

Obama is Overpromising the Wrong Things

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAY 16 2012

The widely respected *Financial Times* columnist, Gideon Rachman, recently gave his assessment of President Obama's first term foreign policy record, the one for which the Nobel Committee awarded him the Peace Prize before it even started. Rachman is less impressed. He sees Obama's record as more failed promises than scored successes. In fact the one success Rachman actually acknowledges, the killing of Osama bin Laden and coupled with the rain of drone missile attacks on al Qaeda and friends, he describes as Bush-like in tone and value, certainly not the proud work of someone who ran in 2008 as the cure for the failed Bush years.

Rachman is no Republican apologist. Least the charge be implied, he makes the compulsory ridicule of Republican critiques of Obama foreign policy that it is weak and craven. Obama's record fails in Rachman's view, not because his foreign efforts were too soft on America's enemies and friends, but rather because he didn't push hard enough to achieve his many initial promises. The Rachman catalog is long of failed promises—solving the Iranian nuclear issue through diplomacy, gaining that elusive peace between Israel and Palestine, transforming America's image in the Muslim world, closing the prison at Guantanamo, fixing Afghanistan, resetting relations with Russia, and improving the opportunities for global cooperation with China. Instead of being off to a bold new start, America under Obama is the same old pragmatic global policeman, harassing some criminals while sharing coffee (or sometimes tea) and the occasional doughnut with others of equal or greater guilt.

Not recognized in the piece is the possibility that Obama's failures in foreign policy are not in the inability to achieve his promises, but rather in making the promises in the first place. Peace between the Arabs and the Israelis will not likely come through wise bribes or carefully timed threats by outsiders. It will not likely be found at Camp David or in Oslo. Rather it is theirs to discover or avoid. America's image in the Muslim world is likely the product of many things more important and less controllable than presidential speeches in Cairo or Istanbul. And resetting relations with Russia and China is likely a constant thing, not a one of kind event kicked off by a press conference or two.

The problem is in the promising. America can meddle in the affairs of others but it is likely to achieve very little that is recognizably good or sustainable. It is more in control back home where it has years of neglected problems to address and difficult choices to make. Roaming the globe making promises of how we will help or reform others may be a pleasing task for a work avoiding president and an entourage of fawning columnists, but it is likely to be disappointing for all. Gideon Rachman would be better to have criticized the Obama promises than the failure to achieve them. Getting Osama is a prize that we all admire. Fixing America's debt problem, repairing its infrastructure, getting its too many poor whites and minorities on the right track to having relevant skills for a modern economy would gain acclaim at home and abroad as well. If only someone would make those promises.

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About the author:

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Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.