

**Henry Jackson Society  
Winter 2010**

**LETTER FROM WASHINGTON/  
Adventures in Engagement**

**By Lawrence J. Haas**

Though he did not coin the phrase, the influential economist John Kenneth Galbraith popularized the notion of “conventional wisdom,” describing it more than a half-century ago as “the ideas which are esteemed at any time” for both their “acceptability” and “predictability.”<sup>1</sup> Such ideas, he might have added, become “conventional wisdom” when they gravitate from the opinion pages of leading newspapers to dinner tables across America.

And so it was that I was dining recently at a Greek restaurant with my wife and daughter when I could not avoid overhearing the robust conversation among three couples to my right. “He criticizes our friends and appeases our enemies,” the man seated furthest from me said of President Obama, his anger evident. It was the one-sentence critique of Obama’s foreign policy that is now conventional wisdom in conservative circles, though it has adherents elsewhere on the political spectrum.

That an idea is conventional, of course, does not make it, ipso facto, correct. In fact, Americans use the term “conventional wisdom” as often to disparage ideas as to validate them – to suggest that an idea is widely accepted within the popular culture because average Americans cannot grasp a more complex reality. That conventional wisdom on foreign policy, in particular, may short-change the complexity of reality seems not just plausible, but likely. Still, conventional wisdom seems as good a launching point as any from which to examine Obama’s performance to date in the global arena.

“He criticizes our friends and appeases our enemies.” Which of our friends think so?

- The Brits, who have enjoyed a “special relationship” with America since FDR and Churchill, think so. Obama rejected Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s repeated requests for a one-on-one meeting before granting one and returned a bust of Churchill that had occupied the Oval Office, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed neutrality in a new dispute over the British-administered Falkland Islands over which Britain went to war with Argentina three decades ago.
- Europe thinks so, noting Obama has not nourished the close relations with its leaders that earlier presidents enjoyed, that Administration officials have chastised Europe for not stepping up on major international challenges, and that Obama chose not to attend a U.S.-European summit planned for May, forcing its cancellation.
- Israel thinks so, after Obama pressured Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu into a settlement freeze in the West Bank as a way to re-start Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, elevated a mistimed Israeli announcement about a settlement expansion in a Jewish

community in northern Jerusalem into a major incident, and refused a public appearance with Netanyahu after his recent visit to Washington.

- Colombia think so, after Obama chose not to push Congress to ratify the pending U.S. trade deal with this staunch U.S. ally and after he warmly greeted Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan strongman who has supported terrorists seeking to topple Colombia's government.
- Honduras thinks so, after the Administration sought to reinstall as president a Chavez ally who was legally removed from office.

All of that, Obama's supporters would say, is a selective take on reality. In their view, Obama is re-balancing U.S. foreign policy after eight years of all-friends, no-adversaries absolutism under his predecessor. Rather than talking just to friends, he is doing what he promised – “engaging” with friend and foe alike because engagement can produce greater understanding. That, Obama would say, can generate progress on issues of mutual concern, perhaps even breakthroughs on longstanding disagreements. Obama, his supporters would say, is also speaking more honestly with allies, such as in Europe where he is urging leaders to work with him in more tangible ways. And he's re-engaging with the “global community” writ large through the United Nations, whether that means working toward more sanctions against Iran through its Security Council or joining its notorious Human Rights Council in order to improve the council from the inside rather than criticize it from the outside.

Obama's no-holds-barred engagement is more than a tactic, however. It reflects the President's overarching approach to foreign policy. A “realist” who has praised the foreign policy approach of uber-realist President George H.W. Bush, he engages with other nations less on the basis of shared values than strategic interests. With rare exceptions, he is far less judgmental than earlier U.S. presidents. He has raised eyebrows more than once by criticizing his own nation's policies while speaking on foreign soil. He responded to the reporter's question about whether he believes in “American exceptionalism” by opining, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” Facing the choice between strengthening relations with authoritarian regimes and promoting freedom and democracy within their borders, he has consistently opted for the former. While seeking better ties with China and Russia, the Administration also has reached out to some of the world's worst human rights abusers, such as Burma and Sudan, for new efforts at engagement. Not surprisingly, Obama has reassured the realists who dominate key centers of America's foreign policy establishment while disappointing human rights advocates who support a more values-based foreign policy.

The question, of course, is what Obama's realism has garnered. Clearly, no crisis has erupted on his watch. And in a few places, the United States can claim a significant breakthrough (e.g., arms control with Russia), continues to make progress (e.g., stabilizing Iraq), or has made a tangible commitment to do so (e.g., more troops to Afghanistan and a push for President Hamid Karzai to more aggressively fight corruption and improve governance). The record grows murkier, however, when we move to other places where Obama promised more engagement, such as the

Middle East and Iran, and when we consider Obama's efforts to entice more cooperation from China and Russia.

"Let's face it," a leading Washington magazine opined in its March 11 issue, (though admittedly before the U.S.-Russia arms deal). "America's foreign policy is hardly healthier than its economy. Of course, jobs and taxes still dominate the politics of the day. Republicans will likely be running election campaigns on those matters. But, as foreign policy comes into focus more and more, Democrats may seek refuge from Barack Obama's grand strategy and its consequences – or lack thereof. For, right now, Obama's frustrated foreign policy is little more than aimlessness."

*The Weekly Standard?* *National Review?* Another leading organ of conservative opinion? No, the critique came from *The New Republic*, the century-old bastion of progressive thinking and Democratic support. "The thrust of Obama's strategy," it concluded, "has been to rebuild U.S. credibility and create space for cooperation on our key priorities. But evidence of such success has yet to materialize. Obama acted on his dream and, thus far, has failed. Nobody likes to have his dream refuted by reality; but it is time for the reality-based community to act reality-based. We await this president's learning curve."<sup>ii</sup>

Let's take a closer look.

Read more:

<http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/HJS%20Letter%20from%20Washington%20Spring%202010.pdf>

---

<sup>i</sup> Galbraith, John Kenneth, *The Affluent Society*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 1958.

<sup>ii</sup> *The New Republic*, March 11, 2010.