

## **“GRADING PRESIDENT OBAMA”**

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**Contrary to what the title of my lecture says, I am not going to grade President Obama. Instead I will leave it up to the audience to formulate their own opinion based on what I have to say. I do believe that the election of President Obama has created a new climate in US relations with the rest of the world and is a major departure from what we endured during the last eight years. I am sure everyone will agree with me that President Obama is a significant improvement over Bush. At this time in his presidency, Bush had gone to war with Afghanistan, denounced the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, unsigned the Rome Statute for the creation of the International Criminal Court, and announced his intention to withdraw from the ABM Treaty with Russia. Bush advocated a go-it-alone foreign policy, and had little regard for the United Nations or multilateral diplomacy.**

**President Obama is surely an improvement over what we had over the last eight years. However, considering the short time he has been in office and the crises he inherited I think President Obama has done a remarkable job in trying to get the country back on track. Given the last eight years it is not surprising that Americans are eager for change. Americans can be somewhat impatient with their elected officials and tend to have very short memories. We have a fast food mentality which requires everything to happen overnight. How quickly we forgot how long it took to get us in the mess we are in and that any change is likely to take a long time.**

**President Obama echoed a theme during his inaugural address that I think we should all take as a lesson. He said “the world has changed and we should change with it.” We in the United States have still not come to terms with the changing world and the reality that the United States is no longer the invincible hyper power that it once was. We faced a more complex world and more difficult challenges than at any time in the history of mankind. We also lack the resources or the political leadership to tackle them. No major power can resolve the world’s problems alone; nor can military force solve all the world’s problems. On some issues we can act unilaterally, but on many issues we need the cooperation of other nations. Hence we need a new approach to diplomacy and a new thinking in international relations.**

**Upon taking office, President Obama faced some of the difficult political challenges any previous president has faced in history. He inherited two wars: Iraq and Afghanistan, a budget deficit of one trillion dollars, the world worse economic crisis since the Great Depression, fueled in part by the collapse of the housing market in the United States. The president also faced rising unemployment at home, a**

widening gap between rich and poor, a crumbling infrastructure and a declining manufacturing sector. Furthermore, the president inherited a rising trade deficit, a pending health emergency, growing cross border violence orchestrated by drug traffickers from Mexico and a 12 million illegal immigration problem. In addition, the president faced a huge entitlement problem with Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security absorbing about 40% of the federal budget.

Moreover, President Obama faced the possibility of more terrorist attacks on the United States, nuclear proliferation from Iran and North Korea, a growing insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, climate change, and global trade negotiations that have been deadlocked due to lack of leadership from the major trading nations. Finally, the president needed to restore US reputation around the world and provide global leadership in multilateral institutions, which President Bush neglected over an eight year period.

Many of the problems the president inherited existed long before the Bush presidency. However, given Bush's pre-occupation with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his distrust for multilateralism, and his failure to push for immigration or entitlement reforms, made it difficult for him to address these problems during his presidency. The increasing partisan nature of U.S. domestic politics has also made it impossible for the two main political parties to cooperate with the president on key issues confronting the nation.

The election of President Obama was a tremendous achievement for the United States and the world. His election victory ushered in a new era of optimism in U.S. foreign relations and it gave hope to millions of people around the world. This was evident in the wave of enthusiasm that followed the president wherever he traveled and on sight days following his victory and his inauguration. His presidency is transformative in scope and geography.

President Obama came into office with a better understanding of the world and its problems and a greater appreciation for its diversity than his predecessor. The president campaigned on taking a new approach to US diplomacy and making tough decisions on many of the nation domestic and foreign policy challenges. He promised to restore the rule of law in U.S. foreign relations and to speak with both his friends and foes. However, the president faces a daunting task in getting Congress and the public to go along with his policies. Notwithstanding opposition from the Republicans minority, President Obama has had a number of accomplishments in the 10 months since taking office; a remarkable achievement indeed, considering the complexity of these problems and the failure of the Democratic majority to align solidly behind the president's agenda. I will now outline some of the president's achievements.

### **The President's Foreign Policy Achievements:**

- (a) The President signed executive orders to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and to repatriate the prisoners to third countries or try those responsible for the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. He also banned the use of enhanced interrogation techniques/torture and called for CIA interrogators to comply with the Uniform Code of Military Justice.**
- (b) The President has allowed the Justice Department to investigate whether CIA interrogators violated U.S. law in their handling of terror suspects.**
- (c) The President ordered a review of his predecessor's war on terror and decided to withdraw all US troops from Iraq within two years.**
- (d) The President has refocused the war on terror on Afghanistan and increased the number of troops fighting the Taliban. He sees the problems in Afghanistan as inextricably linked to Pakistan's tribal areas and wants to stabilize the entire region.**
- (e) President Obama made overtures to the Muslim world and offered to treat them with mutual respect and to restore trust in the relationship between them and the US.**
- (f) President Obama has reached out to Iran and offered to negotiate directly with the Iranian regime without preconditions. He has also made similar offer to North Korea. The president is willing to speak with both his friends and foes.**
- (g) Relations with Russia have improved significantly since the president took office and it is a sharp departure from the Bush-Putin relationship. This has led to the beginning of negotiations on the reduction in the two countries' nuclear weapons stockpiles.**
- (h) The president has called for the elimination of nuclear weapons and for nuclear weapons states to live up to their commitment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and make a genuine effort to free the world of nuclear weapons.**
- (i) President Obama has also made good relations with China an important aspect of his diplomacy. The president recognizes China's global economic influence and its investment in the US economy. He also realizes that the US needs China's cooperation for resolving regional and global problems, such as the North Korean and Iranian nuclear standoffs.**
- (j) The president has opened a dialogue with the Government of Myanmar in an attempt to resolve that country's long standing political crisis and isolation.**

- (k) President Obama recognizes the emergence of new powers such as Brazil, India and China and the shift in the global distribution of power which means the US can no longer ignore the role of these countries. Hence the president has called for the G-20 to become the decision making body for global economic issues.**
- (l) President Obama has renewed US commitment to multilateralism and has made the UN one of the pillars of his foreign policy. The president won a seat for the US on the UN Human Rights Council soon after he took office.**
- (m) Unlike former President Bush, President Obama recognizes that global warming is a problem and the need to do something about it. The U.S. will now play a leadership role in the climate change negotiations instead of being a spectator.**
- (n) President Obama has canceled the deployment of the radar system in the Czech Republic and the antimissile system in Poland, which he considers ineffective and counter productive. This decision has removed a major point of contention between the US and Russia and paved the way for Russian cooperation on Iran's nuclear program.**
- (o) The president supported the indictment of President Bashir of Sudan by the international Criminal Court (ICC) and he blocked effort in the Security Council by China, Russia, the Arab League and the African Union to delay the indictment.**
- (p) The President lifted the travel ban on Cuban-Americans who wish to return home to visit their relatives. He also removed the restrictions on the amount of money they can send to their families in Cuba. The president is allowing American telecommunication companies to negotiate direct phone service between Cuba and the U.S., and is negotiating the restoration of direct mail service between the two countries.**
- (q) President Obama has returned U.S. diplomats to Syria and Venezuela and held high level talks with both governments about the restoration of full diplomatic relations.**
- (r) Appointed special envoys for the Palestinian- Israeli conflict and the conflict in Afghanistan & Pakistan.**
- (s) The President reversed former President Bush's ban on funds for the United Nations Funds for Population Activities (UNFPA). President Bush initially suspended U.S. funding for the agency because he opposed the so-called Mexico City Declaration, which includes abortion counseling as part of family planning.**

- (t) Above all, President Obama has changed the tone of U.S. diplomacy and helped improve the image of the United States around the world. As the president said in his inaugural address, “the United States is now open for business again.” This was welcome news for many who for eight years grew tired of the tone of U.S. diplomacy under George W. Bush.**

**The President’s Domestic Policy Achievements:**

- (a) The president signed into law the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act.**
- (b) He signed the Children Health Insurance Reauthorization Act (S-CHIP).**
- (c) The president signed the Stimulus Bill to rescue ailing banks, resuscitate the financial sector and to revitalize the US economy. Much of this funding would be spent on infrastructure development, schools, retraining of workers and other domestic programs to stimulate the economy.**
- (d) President Obama extended unemployment compensation to workers who lost their jobs.**
- (e) The president has pushed through a health reform proposal that would require all Americans to have healthcare.**
- (f) The president signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act.**
- (g) Signed the Small Business Act Temporary Extension.**
- (h) The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act.**
- (i) The Fraud Enforcement & Recovery Act.**
- (j) The Helping Families save Their Homes Act.**
- (k) The Weapons Systems Acquisition Reform Act.**
- (l) The Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility and Disclosure Act (CARD) Act of 2009.**
- (m)The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act.**
- (n) The nomination of the first Hispanic judge to the Supreme Court.**

### **Areas in Need of Improvement:**

- (a) Repatriation of Guantanamo Bay detainees.**
- (b) Breaking the deadlock in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.**
- (c) Developing a new strategy for the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict.**
- (d) Expediting the ratification process of existing trade agreements and restarting the Doha Rounds of trade negotiations. The president's imposition of tariffs against Chinese tire imports has also raised questions about his commitment to free trade.**
- (e) Getting a climate bill through Congress.**
- (f) Finding a new strategy to deal with the North Korea nuclear issue.**
- (g) Addressing the Darfur crisis.**
- (h) Articulating a new human rights policy for the United States. Many in the human rights community have criticized the president for his failure to make human rights a top priority of his administration. The president seems to have subordinated human rights to realpolitik. He has not been critical of China's human rights policy; refused to meet with the Dalai Lama; rejected the Richard Goldstone report findings that both Israel and Hamas committed war crimes in the Gaza conflict. The Obama administration also pressured the Palestinians not to establish a commission of inquiry as recommended by the commission, and refused to have the matter brought before the Security Council.**
- (i) Failure to articulate a post-Cold War foreign policy for the United States.**
- (j) Delay on formulating a foreign policy for the EU, Latin America, Africa and Asia.**
- (k) Failure to develop a new immigration policy.**
- (l) Expediting the trials of suspected terrorists held at Guantanamo Bay.**
- (m) Stalling on the rights for suspected terrorists held in U.S. detention facilities abroad.**
- (n) Continuing the Bush policy of invoking the "State Secret" law to shield the U.S. Government from civil lawsuits brought by detainees for human rights violation. The president has also opposed the release of intelligence information shared with Britain regarding alleged torture of Binyam Mohamed by U.S. interrogators while he was held at Guantanamo Bay prison. Mohamed filed suit in British court and the court has ruled that the British Government must release summary of the intelligence, which is at the core of Mohamed's case.**
- (o) Failure to establish a new regulatory regime with stronger oversight of banks and the financial sector.**
- (p) Failure to fill key diplomatic posts and vacancies on the federal courts.**
- (q) The president's desire to renew certain provisions of the Domestic Surveillance Act.**

- (r) The president has not submitted the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to the Senate for ratification; nor has he submitted a laundry list of human rights treaties.**
- (s) Sign and ratify the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court (ICC).**

**Notwithstanding all what has been above, I think given the time the president has been in office and the magnitude of the challenges he faces, you will agree with me that the president has done a remarkable job in both domestic and international politics. Keep in mind the president has only been in power for ten months and he still has three years and two months to go. I think we ought to give him time to first address some of the issues I highlighted in my opening remarks before we can accurately grade the president.**

**The day after my lecture the Noble Committee awarded President Obama the Noble Peace Prize for giving hope to millions of people around the world and advocate global disarmament and the use of diplomacy to solve world's problems. It validates my claim that the election of President Obama has transformed the climate in international relations.**