belligerent George W. Bush. President Bush named an "Axis of Evil" to which Iran, Iraq, and North Korea belonged. Later on, Undersecretary of State John Bolton gave a speech entitled "Beyond the Axis of Evil"<sup>377</sup> in which Cuba was added along with Libya and Syria, the three of which Barack Obama dealt with during his presidency. President Obama strove to build

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<sup>376</sup> ROBERT, Frédéric, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>377</sup> The Honorable John R. Bolton. "Beyond the Axis of Evil: Additional Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction." May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150924220446/http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/beyond-the-axis-of-evil>. [Accessed on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

something new and lasting. He “showed more enthusiasm [than previous Presidents] for recognizing the communist regime in Cuba—a step universally applauded on the left”<sup>378</sup> which was quite a feat because President Obama left no one indifferent in Washington yet praise was hard to reap. Furthermore, Republicans were more willing to display their discontent than Democrats were to show their contentment. President Obama was also known for being distant and for not showing his emotions beyond measure. The renewed diplomatic relations with Cuba brought a change to that. In December 2014, President Obama was beaming with joy because of what he was going to tell the world. As pragmatic as ever, he declared: “These fifty years have shown that isolation has not worked. [...] It’s time for a new approach.”<sup>379</sup> Diplomacy was not an option for Barack Obama, it was a necessary prerequisite to consider other options. When he promised—during the 2008 election campaign—that he would be willing to talk with Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Syria and North Korea, Democratic Hillary Clinton dismissed that remark as “irresponsible and frankly naïve”<sup>380</sup> while Republican John McCain declared that it betrayed his “inexperience and reckless judgment.”<sup>381</sup> This kind of statements on Barack Obama’s part was quite alien for the Washington Establishment and surely showed that Candidate Obama shared the values of a former young politician, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy who famously stated: “Let us never negotiate out of fear but let us never fear to negotiate.”<sup>382</sup> During his inauguration speech, he began to prove his words were not for show by promising renegade states that he would “extend a hand if [they] are willing to unclench [thei]r fist.”<sup>383</sup> President Obama did extend a hand toward Havana with the help of Pope Francis who worked like a match-maker behind the scenes. In December 2013, the funerals of former Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela enabled President Barack Obama to extend his hand toward Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro’s brother (the former Cuban leader, who died in 2016).<sup>384</sup> The United States “was represented by the Swiss Embassy in Cuba”<sup>385</sup> from 1961 to 1977 while Cuba was represented by Czechoslovakia in Washington, D.C.

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<sup>378</sup> ZELIZER, Julian E., *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>379</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>380</sup> CHAIT, Jonathan, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>381</sup> BAKER, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>382</sup> National Archives. “President John F. Kennedy Inaugural Address (1961).” No date. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address>. [Accessed on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.]

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

<sup>385</sup> U.S. Department of State. U.S. Interests Section, Havana. No date. <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/wha/cuba/usint.html>. [Accessed on June 23<sup>th</sup>, 2022.]

The Obama Administration upgraded the United States “Interests Section of the Embassy of Switzerland in Havana, Cuba, to full-rank Embassy”<sup>386</sup> on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro eventually met in Havana in March 2016 and attended a baseball game where they were seen together in a wave. Cuba had a long history with the United States and their improving relationship was not the last diplomatic improvement during Barack Obama’s time in office.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

<sup>387</sup> However, since late January, Cuba has been again considered as an enemy of the United States (like Syria, Jordan, and North Korea) and Cuban visitors can no longer enter the U.S. with an ESTA program but need a visa.

## Iran

The relationship with Iran had also been somewhat tense, notably under President Carter when U.S. embassy personnel was taken as hostages in Tehran, and under President Reagan in what was dubbed the Iran Contragate.<sup>388</sup> Iran is located in a region of the world that is particularly unstable, i.e. the Middle East. After 9/11, President Bush named an “Axis of Evil” to which Iran and Iraq belonged while Undersecretary of State John Bolton gave a speech entitled “Beyond the Axis of Evil”<sup>389</sup> in which Libya and Syria were added to the list. President Obama had to deal with these four countries but also other ones in the Middle East during his presidency, especially during the 2010s and the Arab Spring which provoked a snowball effect in that region. Indeed, at the entry of the Arab World, there were uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and the latter was seen as the cornerstone of the region when it comes to stability. Iran had benefited from the Bush Administration's refusal to discuss with their regime, thus portraying the United States as an isolationist state which refuses to hear the truth about Iran's true intentions. The issue was Iran's production of uranium. Iranian officials claimed that it was a means to produce electricity and not in view of waging war by building weapons of mass destruction, which revealed untrue (WMDs to use a lingo acronym, President George W. Bush's terminology.)<sup>390</sup> Iran had too many centrifuges for civil purposes only. Yet, by refusing to engage with Iranian officials, the Bush Administration could not clearly prove that Tehran was lying. America's role as leader of the world was endangered. President Obama chose the other way by accepting to discuss with Iranian officials so as to compel them to have their centrifuges inspected and to come clean if they did not have anything to conceal. For example, Russia gave Iran the benefit of the doubt, and only the United States imposed sanctions that were unilateral on Iran because of Russia and Iran's scheme. The major issue is not to have countries using nuclear energy to produce electricity as long as it is secure but to have “rogue” states (to use a term in keeping with President George W. Bush's “Axis of Evil”) mass-producing nuclear heads as well as chemical weapons on the sly without committing to the *Treaty of Nuclear Non-Proliferation* (the NPT). That was the position that President Obama held in his famous Cairo speech in 2009 when he said: “Any nation—including Iran—should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities

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<sup>388</sup> BERTRAND, Claude-Jean (ed.). *Les États-Unis : histoire et civilisation*. Nancy: PU, 1991, p. 20.

<sup>389</sup> The Honorable John R. Bolton, *op. cit.*

<sup>390</sup> FAUQUERT, Élisabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”<sup>391</sup> The problem was that it was not in Tehran’s options to come clean and cooperate with the United States. Iran “had pledged to wipe Israel off the map”<sup>392</sup> and this further solidified the sense of general distrust toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seriously considered attacking Iran to prevent his country from being attacked or even totally obliterated. At one point, the Israelis “were only weeks away from doing”<sup>393</sup> so, which could have sparked a long-lasting conflict in that unstable region that is the Middle East. Israel and the United States were partners, so the Israelis probably would have asked for more help coming from Washington. The United States was already working hand in hand with Jerusalem. The most famous example was the Iron Dome which protects Israeli cities from Hamas rockets. Israel has been a long-time U.S. partner in the region to try and maintain relative stability and peace. Washington’s aim was to maintain Israel’s “qualitative military edge” in the region. However different President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu were, the relation between Israel and the United States was at an all-time high despite the usual ups and downs. During Barack Obama’s presidency, despite the foundation of the state of Israel only dating back to 1948, “the level of consultation, coordination and sharing on [...] issues between US and Israeli military and intelligence officials has been unprecedented.”<sup>394</sup> The one thorny issue between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, who were two utterly different men, was Iran and the Nuclear Deal that Barack Obama was aiming for.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is safe to say that the Iran Nuclear Deal—which is also known as JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action)—was a success because to this day, in the years 2022-2023, Iran has not attacked anybody in the region on a massive scale, including Israel, as feared, because Iran’s number of centrifuges was too low to build a nuclear bomb “within a year.”<sup>395</sup> Economic sanctions have crippled Iran which means that people suffered from it, people who do not want wars to happen, who would not benefit from having centrifuges hidden in the country because they would not produce electricity for them. Diplomats and government officials certainly thought about citizens suffering more than the rich industrials or the high officials in Iran. President Obama, who is known to be sympathetic and concerned with the plights of ordinary

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<sup>391</sup> CHAIT, Jonathan, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>392</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>395</sup> CHAIT, Jonathan, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

people, probably thought about it too. That may explain why he and his team strove to come to an agreement for the greater good that could have prevented the world to change for the worse. However, the difficult thing to do when assessing a foreign policy's success is predicting what could have happened if the deal under study had not come to fruition. Time is also important to judge what accomplishments have been produced in the long term. For instance, the Iran Nuclear Deal was historic in that it brought the United States, its closest partners, as well as China and Russia together. Indeed, these two last states were concerned about Iran going wild because it managed to produce an enormous quantity of enriched uranium to be in the position of producing nuclear bombs while other countries were too busy watching elsewhere, partly because of President George W. Bush. In 2001, after President Clinton left office, Iran did not have any centrifuges of the sort, then had around 100 of them in 2003<sup>396</sup> and more than 5,600 known working centrifuges in 2009<sup>397</sup> when Barack Obama came to power. However, China and Russia are relatively close to North Korea which does have nuclear weapons of its own. Russia also threatened to hit Europe in 2022 lest Ukraine, Norway, Sweden, Finland,<sup>398</sup> Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia join the European Union and NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). China also possesses nuclear bombs. China and Russia were worried because Iran could be a threat to the world order and their objectives. Iran had lied time and again about not having centrifuges to build nuclear weapons, yet intelligence of such a facility hidden “in a mountain near the Iranian city of Qom”<sup>399</sup> proved that they were not being frank. Not only was Iran building centrifuges for non-peaceful motives but Iran was also “constantly developing new ways to hide or defend its nuclear sites.”<sup>400</sup> Indeed, in 2023, Iran was once again striving to build nuclear weapons in the midst of renewed tensions with Israel.<sup>401</sup>

President Obama’s diplomacy was paramount and crucial to bring efficient and long-lasting change for the better. Hillary Clinton, who had seen Iran’s increase in power when she was First Lady and then as Secretary of State under Barack Obama, stated: “During the Bush’s years

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<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>397</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>398</sup> BUCHHOLZ, Katarina. “Finland Becomes 31<sup>st</sup> Member of NATO.” *Statista*. April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/chart/26674/european-countries-by-year-of-joining-nato/>. [Accessed on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.] On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Finland became the 31<sup>st</sup> country to join NATO, thus strengthening the alliance.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>401</sup> MOTAMEDI, Maziar. “Iran denies enriching uranium to 84 percent purity amid IAEA row.” February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/20/iran-denies-enriching-uranium-to-84-percent-purity-amid-iaea-row>. [Accessed on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023.]

Iran had managed to play the world's great powers against one another and avoided serious international sanctions for its misdeeds. The Obama administration changed that."<sup>402</sup> Hillary Clinton does not necessarily include herself in the Obama Administration when it comes to the Iran Nuclear Deal because she was Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013 while the Iran Nuclear Deal was brokered in 2015. She was part of the "team of rivals" within the White House because she used to be candidate Obama's adversary in the 2008 Democratic Party Presidential Primaries and did not hesitate to rebuke Barack Obama's lack of experience when he said he wanted to contact Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Syria, and North Korea.<sup>403</sup>

President Obama was criticized for wanting to cooperate with rogue states such as Iran. Nonetheless, his detractors would have celebrated if they had succeeded in beating Iran and destroying its centrifuges. Among his detractors were warmongering Republicans he was wary and weary of and whom he criticized for waging war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq on wrong pretenses. Yet, it would certainly have come to a costly price with millions or even billions of dollars spent, a lot of American casualties, and certainly some American and international laws flouted. The Obama Administration managed to prove that Iran was lying in its stated objectives and succeeded in bringing together unlikely partners such as Russia and China to compel Iran into cooperating. If Iran had attacked Israel or any other country, President Obama's detractors would have found a way to blame it on him even though the situation could have been partly prevented during George W. Bush's Presidency.

Iran was a place in the Arab world where President Obama and his Administration fared well, compared to Libya for instance. The situation in Iran could have gone sour if the Obama Administration had not changed course after what President George W. Bush had done, i.e. not engaging with Iran. Despite President Obama's perceived inexperience all over the world, he and his team held firm and managed to bring about more peace or rather to prevent more chaos from happening. Despite opposing the Iraq war—the "wrong war"—and being perceived as anti-war, Barack Obama wanted to have all options on the table and wanted to be able to launch strikes there if need be. In the end, he did not have to invade Iran to achieve his goals, goals that would benefit

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<sup>402</sup> CHOLLET, Derek, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>403</sup> This can be linked to when Kamala Harris personally accused Joe Biden in 2020 before becoming his running mate, Vice President, and trusted adviser.

the whole world except those who were belligerent in Iran. However, Iran has continued to try to build a nuclear arsenal, which is why the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a danger.

Nuclear attacks and accidents may happen more frequently now that more powers and agents are interested in nuclear weaponry. Examples of such accidents and attacks abound for what nuclear incidents represent: Chernobyl, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1986); Fukushima, Japan (March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011), and Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine (2022 and 2023) (where fights occurred near the nuclear power plant which alarmed UN Secretary-General António Guterres).

### Donald Trump's Election

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential Elections surprised almost everybody in the United States as well as in the world, including incumbent President Barack Obama and his team. The eccentric billionaire managed to win over Hillary Clinton despite losing the popular vote by more than 3 million votes.<sup>404</sup> The American system is different from the French one. Winning the electoral vote is sufficient to clinch the victory. The American system favors the states in a winner-takes-all fashion. Donald Trump lost by 3 million votes which was about 1% percent of the American population at the time, yet he managed to win big states such as Texas and Florida to compensate for the loss of California.

There can be multiple interpretations of the loss of Democrats in that presidential election. First, it can be attributed to the particularity of the American system. If Hillary Clinton only won the popular vote in a typical system, she would have been the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, the first woman to hold this position while being the first woman to clinch the nomination for her party. But Donald Trump might have changed his strategy to appeal to masses on a bigger scale.

Then, states are given an incredible amount of power in the United States. The 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—which is the last one of the Bill of Rights of 1791—is known as states' rights and is the one famous example of the latitude left to the states. For instance, France is a highly centralized country while the United States is federalist like Germany. Federalism is the reason why laws can vary from one state to another while all being constitutional, which means pursuant to the U.S. Constitution. Each state also has its own constitution, Supreme Court, Senate, House of Representatives (except Nebraska whose system is unicameral). Moreover, the principle of "equality of rights" makes the states of the union equal. Each state has two senators even if the state does not have many inhabitants and/or is very small. In a certain way, candidates have to woo the electors of many regions and states by travelling and being conscious of the different cultures, mentalities and industries all over the massive country where people can live separated by three hours and many more to travel from the West coast to the East coast. Hillary Clinton has been reproached for somewhat neglecting states such as Michigan,

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<sup>404</sup> BRANAA, Jean-Éric, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Wisconsin<sup>405</sup> or even Pennsylvania (which Joe Biden won in 2020 partly because he was born there) that she and her team thought they could easily win.

The Presidency of Barack Obama also has certainly played a certain role in Trump's victory. It is still hard to entirely blame the Obama Administration and the Democrats for their loss. Winning millions of votes more than Republicans was quite a feat yet the particularity of the American system did not favor this quite large margin. Hillary Clinton will probably be remembered as the first woman to clinch the nomination for her party (maybe before Vice President and President of the Senate Kamala Harris joins her to complete the list) and as a big what-if had she won the electoral vote as well. She could have protected many pieces of President Obama's legacy, ranging from his Executive Orders (which can be easily reversed yet there has to be a justification) such as his 2012 DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival) and his 2014 DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans); his foreign policy accomplishments such as the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, the renewed relations with Cuba, the Iran Nuclear Deal also known as JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action); and the domestic law that has been labeled as Obama's, Obamacare, which Trump vowed to repeal as soon as he arrived in office. Nonetheless, no President except Republican Ronald Reagan managed to have an immediate successor from his party after having served two terms. Thus, no party managed to have three consecutive terms, including the first eight years from one President. That being said, even Ronald Reagan did not manage to have a successor serve two consecutive terms, in this case his Vice President, George H.W. Bush. With the benefit of hindsight, it is still remarkable for Democrats to have had the first African-American President serve two full terms; then have a woman clinch the nomination and win the popular vote in the person of Hillary Clinton; and finally to have another Democratic President, Joe Biden, along with the first female Vice President, Kamala Harris. Democrats thus served three out of the last four terms. Only time will tell if this period will be extended and remembered as one of the best for Democrats. Just as Barack Obama's presidency can be attributed partly to the eight years of President George W. Bush (or Bush 43),<sup>406</sup> the term served by Donald Trump can be seen as a repudiation of the Democrats, Barack Obama and his legacy (especially Obamacare, which Donald Trump vowed to repeal).

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<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>406</sup> President George W. Bush's years were not the best for Americans because of 9/11, the disastrous handling of the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina, the financial crisis and the President's questionable capacity to be at the head of the country even though he had been to prestigious universities, despite having average grades.

## Conclusion

Barack Obama defied all odds and became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, and the first black President in a country where the Presidential house had been partly built by slaves. Symbolically, he chose a diametrically opposed man to be his running mate and Vice President, Joe Biden, who was closer to Hillary Clinton. Joe Biden was an experienced white Senator for the state of Delaware.

President Obama gained credit as he made his style known to high officials, a style which consisted in thoroughly studying subjects. He learnt the lesson after the “shellacking” of the 2010 Midterm Elections. He managed to be reelected and rode the wave of Osama bin Laden’s killing which benefited his Administration and himself. The American population attributed this symbolic victory over al-Qaeda to the President, since the United States favors winners.

His style also consisted in adopting a Third Way—not unlike President Clinton—to triangulate his policies and choose rather centrist or moderate judges. President Obama nominated two female Supreme Court Justices without much opposition, namely Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, in the first two years of his presidency. Then, before the 2016 Presidential Elections, President Obama nominated Moderate Merrick Garland, who could have been a consensual choice. The President chose a Moderate Judge not to antagonize Republicans and Conservatives, so that Hillary Clinton would be more likely to become the first female President of the U.S. However, the nomination of Merrick Garland was not confirmed since Republicans refused to study his résumé, for they bet the GOP was more likely to win the Presidential Elections and have a unified government after the end of Barack Obama’s tenure. The situation marked the beginning of a stalemate presidency which was imbued with gridlock. The Republicans’ bid proved to be successful as Republican Donald Trump won and strove to repeal every single one of the Obama Administration’s policies.

The Supreme Court that President Obama helped constitute voted in favor of same-sex marriage. It was President Obama’s right-hand, Vice President Biden, who publicly supported such unions. This forced the President to clarify his position on same-sex marriage and to publicly support it. Careful as he was, Barack Obama deemed it dangerous to defend same-sex marriage before a clear majority of Americans supported it.

Furthermore, President Obama learnt at his expense that each word of his could be interpreted in such a way as to destabilize the country, as was the case after his statement about

Professor Gates' arrest by a police officer. To de-escalate tensions, the President symbolically invited his friend the Professor, and the police officer involved in the arrest. The reunion took place in the White House and was dubbed the "Beer Summit."

The issue of race, which is a major bone of contention in the United States, became even more destabilizing there when young black men were successively killed, such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray. Both on the national scene and on the international scene, President Obama tried to make himself as discrete as possible and to appear as little black as possible. On the home front, he adopted blind-race policies that would not only benefit black people, such as was the case with the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which is best known as Obamacare. On the international scene, he did not privilege Africa beyond measure even though his father was Kenyan. Barack Obama's impact on the African continent during his political life was more symbolic than substantial. For instance, he and his wife Michelle Obama took HIV tests there, which proved to be negative, in order to fight against the stigma of sexual diseases in Africa.

In other countries, President Obama's approach was more substantial although still highly symbolic. In Cuba, he historically renewed links with the government. The country had been closed off and still frozen in the period of the Cold War as old cars there show. The President was also willing to discuss with countries of the "Axis of Evil" such as Iran. With diplomacy and the help of Russia, the United States brokered the Iran Nuclear Deal, which is also known as JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). As part of the "Reset" strategy with Russia, President Obama managed to have Syrian President Bashar al-Assad relinquish his chemical weapons arsenal in what is probably going to go down in history as unnoticed, especially after he had warned Syria of the consequences of ignoring and trespassing the "Red Line." Sanctions were minimal and it seems that President Bashar al-Assad had his way thanks to the backing of Russia. Barack Obama's rhetoric and lack of actions did not benefit himself nor his image. Russia also posed a problem to the United States when it annexed Crimea, and the Donbas in Ukraine in 2014 after the promising talks that had the United States and Russia reduce their nuclear stockpiles under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 2010 and 2011.

Instability spread in the Middle East after the outing of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the death of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, the killing of Osama bin Laden (the leader of al-Qaeda), and the birth and strengthening of the Islamic State which orchestrated terrorist attacks

throughout the world. The Obama Administration was careful not to renew the mistakes of the Bush Administration which led the United States to a quagmire in Iraq.

Due to the high hopes placed in Barack Obama, his rhetoric, and his promises, he was awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize after a few months in office because of the change he embodied. His being awarded was more of an encouragement than a reward for his historical accomplishments.

Perhaps what explains Barack Obama's prestige as a Former President is that he is human, compassionate, and dedicated. The tears he shed after the Sandy Hook School shooting best exemplify this since he has stayed highly popular, as a caring father and fellow citizen, even if his wishes to impose stricter laws to regulate guns have not proved much successful.

President Obama's legacy will be best remembered in years if not decades when his few blunders are forgotten. This benefited Former Presidents whose résumés mainly comprise their successes, not much their failures. Barack Obama's Presidency marked the end of President George W. Bush's isolationism, and Hillary Clinton's defeat in 2016 signified the beginning of the American public's reaction toward Barack Obama's actions. In 2016, Barack Obama and the Democrats suffered a partial defeat, not a complete one because Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. However, the consequences of this partial rebuke were complete. President Trump strove to repeal every single law and accomplishment of the Obama Administration, the Capitol was invaded by Americans who thought that the 2020 Presidential Elections were rigged since Donald Trump had not won, Donald Trump was impeached (but not removed from office), and Russia invaded the rest of Ukraine. However, in 2020, the Democrats won both the popular vote and the electoral vote as Joe Biden—Barack Obama's Vice President—was elected, thus showing that four years of President Trump were enough for the Americans to recognize Barack Obama to his fair value, before a potential rematch of the 2020 Presidential Elections in 2024.

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## Résumé

Barack Obama incarnait aussi bien les espoirs du peuple américain que ceux de la communauté internationale. Analyser les idées derrière l'Obamacare constitue un passage obligé afin de comprendre le style d'Obama. Nous nous intéressons notamment à la politique étrangère d'Obama qui est une scène largement influencée par le pragmatisme et le relationnel. L'opération qui a éliminé Oussama Ben Laden témoigne de la prise considérée de risques à l'orée des élections présidentielles qui auraient pu s'avérer fatales. Du point de vue national, le « sommet de la bière » fut un moment fort et symbolique de la présidence Obama. Ce mémoire tente de souligner l'aspect symbolique et historique de la présidence Obama en s'appuyant sur la personnalité de Barack Obama et sur les écrits de membres de son administration qui ont tenté de recontextualiser les événements en pesant le pour et le contre. La recontextualisation est primordiale afin de connaître les tenants et les aboutissants de ses années au pouvoir et de mettre en lumière l'opposition farouche et l'obstruction systématique des Républicains au Congrès auxquelles il a dû faire face.

## Mots-clés

Obama, Obamacare, Oussama Ben Laden, guerres, changement, pragmatisme, symbolisme, présidence, États-Unis.

## Abstract

Barack Obama embodied the hopes of the American people as well as those of the international community. Analyzing the ideas behind Obamacare is a prerequisite to understand Obama's style. It is especially interesting to focus on Obama's foreign policy which is a field largely influenced by pragmatism and the relational side. The operation that wiped Osama bin Laden off the map is proof of deliberate risk-taking on the verge of the presidential elections which could have proved fatal. On the national front, the "Beer Summit" was a symbolic highlight of the Obama presidency. This dissertation aims at underlining the symbolic and historical aspect of the Obama presidency by relying on Barack Obama's personality and the writing of members of his administration who have tried to recontextualize events by balancing the pros and the cons. Recontextualizing proves to be of the utmost importance in order to know the ins and outs. Most notably, the fierce opposition and the systematic gridlock undertaken by the Congressional Republicans are put into perspective.

## Keywords

Obama, Obamacare, Osama bin Laden, wars, change, pragmatism, symbolism, presidency, United States.