LETTER FROM NEW YORK

THE OBAMA NARRATIVE

By Abe Greenwald
One popular line of lamentation over Barack Obama’s presidency maintains that Obama has failed to articulate a cohesive narrative for his policies, a story that brings together his domestic and foreign agendas into a comprehensive whole. This is, I think, half-true.

Obama has not communicated a story explaining how his policies form an intelligible whole. However, there is a clearly visible narrative at work, whether the president broadcasts it or not. It goes as follows: We will end the American fetishization of political freedom in the interest of accomplishing great things. At home, we will trade freedom for equality. The federal government will be given more leeway to provide for Americans in want. Abroad, we will trade freedom for stability. Anti-democratic foreign governments will find themselves unfettered by any American criticisms, as the prospect of reduced friction outranks concerns for human rights. No longer bound by the obligations of outmoded national myth, Americans will enjoy a greater diffusion of material comforts and fewer threats from foreign lands. Governments - our own and others - have been newly empowered. If it is hyperbole to call this an anti-freedom agenda, surely Obama’s is a freedom-neutral one.

For most of 2009, while Obama’s domestic big-government scheme rolled on with historic perseverance, little happened within the context of world affairs that could be credited to the policies of the Obama Administration. Words were spoken, executive orders were signed, diplomats planed and deplaned, and cameras flashed. But despite the pomp and PR, a sense of stasis held.

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In Iran, the mullahs’ efforts to obtain nuclear weapons continued apace, while various Obama administration officials went overseas to make various offers that were summarily ignored. In June, when a rigged election spurred the Iranian population to protest in the streets, President Obama played what can only be described as a stabilizing role, “bearing witness” and seeing the regime in Tehran through its moment of crisis. The biggest and most hopeful threat to the dangerous status quo had been squelched.

Try though he did, Obama was less successful in maintaining the status quo in Honduras. When strongman Manuel Zelaya was internally deposed from the presidency, the U.S. called it a coup.
and threatened to withhold aid and future recognition of the country’s democracy. But Honduras, certain about the constitutionality of Zelaya’s ouster and Zelaya’s own preceding violations of the country’s constitution, stuck to its guns. Unable to restore the paranoid ex-president, Obama was forced to recognize change in the small Central American democracy.

In Russia, talk of “reset” was little reflected in dealings with the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev had picked up on the tactic of the day, and frustrated every American overture – whether on sanctioning Iran or coming to a new arms control agreement – by conveying a sense of supreme non-commitment.

In Central Europe, our Polish and Czech allies were literally awakened in the middle of the night by the Obama administration’s announcement that missile defense sites long slated for Polish and Czech soil were cancelled. Central European leaders panicked over the betrayal. Vladimir Putin, the missile defense plan’s most outspoken enemy, rejoiced. Soon the episode took on a strange sense of nullity as the Obama administration announced future plans to base unproven or yet to be undeveloped missile defense sites on ships in the region.

Upon taking office, Obama praised the “courage” of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, singling out the Saudi plan for Middle East peace. At the beginning of the plan’s implementation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged the need of a two-state solution and suspended settlement construction, but the requisite displays of matching “good faith” that were supposed to have come from Arab leaders failed to materialize. Thus, stalemate resumed.

On her first trip to China, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went so far as to announce that the U.S. would not rock the Chinese Communist Party’s boat. Regarding institutional Chinese human-rights abuses, she said, “Our pressing on those issues can’t interfere on the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis.” In keeping with this approach, President Obama did not meet with the Dalai Lama during his first Washington trip of the year, as it would have irked Chinese officials. Needless to say, the world’s best-known practitioner of Buddhism took the slight with equanimity. Beijing, for its part, gave the U.S. nothing on either climate negotiations or Iran sanctions.

In Iraq, consolidated Iraqi and American gains had birthed a period of undeniable hope and order, spotted by the occasional al Qaeda bombing. Obama extended his previous troop-withdrawal timetable to allow for this progress. After years of dominating America’s foreign policy landscape, the Iraq War faded into the background, ignored by the media and anti-war activists alike.

On Afghanistan, a temporary stasis was actually imposed by the administration. While it became clear that the Taliban had made tremendous gains requiring a renewed and bolder American commitment, Obama took no less than three months to mull the requests of his commanders on the ground, before announcing an escalation of troops and a change of strategy. While this last development is surely an outlier in Obama’s otherwise “humble” foreign policy, it cannot be ignored that the three months were spent exploring every last option that would have allowed for a contraction of American force or an extension of the American commitment at then-present levels.
And those were the headline-grabbers. In addition to the above, North Korea remained North Korea, Burma remained Burma, Venezuela remained Venezuela, Sudan remained Sudan, and Syria remained Syria. That is to say, there was no detectable positive tilt from any of these dangerous regimes, despite dogged efforts at American outreach.

In Europe, amid the popular chatter of restoring American ties, leaders were preoccupied with steering their countries through a global financial crisis. What requests Obama made in this regard – that European countries follow America’s “stimulus” model – were politely declined.

Yet, by the end of 2009 and continuing into 2010, it became clear that something dramatic had in fact resulted from this pregnant pause. While thugocracies from Iran to Burma had not changed, America emerged from this experiment in “smart power” looking quite unlike America. What many had thought to be well-intentioned but naïve Plan As are in fact now looking like cynical and even eccentric new American foreign policy stances.

Through all the inaction of 2009, the U.S. was stealthily tilting away from its democratic allies and toward the world's bad actors. More to the point at hand, the aim of the administration’s interventions and evasions was to come down on the side of powerful governments, not individuals. Whether revanchist Russia, oppressive China, or theocratic Iran, the beneficiaries were consistently anti-democratic regimes. The injured were freedom-deprived citizens or smaller democracies.

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In the beginning of 2010, we’ve begun to see the reification of this historic shift in America’s role. Looming largest on the horizon is the broken relationship with Israel. In March, the Obama administration made the unprecedented demand that Jews cease all housing construction in East Jerusalem. (Here, too, it should be pointed out that Obama’s demand was, among other things, a recommendation that a government rein in the aspirations of its citizens). Later in the month, President Obama treated Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu like little more than an intruder at the White House. In April, the U.S. refused visa requests from nuclear technicians employed at Israel’s Dimona reactor. On April 14, the New York Times made it official, reporting on “a far-reaching shift in how the United States views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” and a “debate among [Obama’s] top officials over how best to balance support for Israel against other American interests.”

On the related matter of Iran’s nuclear aspirations, the U.S. administration has blown through so many set “deadlines” for the mullahs to demonstrate a sense of cooperation that the term has fallen out of use. While the U.S. continues in vain to flatter the regime in Tehran, a generation of Iranian democrats despairs over the false promise of America’s doctrine of universal freedom.
On March 26, Obama signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. As Jamie Fly and John Noonan wrote at the Weekly Standard’s website, “in their rush to ink a deal, the Obama negotiators appear to have granted concessions to the Russians on missile defense that are troubling...” Setting aside the larger dangers of bringing missile defense into the realm of bilateral nuclear arms reduction, this is yet another potential blow to our Polish and Czech friends.

Obama’s snubs of Western European allies have been nearly countless: superficial faux pas or medium-force face-slaps whose cumulative effect has been to distance us further from our oldest democratic allies than we’ve been in recent history.

Unprecedented domestic policy decisions, perhaps beginning with the federal takeover of two of Detroit’s Big Three automotive companies and (not) ending with the House’s passage of the Senate’s health-care bill has created the same not-quite-America effect at home. If there is room for the promotion of freedom in Obama’s narrative it has to do with freeing up the hitherto untapped abilities of governments, not people.

Arguments about the validity of labeling Barack Obama a socialist may never be resolved, but there is no question that his conception of rights and freedoms comes from the same intellectual wellspring that brought us socialism and communism. Whereas the great democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century – and their founding documents – defined human rights in political terms, the socialists who swept in to criticize these movements had something else in mind. If the Declaration of Independence spoke of the inalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and the right to “abolish” destructive governments and “institute new governments,” early nineteenth-century socialists preached the right to employment, or, as French socialist Charles Fourier put it, “the liberty to work.”

In her book Inventing Human Rights, Lynn Hunt describes the conditions under which the reconfiguring of liberty and human rights came about:

"During the first half of the nineteenth century, when trade unions were illegal in most countries and workers did not have the right to vote, Socialists concentrated on revolutionizing the new social relations created by industrialization. They could hardly hope to win elections when workers could not vote . . . Instead, Socialist pioneers set up model factories, producers’ and consumers’ cooperatives, and experimental communities to overcome conflict and alienation between social groups. They wanted to enable the workers and the poor to benefit from the new industrial order, to “socialize” industry and replace competition with cooperation."
The Obama Narrative

This strategic maneuver wrested the notion of human rights from the realm of the political and placed it squarely in the domain of the material. Where the Declaration of Independence guaranteed people the right to “pursuits,” the doctrine of socialism fought for the right to acquisitions, most notably jobs, but also food, medicine, and various other good and services. Put more crudely, according to the former you have a right to chase; according to the latter, a right to catch.

Changes in guaranteed rights are naturally followed by changes in one’s perception of the role of government. If you are guaranteed the right to pursue, the government is obligated not to interfere with the chase. If you have the right to catch, the government must, failing all else, give you your quarry. This forever posits government as a paternal, activist monitor of people.

Socialists and communists would go on to disagree over the relative importance of voting rights, but the idea of states as dispensers of things endured in both camps.

For an updated elucidation on the difference between freedom as a political or material matter, consider the following excerpt from a speech made by Barack Obama in 2006:

*We should be more modest in our belief that we can impose democracy on a country through military force. In the past, it has been movements for freedom from within tyrannical regimes that have led to flourishing democracies; movements that continue today. This doesn’t mean abandoning our values and ideals; wherever we can, it’s in our interest to help foster democracy through the diplomatic and economic resources at our disposal. But even as we provide such help, we should be clear that the institutions of democracy – free markets, a free press, a strong civil society – cannot be built overnight, and they cannot be built at the end of a barrel of a gun. And so we must realize that the freedoms FDR once spoke of – especially freedom from want and freedom from fear – do not just come from deposing a tyrant and handing out ballots; they are only realized once the personal and material security of a people is ensured as well.*

The “freedom from want”? The “freedom from fear”? Who among us, in the modern United States or England, two of the most free lands history has ever known, expects to enjoy either of these? There is something striking about Obama’s freedom formulations. Namely, that they are illegitimate. Freedom from fear and freedom from want haven’t a thing to do with what has been understood in America, England, and France as self-evident freedoms since the late 18th century. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Note the language. The document guarantees the “freedom of” intentions and actions. Obama calls for the “freedom from” unfortunate states of existence. The difference here is one of agency. The Constitution ensures individuals the right to act on their own behalves. Obama’s conception of freedom changes the balance of obligations in the relationship between a government and
citizens. The freedoms that the first amendment guarantee require the government to refrain from infringing upon citizens’ affairs. The “freedoms” that Obama singles out demand the opposite. Under the latter rubric, the government is charged with providing services.

Despite his acknowledgment that “it’s in our interest to help foster democracy,” for Obama, the matter of promoting political freedoms can be derided as merely “handing out ballots.”

So here is Obama’s fundamental conflict. Americans understand freedoms and rights as political. People have, above all else, the right not to be molested by their government. Obama’s ideology sees benevolent intervention in citizens’ lives as government’s highest calling. How to proceed?

This is a challenge Barack Obama was born to meet. For he is the master of the “false choice,” taking cover under the term whenever a real decision must be made. And so, when selling domestic statism and foreign-policy accommodationism, he splits the difference between freedom and its opposite. While ObamaCare criminalizes the refusal to purchase health insurance, the president repeatedly offers, “if you like, you can keep your doctor.” As the New Republic described the president’s philosophy of the state, “Obama has set out to synthesize the New Democratic faith in the utility of markets with the Old Democratic emphasis on reducing inequality... Rather than force markets to conform to his wishes, [Obama] shapes their calculus so they conclude (on their own) that their interests coincide with his wishes.” He’s merely offering the best of both worlds, you see. The problem is, markets are either free or they’re not. You can call it “shaping their calculus,” or something else clever and indecipherable, but you can’t call it free.

When it comes to handling the challenge of democracy-promotion abroad, this excerpt from a Washington Post interview conducted just before Obama was sworn in to office both echoes his 2006 comments and points to places beyond:

But democracy, a well-functioning society that promotes liberty and equality and fraternity, does not just depend on going to the ballot box. It also means that you’re not going to be shaken down by police because the police aren’t getting properly paid. It also means that if you want to start a business, you don’t have to pay a bribe. I mean, there are a whole host of other factors that people need in building a civil society that allows a country to be successful.

This is redefining development as democracy promotion. Here is Vice-President Joe Biden, speaking at the Munich Conference on Security Policy:

To meet the challenges of this new century, defense and diplomacy are necessary. But quite frankly, ladies and gentlemen, they are not sufficient. We also need to wield
Development and democracy, two of the most powerful weapons in our collective arsenals. Poor societies and dysfunctional states, as you know as well as I do, can become breeding grounds for extremism, conflict and disease. Non-democratic nations frustrate the rightful aspirations of their citizens and fuel resentment.

Our administration has set an ambitious goal to increase foreign assistance, to cut extreme poverty in half by 2015, to help eliminate the global educational deficit, and to cancel the debt of the world’s poorest countries; to launch a new Green Revolution that produces sustainable supplies of food, and to advance democracy not through the imposition of force from the outside, but by working with moderates in government and civil society to build those institutions that will protect that freedom - quite frankly, the only thing that will guarantee that freedom.

Sustainable food supplies and the protection of freedom in the very same breath. And so, in the Administration’s fiscal year (FY) 2010 budget, proposed State Department increases will double total U.S. development and economic aid by the year 2015.

While the blurring of material and political freedoms may help the Obama Administration push its policies, the reality is that a verifiable and tragic choice has been made. “For God’s Sake, Please Stop the Aid!” said Kenyan economics expert James Shikwat, in a 2005 interview with Der Spiegel. As Shikwat explained, “Huge bureaucracies are financed (with the aid money), corruption and complacency are promoted, Africans are taught to be beggars and not to be independent.” This is borne out in studies of other leading aid-recipients conducted by the World Bank, the National Academy of Public Administration, and more. In lands defined by corruption, aid works to ensure restricted political freedoms. With great new sums of toxic aid leveraging his kindly disposition toward tyrants, Obama hopes to get credit on the democracy front.

In lands defined by corruption, aid works to ensure restricted political freedoms. With great new sums of toxic aid leveraging his kindly disposition toward tyrants, Obama hopes to get credit on the democracy front. What is most worrying about Obama’s dismissal of political rights is the material trouble it engenders. One need not get teary-eyed about the Declaration of Independence in order to see the folly in embracing tyrants and ostracizing democrats. For all its meticulously recorded atrocities, the post-WWII age is the most peaceful in history. It is also the time period when great democracies, led by the United States, cooperated to protect a global order of unparalleled prosperity and well-being. If Barack Obama believes this to be a coincidence the burden of proof is on him.

Similarly, the calamitous inefficiencies of history’s regulated economies are undeniable. In its merely tragic forms, socialism has led to gross inequalities and unsustainable standards of living—
look at today’s Greece. At its most abhorrent, it has led to the worst horrors mankind has known. America will not do a better job of being un-American than anyone else. It will do worse. For the countries already going through their failed statist experiments have America to rely on for protection. Who will we have?

One can see why Barack Obama has failed to enunciate what is clearly the narrative of his presidency. It is a story of the broad devaluation of political freedom, from a good in and of itself to a bargaining chip worth more in forced equality and phony calm. It is the story of letting governments access their full potentials. This is both antithetical to the prevailing American political spirit and inconsistent with the lessons of history. For nothing precipitates the loss of material comfort and relative peace so predictably as a scarcity of freedoms.

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