

OBAMA'S B+

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, DEC 25 2009

Answering a question from that professor of the airwaves Oprah Winfrey, President Obama gave himself a B+ as a grade for his first year in office. This proved, as a friend said, that he did indeed attend Columbia and Harvard, Ivy League universities renowned in America for their grade inflation and self-congratulatory style.

To be fair to President Obama, however, 2009 was not a terrible year in terms of American security. The war in Iraq continued to wind down and the war in Afghanistan got worse, but they both were already heading these diverting directions before Obama took office. Not much progress was made this year in improving our relations with Iran or North Korea or in gaining a stable peace between the Arabs and Israelis, but then again there hardly ever is progress in these arenas. And in 2009 the usual number of reassuringly pointless international conferences, joint training exercises, and state visits were held.

The Obama's national security team, composed as it is of Bush administration holdovers like Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and centrist Democrats like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, aroused few objections. Gates fired a few generals and officials, and championed the demise of a weapon system or two, enhancing a tough guy legacy he is creating for his eventual departure. The president's long drawn out policy review for Afghanistan did little to build a coherent strategy or alter his field commanders' recommendations, seeming confirming the suspicion that it was largely a political exercise to protect an embattled domestic agenda. The rhetoric was all about new beginnings, better relations with allies, and engagement with foes, but the unbiased eye would find little difference with George W. Bush's second term. It was roughly the same priorities and the same set of limited and uncertain achievements.

The Noble Peace Prize award was largely an embarrassment only to the prize committee. President Obama's acceptance speech defended America's wars and role in the world, avoiding the bowing and apologizing that some saw in his trips to Saudi Arabia, Japan and China. And given the failures associated with his visits to Denmark, I think that trips there will be avoided in the future.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are the big gambles. Obama has upped his bet. NATO is easing toward the door. More drones and soldiers are heading into the theater. Afghanistan knows that the US isn't leaving no matter how corrupt and ineffective its government. Pakistan, in an arms race with India and beset by the very terrorists it helped create, knows that the US is not staying. And Iran lurks nearby, building its own Bomb and tearing itself apart politically.

B might have been a more appropriate grade. The problems identified are the big ones. The policies selected may not be the right ones, but it is too soon to tell. The Nobel Prize hasn't been earned, but it hasn't been lost yet either.

About the author:

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