

# The Halfway 'Obama Doctrine'

**Exclusive:** President Obama's counterterrorism speech failed to quiet his critics on the Left who want an immediate end to the "war on terror" and those on the Right who demand more Bush-Cheney policies. Obama charted a middle course of gradually reducing violence and asking for patience, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

How to view President Barack Obama's speech on counterterrorism can be likened to how you might think about a serious drug problem: you could deny that anything's wrong and keep using; demand a cold-turkey withdrawal; or ratchet down the drug dosage over time to a minimal level.

Obama, both in his speech and his evolving policies, has opted for the third approach. Overall, he has reduced the levels of violence even as he has used some methods, such as lethal drones, with greater ferocity than his predecessor. Yet, even with drones, the number of strikes has been dropping in recent months.

The President also has withdrawn all U.S. combat forces from Iraq to the dismay of Official Washington's neocons and has drawn down troop levels in Afghanistan after a 2009 "surge" advocated by his holdover Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the military high command.

In his May 23 speech, Obama also announced that he will resume repatriating Guantanamo Bay detainees who have been deemed not to represent a terrorist threat. Obama vowed, too, to revive his earlier effort to close the offshore prison despite vigorous congressional opposition.

In other words, one way to evaluate Obama – just past the expected halfway mark of his presidency – is by measuring the trends of American military violence as he has scaled it back, rather than judging each individual aspect which may have its own legal and humanitarian concerns, i.e. violations of international law from drone strikes and the deaths of more noncombatants.

For many of Obama's critics on the Left, his measured approach toward gradually weaning U.S. national security policy off its heavy reliance on violence (like conventional war) and replacing that with more selective tactics (like drones) is still unacceptable. His strategy does, as they note, continue to flout international law.

To these critics, the use of weaponized drones in the airspace over other nations is a clear violation of their sovereignty and the killing of civilians (or even suspected terrorists) breaches standards on human rights and due

process. Whatever sophistry Obama and his lawyers may devise, there is no doubt that these objections are correct.

International law offers no special permission for the United States to conduct a transnational war against shadowy organizations of loosely defined "militants." Imprecise claims of self-defense are not what the United Nations Charter had in mind when it included that exception to prohibitions on military force.

One can only imagine how outraged Official Washington would be if some other country began sending unmanned aerial vehicles across borders to assassinate its "enemies." Such a country would be branded an international outlaw or worse.

### **Moral Grays**

Still, Obama's speech represented something of a plea to his critics to see the problem in the moral grays of a shadow struggle against a ruthless foe eager to kill innocent civilians, not in the blacks and whites of a perfect world where the rule of law neatly prevails. In one of the most emotional parts of his speech, Obama said:

"America does not take strikes to punish individuals; we act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people, and when there are no other governments capable of effectively addressing the threat. And before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured – the highest standard we can set.

"Now, this last point is critical, because much of the criticism about drone strikes – both here at home and abroad – understandably centers on reports of civilian casualties. There's a wide gap between U.S. assessments of such casualties and nongovernmental reports. Nevertheless, it is a hard fact that U.S. strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in every war.

"For me, and those in my chain of command, those deaths will haunt us as long as we live, just as we are haunted by the civilian casualties that have occurred throughout conventional fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. But as Commander-in-Chief, I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives.

"To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties – not just in our cities at home and our facilities abroad, but also in the very places like Sana'a and Kabul and Mogadishu where terrorists seek a foothold. Remember that the terrorists we are after target civilians, and the death toll from their acts of terrorism against Muslims dwarfs any estimate of civilian casualties from drone strikes. So doing nothing is not an option."

Implicit in his speech was a warning, too, that any president who ignores the terrorist threat invites even more draconian policies in the future if another 9/11 happens. However, Obama argued that even staying for too long on the course charted by George W. Bush would fundamentally alter the U.S. constitutional structure. He said:

“America is at a crossroads. We must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us. We have to be mindful of James Madison’s warning that ‘No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.’ Neither I, nor any president, can promise the total defeat of terror. We will never erase the evil that lies in the hearts of some human beings, nor stamp out every danger to our open society.

“But what we can do – what we must do – is dismantle networks that pose a direct danger to us, and make it less likely for new groups to gain a foothold, all the while maintaining the freedoms and ideals that we defend. And to define that strategy, we have to make decisions based not on fear, but on hard-earned wisdom.”

### **Political Imbalance**

In effect, Obama was acknowledging the reality of today’s U.S. political/media structure that has made “security” against terrorism a prerequisite for holding high office. So, rather than go “cold-turkey” on America’s addiction to endless warfare the narcotic to dull the fear of another 9/11 he opted for a gradual withdrawal from this dependency.

Obama’s approach has led to a zigzag path in his national security policies. He kept on Bush’s last Defense Secretary Gates and Bush’s high command, including Gen. David Petraeus, a neocon favorite. As a nod to more hawkish Democrats, Obama named Hillary Clinton his Secretary of State.

Obama ignored warnings from some analysts that he risked getting boxed in to more military-oriented solutions than he might personally prefer which happened in 2009 when Gates, Petraeus and Clinton pushed for a major troop escalation in Afghanistan, a move that some administration officials say Obama regretted almost immediately.

However, he twinned the escalation with a commitment to phase out the U.S. combat role in Afghanistan by the end of 2014. He also stepped up drone attacks against al-Qaeda-related targets in Pakistan, Yemen and other countries as he pressed ahead with a military withdrawal from Iraq, a pullout that was completed by the end of 2011.

Bending to Secretary Clinton’s wishes, Obama authorized use of U.S. air power in

the military campaign to oust Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. But Obama refused to commit combat forces in Libya, and in the Syrian civil war, he resisted pressure from Petraeus (who had become CIA director) and Clinton to arm the Syrian rebels in their struggle to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Both Petraeus and Clinton were soon gone.

Obama also has rejected Israeli demands that he join in air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, relying instead on economic sanctions to restrain Iran's advancement of its nuclear capabilities and insisting that military action would be only considered as a last resort to stop Iran from building a nuclear bomb, which its senior officials say they don't want anyway.

So, one way to assess what might be called the Obama Doctrine is to recognize the nuances that he has added to the U.S. use of military force, especially when compared to the policies of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. In particular, Cheney's "One Percent Doctrine" insisted on a violent response against a possible terrorist threat even if the perceived risk were only one percent.

If the Obama Doctrine continues for the next three-plus years without any major reversals i.e., no large-scale terrorist strike inside the United States or some new conflict abroad it's likely that American military forces will be more at peace than at any time since 9/11. Even drone attacks would be a relatively rare event.

And, if Obama lives up to his commitments in his May 23 speech, the number of detainees at Guantanamo (or some successor site) would be dramatically reduced, presumably down to several dozen men identified as dangerous terrorists, including some implicated in the 9/11 attacks.

### **Frustration of Gradualism**

That gradualism, however, is not acceptable to Americans who favor the "cold-turkey" response to the U.S. addiction to the Bush-Cheney anything-goes behavior after 9/11. They insist that Obama abide by international law, renounce use of lethal drones and accept unconditionally the constitutional principles of legal due process now.

Besides the civil liberties concerns, people in this group argue that the goal of reducing terrorism is best advanced by closing U.S. military bases around the world and addressing legitimate grievances of Muslims and other groups alienated by decades of American double-talk and double-standards.

That way, this group maintains, the United States can be both true to its ideals and safer. They believe that Obama's approach of simply phasing down the Bush-

Cheney lawlessness only invites more anger in the Islamic world and more danger at home.

There is, of course, the third grouping, Americans who still favor the Bush-Cheney “tough-guy-ism.” This group asserts that U.S. “enemies” only respect American force and that any hesitancy to use it shows weakness and vulnerability. Many in this group believe that a “clash of civilizations” is under way and that political Islam must be categorically defeated.

Though these advocates for “the Long War” have been on the defensive since Bush’s failures in Iraq and Obama’s election in 2008, they remain a powerful force in Official Washington and throughout the U.S. news media. They include leading politicians such as Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham; many analysts at prominent think tanks; and many commentators at media outlets from Fox News and right-wing talk radio to the Washington Post and the New York Times.

Whenever there’s a setback in Obama’s strategy, these loud voices are quick to denounce his perceived “failure” on “terror,” as we’ve seen after last year’s Benghazi attack and this year’s Boston Marathon bombings.

Part of Obama’s trouble here is the continuing inability of the Left to build any significant mechanism for reaching out to the American people with information and analysis, certainly nothing that compares to the billions upon billions of dollars that the Right has spent to build its vertically integrated media machine, from newspapers, magazines and books to radio, TV and well-funded Internet sites.

That imbalance has left Obama on the defensive any time a terrorist attack succeeds. Not only does he get bashed from the Right but from the mainstream media, as occurred in the months since the Benghazi attack over something as trivial as the preparation of “talking points” for a second-tier official appearing on TV.

### **An Imperfect Strategy**

Yet, instead of investing in a media apparatus that can begin to counter what the Right has created, many on the Left seem content to berate Obama for his imperfect strategy. In their view, it’s not enough for Obama to have reduced the bloodshed. It will not be enough even if he has all U.S. combat troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan and makes the targeting of suspected terrorists a rare event. Any violent acts no matter how seemingly justifiable and isolated will still be condemned, as will Obama.

Nevertheless, the emerging reality is that the Obama Doctrine is slowly arguably

way too slowly eliminating many of the worst violations of international law and the rules of war that were central to the Bush-Cheney Doctrine. A new equilibrium is emerging between homeland security and human rights. This rebalancing is far from perfect and needs continued criticism and vigilance, but there have been undeniable steps in a less violent and a less lawless direction.

Nothing that Obama has done in office can reasonably be compared to Bush's illegal invasion of Iraq with the resulting deaths of nearly 4,500 U.S. troops and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. That was both a gross violation of international law, a humanitarian catastrophe (which continues to this day in Iraqi sectarian violence), and a gateway for many young Muslims to develop hatred toward the United States.

Yes, I know that force feeding hunger strikers at Guantanamo inflicts pain and can be regarded as torture, but it is not the same as torturing detainees with waterboarding and other brutal techniques for the purpose of extracting information. One procedure is done to keep people alive; the other put lives at risk and, in some cases, resulted in deaths.

The answer to the hunger strike is to do what Obama has belatedly committed himself to do: transfer cleared detainees to other countries as quickly as possible, waiving whatever restrictions Congress has imposed, and to put other detainees on trial, preferably in civilian courts which have been much more effective in handling terrorism cases than the makeshift military tribunals. It also might help if ending the "war on terror" was made an issue in the congressional elections in 2014.

In summation, to return to the metaphor of drug abuse: The American political system is far from clean. It still wants a security "fix" from time to time. But the dosages are down and declining. This gradual withdrawal is making the patient healthier albeit slowly. Yet there remains a big danger of a relapse.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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