



The Obamians: How a Band of Newcomers Redefined American Power

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The definitive analysis of the events, ideas, personalities, and conflicts that have defined Obama's foreign policy

When Barack Obama took office, he brought with him a new group of foreign policy advisers intent on carving out a new global role for America in the wake of the Bush administration's war in Iraq. Now the acclaimed author of *Rise of the Vulcans* offers a definitive, even-handed account of the messier realities they've faced in implementing their policies.

In *The Obamians*, acclaimed author James Mann tells the compelling story of the administration's struggle to enact a coherent and effective set of policies in a time of global turmoil. At the heart of this struggle are the generational conflicts between the Democratic establishment—including Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, and Joseph Biden—and Obama and his inner circle of largely unknown, remarkably youthful advisers, who came of age after the Cold War had ended.

Written by a proven master at elucidating political underpinnings even to the politicians themselves, *The Obamians* is a pivotal reckoning of this historic president and his inner circle, and of how their policies may or may not continue to shape America and the world.

The Obamians: How a Band of Newcomers Redefined American Power Details

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Holly Morrow says

James Mann wrote “The Rise of the Vulcans” during the Bush administration about the group of neocons (Wolfowitz, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Feith, etc) who had a profound effect on the Bush presidency’s foreign policy – and more specifically, about their intertwined personal history over many years and the evolution of their philosophy of international affairs and national power. It was a terrific book, and essential reading for understanding the Bush 43 years. “The Obamians” is Mann’s attempt to do the same for Obama’s circle of foreign policy advisers. Its no “Rise of the Vulcans,” but is interesting nonetheless. Part of the issue is that there is not the same coherence as there was with the neocons – personally or intellectually. Of the “big three” on Obama’s national security team when he took office – Secretary of State (Clinton), Defense Secretary (Gates), and National Security Adviser (Jones) – none of them were people Obama knew well or was close to. While Obama relied on these three for consultation and implementation, his “framing” for foreign policy relies more on a less well-known group of close advisers, portrayed in this book as Dennis McDonough, Tom Donilon, and Ben Rhodes (with a dash of Samantha Power). The lack of coherence shows up in the occasional schizophrenia in Obama’s foreign policy: Obama took office wanting to right the wrongs of the Bush administration’s approach to the war on terror, and yet he ends up with if anything a more aggressive and muscular campaign against Al Qaeda (e.g. unprecedented use of drones in Pakistan, an incursion into Pakistan to kill bin Laden without the knowledge of the Pakistani government, the assassination of an American citizen Anwar al-Alawki). He begins his administration convinced that the US and China can act as partners on the big challenges of our day, only to find that the PRC is not on our side and there is precious little overlap between the Chinese strategic worldview and our own (I could have saved him some time on that one). His administration’s response to the Arab Spring is confused – virtually silent on the original protests in Iran, unable to settle on the right response to Egypt, ultimately willing to use force in Libya, and yet uncomfortably willing to accept the status quo in Jordan, Saudi, and Bahrain. In some ways Obama’s foreign policy is hard to categorize because it is non-ideological and pragmatic. This can occasionally make Obama appear not to believe in anything, but I think its rather that he doesn’t believe in anything so much that it overrides a consideration of the reality as it stands before him (e.g. democracy is a good thing, but must be balanced against the risks involved in letting a US ally fall in a volatile, strategic region). Maybe I’m accepting of this because fundamentally I think that nobody knows what it means to be President of the United States until they hold the job and the awesome responsibility that comes with it – so “consistency with campaign rhetoric or articulated philosophy” is not something I really care about at the end of the day. Which is not to say that I think Obama has been entirely a stellar foreign policy president (although I do think hes been a stellar counter-terror president), just that I don’t fault him for the lack of a clear and consistent frame. The world’s a messy place, US power and resources are finite, and issues don’t always fit in neat boxes. Much of whats in this book has been reported before, but Mann has an eye for the telling nugget. The recounting of the bin Laden raid, for example, includes aspects Ive not read before – and seriously, I could read about the bin Laden raid all day long (go SEALs!). He also clearly got a lot of access to people in the administration – its an insider account - but for the most part it avoids the perils of access journalism (i.e. blatant sucking up to your sources and inability to dissect a talking points narrative critically).

Brad VanAuken says

This is a very balanced, informative and interesting exploration of how President Barak Obama built his foreign policy team and how they addressed the foreign policy issues. It provides insight into the similarities and differences between the environment in which he is operating versus that of his predecessors. It also highlights how his staff and thinking evolved over time based on external responses to his policies. One of the more fascinating aspects of this is the effect of being surrounded by advisors who are from different cohort groups (Baby Boomers versus Gen Xers, etc.). It certainly points out that the average American is only exposed to carefully crafted sound bites about what the issues are, as the issues and their solutions are inevitably more complex and nuanced than most people have time to digest. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the US presidency, foreign policy or President Obama's view of the world and his foreign policy successes and failures.

Cora says

While I was reading *The Obamians*, I found myself thinking of the old cliché about journalism being the first draft of history, with the emphasis on 'first draft.' *The Obamians* was released in the summer of 2012, little more than three years after Obama took office, and thus its account of Obama's foreign policy record is necessarily tentative. As I write this, there have been reports that the Iranian leadership may be interested in a nuclear deal. That deal may happen, or Israel may launch airstrikes, or Iran's nuclear program may set off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Any one of those would make Obama's record to date look very different. (An equivalent book about Ronald Reagan, released in the summer of 1984, would have predated Gorbachev's rise to power and all that followed from there.)

James Mann is highly conscious of that, so his conclusions are vague and tentative. He is willing to offer that America's diminished role in the world is likely here to stay, but says little about specific policy issues. Sometimes it even seems as if Mann felt the need to include every story, no matter how minor, because he was unsure what would ultimately matter and what wouldn't. The opening chapters, which cover the evolution of Democratic foreign policy since the Vietnam War, is smart and well-considered. Later chapters on infighting in the White House are much less interesting, unless you're surprised to learn that people without close relationships with the President fail to exercise much influence over policy. The chapter on the bin Laden raid also suffers from being a very familiar story (at least, here in the US).

I also thought it was unfortunate that Mann uncritically accepts the position that Obama erred in not openly embracing the Green Revolution in Iran. He doesn't even mention the fact that Green movement leaders wanted nothing less than to be openly linked to America, and in fact a common slogan of the movement went, "No to a coup d'état government, no to an indebtedness to America." Perhaps I should be happy that Mann doesn't offer his own insights more often.

Mann tells the story briskly and with a clear explanation of some topics that I hadn't understood (like the origins of Obama's Asian pivot strategy, for example). But with no firm argument that James Mann can offer, the book sinks or swims based on providing new insights and information, and there Mann often falls short. *The Obamians* suffers in comparison to David Sanger's *Confront and Conceal*, which covered the same ground more memorably. (Sanger's account of the development of the Stuxnet virus was particularly compelling, but he's also just flat out a better writer than Mann is.) Mann can be a useful guide at explaining particular factions and strains of thinking within the Obama White House, but he stumbles sometimes when

trying to establish why that matters.

Kinksrock says

A thorough review of three years of foreign policy under the Obama administration, focusing on the conflict and interplay between the young and less experienced idealists that Obama brought in and the more experienced realists with whom they had to work in order to function.

This book is not pro-Obama or anti-Obama, but, rather, covers Obama's triumphs, most notably the killing of Osama bin Laden, and his failures, notably the decision not to support the Green movement in Iran and Obama's poor treatment of Richard Holbrooke.

Lobstergirl says

Anyone tempted to be critical of the Obama administration for not reaching heights of greatness thus far needs to bear in mind: before you can attempt those heights, you have to play the hand you've been dealt. Not only on the economy, where four years after 2008 we are still extracting ourselves from a profoundly deep and wide recession, massive unemployment, and a cratered housing market, but also in foreign policy. The Bush administration's two wars left America despised around the world, and financially crippled by their costs. What Mitt Romney fondly termed Obama's "apology tour" was in actuality a necessary step not only in convincing the rest of the world that the U.S. wanted to repair its global relationships rather than damage them further, but also in regaining American prestige and power, a subtler, more deftly exercised power, that of the scalpel rather than the hammer.

Thus far, aside from the killing of bin Laden, the story of Obama's foreign policy is a lot less flashy than his predecessor's. One of the first conundrums Obama faced was how to react to the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009, when pro-democracy demonstrators filled the streets and used social networks like Twitter to protest Iran's dictatorship. The response was restrained; the U.S. did not interfere. Candidate Romney was critical of Obama during the 2012 campaign for not publicly supporting the Revolution, but it's far from clear a Romney administration would have acted differently, because Obama's non-interference was due to the desire to maintain any possible leverage over Iran's nuclear program. The Obamians felt that public support for pro-democracy protestors would doom any chance of negotiation or persuading Iran to halt developing a nuclear weapon. In addition, eight years of pro-democracy, anti-dictator rhetoric by the Bush administration had made the Obamians very wary, given that it was usually followed by invasion and war. It would be two years before Obamians, in the 2011 Arab Spring, felt comfortable urging dictators to step down and protesters to step up, and even then, they didn't urge it uniformly. Bahrain's protesters were crushed by its government, and the U.S. did not intervene because it needed Bahrain to remain the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.

What has worked fairly well on Iran (and North Korea) is economic sanctions by the international community and banks. I always pictured sanctions as something that gets quickly "slapped" on a rogue nation. But as James Mann explains well, they are complicated, time-consuming, and involve a lot of financial intelligence-gathering and behind the scenes diplomacy and persuasion.

One of the administration's failures has been getting North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons. North Korea

had learned the lesson of Libya well: Muammar Gaddafi, to the joy of the Bush administration in 2003, had given up his nuclear weapons in exchange for reestablished diplomatic relations with the U.S. and removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (Libya also took responsibility for the Lockerbie bombing). This meant that if the U.S. and others took military action against Libya, they didn't have to worry it would become a nuclear conflict. With North Korea, this would not apply. The U.S.'s hands will be tied in any military escalation or conflict with North Korea, because it does have nuclear weapons. This is generally why rogue nations try so hard to acquire them.

Another area that failed to see progress was Arab-Israeli peace. This was another case where the administration was hampered by the hand it had been dealt: with conservative Benjamin Netanyahu in power in Israel, there was no room for negotiation, and no incentive for the U.S. to push for talks.

If you're a liberal, or perhaps just a fan of the Constitution, you might also see as failures Obama's decision not to close Guantanamo (a campaign promise), and his policies to continue rendition of terrorist suspects and to escalate the use of unmanned drones, especially in targeted killings. The proposed Guantanamo closure received pushback from the public and Congress, and Obama gave up on it. It's not clear to me why the President wasn't willing to expend some political capital on this; maybe it's as simple as conserving political capital for the healthcare fight. Nor does Mann adequately explain Obama's fairly shocking reversals on rendition, habeas corpus, and targeted killing.

The picture we get of Obama is of a different kind of foreign policy president: not just the first "post-post Vietnam" president, whose team vigorously disconnects itself from any talk of Vietnam and its implications, but also a Democratic president unintimidated by foreign policy and unwilling to be chained to historical perceptions that his Party is weak in that area. As with every area of policy, Obama wants to hear any and all informed opinions, and then makes a decision himself based on all the evidence in front of him. Far from being risk-averse, he sometimes chooses the riskiest possible policies, as with the assault on bin Laden: a commando raid rather than an air strike, and not notifying Pakistan of the raid (which certainly would have tipped off bin Laden), even though this damaged our relations with Pakistan, a nation we very much need on our side. At every point in the planning for the raid, Obama took the riskiest path, differing with Vice President Joe Biden and Defense Secretary Bob Gates, and others.

Mann's narrative stops in very early 2012. He leaves us with the foreign policy "pivot" toward Asia, in which we cultivate our Asian allies in order to both strengthen our position vis-a-vis regional Goliath China, as well as become a partner with China in various ways. (China is our frenemy.) Mann also notes in conclusion that we have a lot less to spend on foreign policy now than we did, oh, twelve years ago. The war in Iraq cost nearly one trillion dollars, and we're still spending about \$10 billion per month in Afghanistan. We simply don't have the luxury of doing everything around the world that we might like to do.

Mann writes clearly and coherently and I would recommend this book to anyone looking for a balanced, somewhat lengthy description of Obama's first-term foreign policy. Two quibbles: Sarah Palin did not actually say "I can see Russia from my house," as Mann states she did, on page 98. It was Tina Fey who said that. And Mann fails to identify the man at the center of the famous bin Laden raid photograph, Marshall B. Webb, Assistant Commanding General of Joint Special Operations Command.

Carol N says

Contains an analysis of Obama's foreign policy—with a new afterword for his second term

A new group of foreign policy advisers intent on carving out a new global role for America were appointed when Barack Obama took office. This author offers a conclusive, even-handed account of the realities faced in implementing these foreign policies. Also included in this book are the conflicts between the Democratic establishment—Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden—and Obama and his largely unknown, remarkably youthful advisers. As our nation slowly sinks into Trump's World, I needed to look back on Obama's policies. With this book I was able to do so and found that. . . this detailed account of this historic president and his inner circle, and of how their policies may or may not continue to shape America and the world gratifying.

Tobias says

Smart, well-researched account of the personalities and structural constraints guiding the Obama administration during its first term. By no means a hagiography, Mann provides an excellent glimpse at how Obama and his inner circle navigated the legacy of the Bush administration as well as earlier Democratic administrations - while also dealing with the growing awareness of the limits of US power post-Iraq and post-financial crisis.

Chris says

I thought the book was helpful in deciphering the foreign policy of the Obama administration (so far). A description of other recent administrations is given in the beginning of the book so that you can understand the development of ideas and philosophies used in the Obama administration. Overall, this is a good overview of the administration and its foreign policy. I thought it was well worth the read, and once I got into it, I finished it quickly. "Obama's Wars" by Bob Woodward has a lot of information on the first few years of this administration, but this one is more recent, so it covers a lot more ground and really describes the thought process behind the policies.

Ray says

James Mann, in "*The Obamians*", reviews the players behind the policies, and how policies were developed, during the Obama Administration. It was interesting to hear about some of the less well known individuals in the Obama Administration. The book is similar to, but not quite as coherent and ordered as Mann's earlier book "*The Vulcans*" describing the neo-conservative advisers behind G.W. Bush. As a frequent audiobook listener, this is probably one book I would have preferred in the printed format. I've listened to hundreds of audiobooks, and while some readers, especially authors doubling as both writer and reader, aren't necessarily wonderful, this was the first book in which I actually found myself distracted by the reader to the point of missing some elements of the book. The reader was probably selected for his near perfect diction, but he sounded almost robotic or computer generated, and frequently pronounced words, if not incorrectly, then certainly not in keeping with mainstream pronunciations I was used to.

Fran says

Book describes backgrounds of Obama's key foreign policy team and addresses major issues dealt with during the first three years of his Presidency, including the assassination of Bin Laden. I don't think the book will change any minds, but it does add insight to the complexity involved in foreign policy decisions.

Ryan says

A solid analysis of President Obama's worldview and his administration's approach to foreign policy.

Oregon Expat says

Truly intriguing look at the fight for the soul of the Democratic Party, between the "Clintonian" (Hillary) and "Obamian" wings, the former focused on more traditional, interventionist views of American democratic promotion... the latter, a more forward-looking one could argue view based in more realistic assessments of "relative power decline" (not absolute), which limits America's ability post-Cold War to influence the world and have them volunteer to follow our lead.

K says

This book isn't as coherent and focused as *Rise of the Vulcans* is, but that's at least as much due to the lack of coherence in the Obama foreign policy apparatus as it is to James Mann's writing. A very useful look at how our last president chose to construct his foreign policy staff, on the eve of another president doing the same.

Zach Cohen says

A great, in-depth, objective profile of Obama's foreign policy team. Brilliantly researched with both anecdotal detail and broad, sweeping understanding of American foreign policy make this a must-read for any IR expert (though some of it may already be obsolete in his second term). Parts can be a little slow and cumbersome, but the insight into an administration that usually spurns access to the press is very valuable.

Tony says

This was superb.

I read and enjoyed James Mann's two previous books on Presidents and foreign policy: *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan* which posited Reagan's evolution of thought on the Soviet Union; and *The Rise of the Vulcans* about George W. Bush and his band of neo-conservatives. I found both books illuminating and refreshingly non-partisan. I had not heard about *The Obamians* and was surprised to see it shelved on the \$2

everything-here-must-go shelves at Half-Priced Books. It deserved more respect.

Mann does not have the same access to the highest ranking White House insiders as, say, Bob Woodward. Everybody talks to Woodward. Mann doesn't have Woodward's numbers of readers. But also unlike Woodward, Mann is not looking for that piece of gossip, the off-hand comment, the indiscretion, the 'AH-HA' moment, whatever sells. Instead, Mann finds the people actually doing the grunt work. And he tries to discern the motivations and philosophies of the people setting policy. Who mentored whom? Who read what? And what did these people study, write and teach? And then, he lets us see this play out on the canvas of real global events. All of which I find fascinating.

Mann teaches that Obama came to Office as a realist, from the Scowcroft school of global relations. We would not interfere with a foreign country's inside workings. The short term purpose of this policy was to undo foreign perception of the United States created by the George W. Bush years. So, Obama would not preach Democracy or, even, freedom. Our policy, emphatically, was engagement. Carrot and stick stuff. The problem was that engagement rarely, if ever, worked. But at least now other countries would know there was the attempt. Mann said this paid dividends with global consensus for subsequent harsh stances. Hey, we tried.

But Obama, in three short years, evolved. His strategy changed from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism with, Mann believes, much better results. And after 18 months with nary a peep, he came to espouse Democracy and the protection of human rights. Scowcroft would never have attacked Libya. Indeed, Obama, who won a Nobel Peace Prize "for a few speeches", would show he was no pacifist. He simply was particular on who he ordered to be killed.

Mann very helpfully compares Obama's foreign policy to that of Bill Clinton and the second Bush. He demonstrates that there were differences, sure, but also much that was the same:

The drones and the targeted killing did not stop. The United States continued to hold prisoners without trial. The policy of rendition remained in effect. Just as many of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reforms didn't become permanent until the Eisenhower administration failed to do away with them, so, too, some of George W. Bush's antiterrorism policies didn't seem like permanent changes until they were perpetuated by Obama.

And so, since I know you want to know, Obama comes off quite well. Smart, temperate, analytical, and not afraid to make tough decisions. Most importantly, however, Obama is not afraid to change tactics or philosophy. I came away with a heightened respect for Obama. And for Hillary Clinton too, for that matter.

If you wanted to you could take the information in this book and say, see, this is exactly what I am saying about why Obama's right (or, Obama's wrong). But that's now what this book means to be. This is not about taking sides. This book taught me that I wasn't really paying attention to hot spots around the world. I have a much better (if still superficial) understanding of what's going on. We are all a work in progress.

A few minor criticisms. First, there was some really shoddy editing, both as to basic grammar and repetitiveness. Second, the title - *The Obamians* - sounds a little glib. I suppose Mann really liked calling Bush's guys 'Vulcans' and felt the giddy need to match it here. Third, the subtitle - *The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* - is, at a minimum, hyperbolic. There really wasn't any struggle. Obama sets policy and everyone gets that. Lastly, the use of group caricature drawings on the cover (similar again to *The Vulcans*) is, well, cartoonish and demeans the players and the book.
