



Munk Debate on Obama's Foreign Policy – commentary by Janice Stein

Has President Obama emboldened our enemies and made the world a more dangerous place? That was the resolution at the latest Munk Debate. The four debaters, however, quickly zeroed in on an age-old question. They argued all evening about whether leaders are the victims of history or whether they make it and shape it.

Even those who spoke in favour of the resolution—Bret Stephens and Robert Kagan—conceded that Barack Obama had inherited a tough world. When he became president, the world had just gone through a terrible economic crisis, Iran was rushing ahead with its nuclear program, and America was at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the president, they argued, promised to avoid a world recession, to reset relations with Russia, to remove Iran's capacity to make a nuclear weapon, and to end America's wars and bring home the troops. Obama, they insisted, has met none of these objectives and, on the contrary, emboldened his enemies. They conceded the argument made by Anne-Marie Slaughter and Fareed Zakaria that the president has led a vigorous economic recovery in the United States. But everywhere else, they asserted, the president has failed to meet the objectives he set himself.

Most important, America was at war again, against the much larger and better armed Islamic State, and it was at war in both Syria and Iraq because of the feckless decision the president made to stand back and refuse to help those fighting Bashir al-Assad in the early days. Even Anne-Marie Slaughter, arguing against the resolution, conceded that the president had made a mistake when he stood aside. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran filled the vacuum Obama created by arming militants that today constitute the shock troops of the Islamic State that has swept through northern Iraq and eastern Syria. Not so fast, countered Fareed Zakaria: the Syrian story is one where a minority regime that ruled the majority

through fear and brutality collapsed as did the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq where a minority of Sunni ruled a majority of Shi'a. On this issue, the two debaters who insisted that the president has not made the world worse seemed to be arguing with each other rather than with their opponents. The house of Obama was divided amongst itself.

Two other issues dominated the debate. What, the debaters argued, motivated President Vladimir Putin to shake Europe to its foundations by using force against Ukraine to unilaterally change Russia's borders? Those who see leaders as buffeted by the forces of history—Slaughter and Zakaria—argued that Putin was motivated largely by events in his neighbourhood and by domestic politics. When the president had to move, he did and he put in place a robust set of sanctions. Not so, replied Kagan and Stephens. Obama emboldened Putin by his failure to keep his word after he drew a red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Putin then called Obama's bluff and won. The newly assertive Russia was not Obama's fault, they conceded, but the president made it worse. Presidents have to shape history when history calls. Point taken.

The other big issue was a resurgent China in a globally important but twitchy Asia. Zakaria made a compelling argument that, early on, Obama got the importance of the United States as a Pacific power, announced a "pivot" to Asia, and established bases in Australia and the Philippines to reassure Asian allies jittery about China's vigorous assertion of claims in the South China Sea. Score one for good intentions. Kagan and Stephens responded vigorously by asking: "Where's the beef?" There has been no redeployment of forces to Asia as the U.S. is caught up, yet again, in the ferocious sectarian fighting in the Middle East. Japan's leaders are deeply worried about China and deeply uncertain about the worth of a U.S. guarantee. Not only Japan, but Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines all doubt American resolve and are increasingly willing to go their own way. Not only has Obama emboldened his enemies, they concluded, but he has alienated his friends. It is not what the president says that matters, but what he does. Score zero for execution.

Canada was but a footnote in the debate. Bret Stephens praised Canada for its contribution to the battle from the skies against the Islamic State, and the

reaction of the crowd was polite but unenthusiastic. Fareed Zakaria spoke about a multilateral, peacekeeping, “good” Canada and the crowd roared. That Canada did exist once, in a different world way back in the twentieth century, but certainly not in the second decade of the twenty-first. Score zero for the audience.

The audience clearly favoured the argument that history shapes the leader, but that misses an important part of the story. Leaders shape events and great leaders change the flow and the course of history. That we had such a vigorous and spirited debate tells us that, at least for now, Barack Obama does not rank as one of the great presidents.

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