

ARTICLES	VIEWS/REVIEWS	BLOG	INDEX	AUTHORS	ABOUT	SUBSCRIBE	SEARCH
----------	---------------	------	-------	---------	-------	-----------	--------

GSJ View

30 July 2012

Obama's Presidency 2008–2012: Intermezzo or Change? A Voice from Europe

Gert Schmidt

Institute of Sociology
University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

- 1 When Obama won the 2008 election, the eight years of G.W. Bush came to an end, an end that was hoped for by many people around the globe. Most Europeans reacted with relief and grand sympathy as well as high expectations. During the Bush era, the perception of the United States in many parts of the world outside the U.S. had changed dramatically for the worse. Ambivalence towards the U.S. had existed before in the form of dislike of what was perceived as its crude capitalism and individualism, its militarism, and the seemingly aggressive cultural impact of Americanization. During the first three decades after the Second World-War, however, Europeans also identified the United States positively with broadly accepted values of democracy and freedom, and saw America as a place with more opportunity for social mobility than Europe, allowing Americans to have a secure job, enjoy success for hard work and, last but not least, attain a high standard of living within a liberal and diverse society. Europeans saw the political history and the political institutions of the USA, as well as its economic system and everyday-culture as an enlightened form of social praxis. The so-called American way of life was much copied.
- 2 Yet the Bush administration confirmed almost all the existing negative prejudices related to the United States as an aggressive and hegemonic military superpower, a global political actor that was a bully in the representation of its interests, resistant to and naïve about other cultures and dangerously casual in its use of force.
- 3 From the perspective of domestic policy, the eight years of the Bush administration can be seen as continuation and deepening of Reaganomics, i.e. business-friendly economic policy in which Wall Street power grew, resulting in an enormous polarization between rich and poor, and a further diminution of the middle-class. For ordinary Americans this extreme form of Reaganomics spelt neglect of social welfare, healthcare, infrastructure and especially public education. For some European observers (especially in the West-European Countries), the internal American social and cultural scenario nowadays is linked to the incantation, *Not like in America*. Even before Bush's presidency, the attitudes of many Europeans had changed: from admiration and smiling irony regarding the vulgarity of some American popular culture or American naïveté about other societies, to rejection and aversion. But Bush gave already hostile Europeans much ammunition for their view that America suffered from institutional and structural backwardness, that it was a nation deficient in terms of both social welfare for its citizens and in standards of social justice.
- 4 Europeans did not question the leadership of the United States as the world's only superpower, but they considered Bush's use of hard power disastrous. The turn against soft power can be demonstrated by the following: Secretary of State Powell's presentation in the UN regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; the decision to go to war against Saddam Hussein, ignoring and publicly deriding the UN; breaking international law by establishing Guantanamo; the atrocities of Abu Ghraib, etc. These actions ruined the prestige and moral status of the United States not only in the eyes of its classical opponents, but also among its allies and friends. Moreover, the nation's costly wars affected its economy. The globe's leading economic power encountered severe structural problems, exemplified by its inability to deal with deindustrialization and a series of asset bubbles that burst (the savings and loan crisis; the dot.com

bubble; and finally the subprime housing crisis and subsequent financial crash of 2008), which weakened its international competitive position severely.

- 5 Many Europeans came to see these events within the frame of an end to the era of a postwar special relationship between Europe and the USA. Europe was now America's economic and political competitor. The catastrophic nature of Bush's tenure in office was the driving force behind a new European self-consciousness – emancipation from the real and virtual dominance of the USA.
- 6 Even though Bush's second term was more realistic than his first, exhibiting some capacity to learn from earlier mistakes, it was nonetheless too late for America to soften its position with regard to the unilateral use of hard power and the necessity of consultation with friends and allies. America's international position was substantially damaged. And in 2008, when the United States became the source of a worldwide economic crisis caused by Wall Street trading in bad securitized housing mortgages, the neo-liberal Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism was likewise called into question, opening up interest in alternatives of socio-economic governance such as the Chinese.
- 7 There was great relief in Europe when Bush's presidency was over and great hope for the new president, Barack Obama, who seemed to represent everything that was best about America. In Europe, his victory was greeted with enormous passion and negative views seemed to have changed overnight, because there were reasons to believe that Obama represented change. For example, he was seen as opening up new possibilities of dialogue and cooperation between Europe and the U.S.; and the fact that he was the first black citizen to become president of the U.S. was a testament to America's acceptance of diversity. Obama's brilliant campaign provided an anti-Bush profile on many substantive issues such as social welfare and the reform of American healthcare as well as the return to American use of soft power. In addition, it was a strategically brilliant campaign, succeeding with its slogans of *Yes, We Can* and *Change We Can Believe In*. Obama combined rhetoric, programmatic content, and personal charisma, reminding many of John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s.
- 8 Notwithstanding sentiments of relief and optimism, many European commentators were from early on skeptical about the high expectations for change and the great hope that Obama was articulating. Obama himself repeatedly pointed out that change would entail a hard and difficult path, one that would take years to produce tangible results. Nevertheless, Obama, having talked the talk had to walk the walk. Very soon after the beginning of his presidency, emphatic enthusiasm turned into disenchantment and critical analysis of what he managed to do was compared with what he said he would do.
- 9 Obama had some successes: the management of the General Motors disaster, when his administration put sacred liberal principles of government non-intervention aside, or when he delivered a well-received speech in Cairo in which he rethought the relations between the so-called Western World and the culture and political identity of the Muslim World. Finally yet importantly, the "bridge" between Europe and the U.S. received a coat of varnish. Though problems and differences between Europe and the US remained in areas like environmental policy and the handling of NATO, the culture of communication between the U.S. and Europe changed considerably. Obama was attuned to the need to rediscover the potential of soft power and a more diplomatic affirmation of the American leadership-role in a changed world power scenario.
- 10 As Obama's presidency progressed, however, much of his ambitious program was not enacted. What in the beginning appeared to be a pragmatic strategy to win acceptance in the House and Senate, to compromise with the Republicans, was soon seen as weakness and naiveté. The new president was caught between the internal schisms of the Democratic Party, in which progressives had sharp disagreements with moderates over strategy and policy, and the vindictive and stubborn behavior of the Republicans, whose sole strategy was negativity and the desire to preclude Obama from achieving anything. The Republicans behaved less as a responsible opposition party and more as a group who simply hated Obama, thereby rendering communication and decision-making on Capitol Hill extremely difficult.
- 11 Many inside and outside observers were disappointed by the fact that Obama kept Guantanamo open. Whatever the reasons for this policy, around the world it was felt that he had broken a promise, causing many who were his partisans to become disenchanted.
- 12 Another disappointment was health-care. During his campaign Obama promised to pursue healthcare reform, which for decades had been on the agenda of the Democratic Party. Forced to compromise with fiscally conservative (blue dog) Democrats in the Senate who rejected a single payer system, and unable to compromise with radical Republicans who refused to consider any reform on the issue, the already weak healthcare bill was enacted and finally proved constitutional by the Supreme Court. Still, it will face further juridical interventions and severe opposition by the Republicans.

- 13 Obama did not act to achieve his campaign promises on the environment. The platform of candidate Obama was strong on dealing with environmental problems, especially relating to climate change and to the promotion of new sources of energy. However, as president he did very little to attain these goals. Obama handled the BP Oil catastrophe better than G.W. Bush handled Katrina, but he did not use this incident to redesign the energy strategy and philosophy of the country. Obama maintained a low profile policy on the issues of energy-resource-management and global warming and for political reasons accepted gas-prices as a critical issue for the electorate. The U.S., allied with China, India, and Australia blocked any effective worldwide regulations concerning a more intelligent global resource policy. For many European observers, Obama's obvious failing concerning the global energy issue exemplified the weakness of his leadership about global ecological problems.
- 14 Obama likewise failed to tackle challenging social policy-issues like poverty, economic inequality, immigration, and urban revitalization. Regarding these issues Obama's first term may be described as non-spectacular. His record can scarcely be compared with the New Deal-type achievements of Lyndon B. Johnson. Last, the Dodd-Frank Bill shows that the Obama administration is rather half-hearted in trying to discipline financial capitalism.
- 15 Obama did not fulfill all of his campaign promises, but from the European perspective it is nonetheless true that the negative impact of the Bush administration was successfully reversed. If one looks back at the election of 2008, it is clear that, in spite of Obama's limited ability to achieve all of what was contained in his two slogans, the reason he won four years ago was that the electorate was voting against Bush rather than affirming Obama. To an extent, this is demonstrated by what happened in the mid-term elections in 2010, which shows that the conservative nature of the American electorate had not changed much.
- 16 Further analysis may suggest that there has been a change of mood: simple pro-business ideology – for decades a non-disputable pattern of Americans political consciousness – seems to be fading and the topic of economic and social inequality, an issue traditionally neglected in America, is getting a good deal more attention. The emphasis on inequality has its source in the Occupy movements that started on Wall Street, yet it is unclear whether OWS will have any more success than earlier protests against inequality and globalization such as the Seattle protests of over ten years ago.
- 17 The question for sympathetic Europeans is this: Will the United States of America as a society and government be able to adapt itself to a changing economic and politico-cultural global environment? The relevant themes are:
 - America must reformulate its historical identity, relinquishing American exceptionalism and the view that the United States is the natural leader of the world. Global history no longer has a place for imperial attitudes and strategies.
 - The United States needs to understand that in the coming decades military supremacy will be less important than heretofore – for example, in the days of the Cold War – for successful policy and politics in global world affairs. Today's global environment is antipathetic to gunboat diplomacy. If we look back and consider the effects of military conflicts and interventions after the Second World War by the U.S., the Soviet Union, and other nations, what becomes clear is that the attempt to influence history and world affairs by warfare is both costly and risky, even for powerful actors with overwhelming military resources.
 - America's brand of radical conservatism repulses many Europeans. They are particularly irritated by radicalized evangelical groups and the tea-party people who appear to have too large an impact on America's political climate. The American people are traditionally skeptical of the institutions of the central state, but if they begin to confuse any active use of state power with socialism, then they bring into question the importance of government in any democratic society. Legitimacy in a modern democracy derives from government achieving a balance between the empowerment and freedom of individuals and the larger social responsibility, which requires that the state guarantee minimal standards of justice and collective solidarity.
- 18 The last months of Obamas first term as President exhibit an American nation that is marked by an aggressive conservative establishment that is even pushed further into radical opposition by the Tea Party and evangelists' movement on the one side, and large groups of liberal and left people, who might refuse to vote in November, on the other side.
- 19 In the 2012 election, Obama will not march to victory propelled by anti-Bush sentiments. Many other factors will make his re-election difficult. First, there is American racism, for it is clear that some white Americans see the election of a black man in 2008 as a painful exception. Obama's enemies are in some instances obsessed with hatred for him; they do not merely oppose his policies, but they also despise him as a man. His fate may also be determined by the volatile quality of simple data like high gas prices, or other short-time economic developments in the U.S., China, or

Europe. He is facing a rather difficult scenario in November, with his foes radicalized to do everything to end his presidency and many of his disappointed friends perhaps not voting. It seems that once again the most important factor for Obama's success may be that the Republican performance in Congress has been wholly negative.

- 20 My assessment is that Obama's achievement as president of the United States has been disappointingly limited, regardless of the fact that he has done many good things. His impact on the culture may be more substantial than what he has actually achieved. He has prepared the nation at least to some degree to face the turbulence and challenges that will confront it in coming decades. Even if Obama has a four-year term as president only, people in the U.S. and all over the world will remember an Obama who tried to lead the country creatively into a new era. A new conservative government in Washington, influenced by elites resistant to change, and aggressively defending an American dream of yesteryear, will preclude the world from dealing with its many problems.
- 21 It might be that the American electorate and America as an actor in world affairs requires such a regressive setback in order to be finally ready for substantial change. This setback will initiate a process of economic and political decline for the U.S., a costly possibility for the U.S. and the rest of the world. In this case, the Obama period can be seen as an *intermezzo*. One can only hope that the rest of the world will demonstrate sufficient collective intelligence to serve as a balance against this revival of American exceptionalism. However, if Obama is re-elected, the inherent conservatism and provincialism of a substantial part of the American electorate will not make things easy, but then at least there will be a realistic chance for gradual and substantial change.

[\[PDF\]](#)