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**LETTER FROM WASHINGTON/
OBAMA AND HUMAN RIGHTS:
Hitting the “Reset Button”**

By Lawrence J. Haas

“Now, it's not productive, given the history of the U.S.-Iranian relations, to be seen as meddling – the U.S. President meddling in Iranian elections.”

President Obama, June 16, 2009

Responding to Iran's fraudulent Presidential election and subsequent protests

“America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal. We will bear witness to the quiet dignity of reformers like Aung Sang Suu Kyi; to the bravery of Zimbabweans who cast their ballots in the face of beatings; to the hundreds of thousands who have marched silently through the streets of Iran.”

President Obama, December 9, 2009

Nobel Peace Prize ceremony

American foreign policy is as much art as science, as much nuance as hard rule, as much shaped by the history and circumstance of, say, a particular bilateral relationship as by a President's principles. However they presented themselves during their campaigns, whatever their basic framework for foreign affairs, all recent Presidents have been part idealist and part realist, their words and deeds sometimes in conflict with one another from week to week, depending on events from abroad and politics at home. Thus, the conflict between President Obama's pronouncements on human rights displayed above is less striking than it may seem; all modern-day Presidents have examples to match.

Nevertheless, as Obama begins his second year, the question arises: what should we make of his approach to human rights so far? On no area of policy (foreign or domestic) has this political shooting star, this bright and hopeful new face on the world stage, brought such reassurance to some and disappointment by others. On no issue do we have such a muddled picture of what the new President is trying to accomplish.

That a Democratic President finds himself in this position is historically ironic – and yet perfectly predictable in the context of contemporary politics. Historically, Democrats have promoted human rights far more consistently than Republicans. Democrats essentially put the issue on the foreign policy agenda of both the United States and the world at large in the middle of the last century, and Democrats consistently kept the issue front and center through the ensuing decades. But, President George W. Bush's mismanagement of the Iraq war (which the President tied to human right promotion after U.S. forces failed to find Saddam's weapons of mass destruction) and his push for Palestinian elections (which catapulted the terrorist group

Hamas to power) tarnished the issue and made today's Democrats wary of reclaiming it for the post-Bush years.

In recent weeks, however, Obama and his foreign policy team seem to be doing for human rights what they had promised to do for U.S.-Russian relations: "hitting the reset button." A President who for most of the last year has given the issue short shrift – refusing meetings with overseas dissidents as they passed through Washington, seeking "engagement" with the world's worst human rights abusers, speaking tentatively about U.S. support for democratic activists in Iran, China, and elsewhere – has more recently embraced human rights promotion in his high-profile public statements. So, too, has Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose policy evolution mirrors that of Obama.

Obama's transformation – presuming that we *are* witnessing a policy transformation, not a short-term tactic – is welcome and reassuring. It puts the world's leading power squarely back on the side of its highest ideals – those of freedom and democracy, of human rights and tolerance. It will make the nation once again a source of inspiration, a beacon for those seeking to escape the chains of oppression. To the extent that it inspires democratic aspirants the world over to activism and eventual success, spreading American values to more places, it will make the world safer for all of its people. As Obama put it when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo last month, "peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. Only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting."

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