The Obamians: The Struggle inside the White House to Redefine American Power

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY’S FOREIGN POLICY SINCE THE VIETNAM WAR


James Mann walks the reader through the key foreign-policy challenges faced by the Barack Obama administration and outlines the evolution that has taken place in the president’s approach to these issues.

He traces the post-Vietnam history of the Democratic Party’s foreign policy and describes the three different generations that come together in the present administration: the Vietnam War generation, the post–Vietnam War generation, and the Obamians, who are identified by Mann as mostly campaign staffers, plus National Security Council officials Ben Rhodes and Denis McDonough. The third group’s foreign-policy experience is limited to the Congress, and its political reference points are September 11th, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2008–2009 financial crisis. The Vietnam War is ancient history to them. Mann believes this third group most closely reflects President Obama’s own worldview. He notes that foreign-policy “veterans were to discover that Obama relied to an unusual extent on his own informal network, the Obamians he had come to trust in the presidential campaign.” In fact, while Defense Secretary Bob Gates, National Security Adviser General Jim Jones, Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg, and others have moved on, the core of officials that Mann describes as Obamians are largely still in place.

Mann describes “two distinctive aspects of Obama’s foreign policy.” The first is that Obama is not “squeamish about employing American military power,” as the surge in Afghanistan, the war in Libya, and his campaign expression “to track down, capture, or kill” all show. The second is the concern on the part of both the president and the Obamians that America’s financial resources no longer allow the United States to exercise its traditional postwar hegemony. Instead, they believe that on entering office they were faced with a “continuing effort to recast the United States’ role in the world in a way that fit America’s more limited resources.” Mann notes the
biggest change for the William Clinton administration alumni was grasping this new reality of declining resources. The author also chronicles some important missteps made by the Obama administration, arguing that the president’s fixation on not repeating what the Obamians viewed as mistakes of the George W. Bush administration led them to downplay democracy early in their tenure. This led, in part, to being overly reticent during Iran’s Green Revolution. Mann also describes how their initial approach to China was based on lessons learned during the Clinton administration. Unfortunately, they did not recognize that China had become much more confident during the eight years of the Bush administration, thereby making their approach ineffective.

Mann spends a significant amount of the book dealing with Afghanistan and describing President Obama’s increasing disillusionment with the war. Afghanistan, for candidate Obama, was the good war that had to be won. During the first policy review this remained the main theme, and the president, at least implicitly, endorsed a counterinsurgency strategy. However, when General Stanley McChrystal’s appointment as top commander in Afghanistan set in motion another review later that same year, President Obama was “forced to confront the implications of the counterinsurgency strategy: How many troops would be required, and how long would it take?”

President Obama comes into his own, according to Mann, with the 2011 war in Libya. Mann states that while Obama acknowledged the United States has little strategic interest in Libya, he also recognized that our “only . . . strategic interests on this issue lay in maintaining strong relationships with close allies.” Nonetheless, President Obama did not approve the initial plan for a humanitarian intervention, because his advisers admitted it was unlikely to work, but rather pressed for options that would accomplish the mission. The president then personally worked out the division of labor among allied forces, in order to limit U.S. involvement.

Mann, looking back at his book Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet (2004), concludes he was right when he described the 2003 invasion of Iraq as “the outer limits of the expansion of American power and ideals.” Mann concludes that the Obama administration has been centrist, marking a new era in America’s relations with the world, “one in which primacy is not assured.”

The Obamians follows in the path of such books as Bob Woodward’s Obama’s Wars, in that it uses background interviews to provide a picture of the Obama administration’s foreign-policy decision making. While Woodward focuses on the Afghan-surge decision making, Mann looks at the evolution of the Democratic Party’s foreign policy since Vietnam and then places the Obama administration within that context. By doing so, James Mann has produced a book of value to both specialists and the general reader, contributing to a better understanding of the Obama administration’s foreign-policy decision making.

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