




A world of difference...

When President Obama took office earlier this year he faced one of the most difficult international situations of any incoming president. Here **Michael Cox** analyses his foreign policy and asks: is he really that different from George W Bush?

On 15 September 2008 Lehman Brothers collapsed. Within days the global financial system moved from crisis to near collapse leading to a panic in the markets and to what in effect has now become the first great depression of the 21st century. Every cloud though has its own silver lining. For the Democrats, the meltdown made Barack Obama's election on 4 November virtually inevitable. As a member of a party that

had for 25 years been arguing that government was the problem, McCain could hardly be seen as credible in circumstances where even Bush had been forced to nationalise a large chunk of the mortgage industry while pumping billions of tax dollars into the US economy. For the first time in a long time, the republicans – who were neck and neck with the Democrats until August – got it very badly wrong in the late fall of 2008.

The election of Barack Obama was a first in several different ways. He was obviously the first president since 1932 to come into office in the midst of an economic tsunami (little wonder he has been more often than not compared with Franklin Delano Roosevelt). He was even more obviously the first black president, whose mother was white, who had spent a good deal of his early life outside mainland United States, and whose name – Barack Hussein Obama – speaks in itself of a dual heritage of which he is obviously proud. He was also the first American president since Kennedy in 1960 whose election truly excited the rest of the world and in whom the world has now obviously invested an enormous amount of hope. Indeed, without even having fired a shot in friendship (or anger), Obama's election has done wonders for US standing globally.



'He was the first American president since Kennedy in 1960 whose election truly excited the rest of the world and in whom the world has now invested an enormous amount of hope'

be less change in US foreign policy than many on this side of the Atlantic might have hoped for.

Take the dirty war better known as the 'war on terror'. Certainly, Obama has promised to do away with torture and close down Guantanamo. He has also made plain that there is no inherent conflict between US security needs and US democratic values. However, he has not – at the time of writing – said anything about getting rid of extraordinary rendition. Moreover, while his new foreign policy team has stressed the centrality of 'diplomacy' in US foreign policy, it has not rejected force as a means of achieving US goals. Indeed, in Afghanistan and Pakistan Obama has effectively promised to escalate the war against what Vice President Biden termed in his February speech in Munich, the 'true irreconcilables'.

Nor has the United States conceptually abandoned unilateralism. As Biden carefully and quite deliberately told his German audience, the US will work alongside friends and allies when it can. Furthermore, it will not act pre-emptively. But as he went on to stress, if it has to, the US will go it alone – if it 'must'. Obama has already shown what this might mean in practice. For while Europeans fumed and protested on the sidelines as Gaza was blitzed, Bush, with Obama's implicit support, did what the US will no doubt do again and again in the Middle East in the coming years: Ignore London, Berlin and Paris and act alone or in a coalition of the willing – with one other state, Israel – and try and secure what it defines as peace in the region. Iran and the EU please take note.

At the end of the day however Europeans in particular seem to be less interested in these fine – though rather significant – details, and more interested in the fact that George W Bush is no longer sitting in the White House. The sense of relief across Europe since 4 November 2008 has been palpable. No doubt the European political class has much to be relieved about. The new man in the White House is intelligent, articulate and even readable (his autobiography has sold very well on this side of the Atlantic). In addition simply by being – well, Obama – he has made anti-Americanism in Europe intellectually unfashionable for the first time in a very long time. To cap it all, Barack will have the very great pleasure of welcoming France back into the military command of NATO later this year (though all the spade work for this began under Bush). Who knows? After the deal has been signed with 'Sarko', we may even hear of Carla Bruni and Michelle Obama sharing a glass or two of good Burgundy late into the small hours, while earnestly talking about the environment and poverty (such things would never have happened with poor George in charge).

But as the plain-speaking Biden reminded his European listeners, there is good news and there is bad news. And the bad news is quite bad.

First, while the White House might talk multilateralism and utter fine words about global co-economic cooperation, the Obama team has focused like that proverbial laser beam on the American economy rather than anybody else's. Protectionist it is not. But protectionist it could easily become if the recession continues and a Democratic-dominated Congress begins to scream loud enough.

Second, though America and Americans may love NATO and feel a sense of cultural and political solidarity with their various democratic cousins across the pond, they still want to see more European bodies in the line of fire in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is an open secret in Washington that the US military is fast losing patience with its friends; even those loyal and now not-quite-so-special Brits, have come in for a fair share of American criticism of late following their performances in Basra and Helmand province.

Finally, there is the old – some would say new – 'Cold War' problem of Russia. Obama may have pushed the 'reset' button on the US-Russian relationship in an attempt to develop some kind of new deal with Moscow. Nonetheless, there remain some deep underlying differences in approach between key European countries – Germany, France and Italy in particular who talk cooperation, regional stability and gas pipelines – and a Washington who while willing to talk, senses that Russia may now be a busted flush in an era of low oil prices. So far this difference in philosophy has not surfaced to divide the transatlantic relationship in any serious way. And it still may not. But it is yet another of those unexploded political devices lying just under the surface of the road that could in time bring the European honeymoon with Barack Obama to an unfortunate, and possibly tragic, end, for both sides. ■



Michael Cox

is co-director of IDEAS: Diploma and Strategy at LSE and professor of international relations at LSE.

Still, with over half a million Americans losing their jobs every month, a world in economic disarray and several very dangerous problems facing the US from Afghanistan (where the NATO mission is in crisis) to Iran (a state with nuclear ambitions and friend of Hamas and Hezbollah), the situation confronting him could only be described as challenging. Indeed, given a whole host of other issues – building bridges to an alienated Muslim world, dealing with Chavez in Venezuela, maintaining a stable relationship with recession-hit China, and reassuring those sensitive, complaining but in the end very useful Europeans that America still considers them all to be 'special' – one might even call it critical. Little wonder that Richard Holbrooke (the Balkans Bulldozer and now US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan) described Obama's foreign policy agenda as being perhaps the most problematic confronting any American president since the end of World War II.

If we know what he faces, can we reliably predict what he might do? And how might this impact on Europe? To answer this we need to beware change – or, more precisely, be aware that there may in fact

Obama's team



Barack Obama's new budget director, LSE alumnus

Peter Orszag (MSc 1992, PhD 1997), pictured left, is one of an impressive retinue of LSE alumni appointed

to the president's administration.

Dr Orszag, a Princeton graduate who studied economics at LSE as a Marshall scholar, has been named director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Obama administration. At 40, he will be a key member of the president's economic team, advising him on a variety of issues including federal spending programmes and managing the federal budget.

Professor Emeritus Lord Richard Layard recalls: 'As well as being brilliant, he had an extraordinary level of organisation. In fact he was the most organised person I have ever known. ... He's very much the right kind of person for Obama, with very sensible, balanced views which are relevant to the problem in hand. I wasn't surprised at his appointment.'

Professor Danny Quah said: 'From when he was an undergraduate, he was committed to public service. He's also genuinely a really nice guy. ... I think his experience at LSE shows that PhD training is not necessarily just for preparing for a career as an academic. The knowledge we transmit and the conversations we have in the LSE economics department will transfer into the type of good policy work that Peter will do.'

Obama's team also includes alumni **Peter Rouse** (MA 1970), senior adviser to the president, and **Mona Sutpke** (MSc 1997), deputy chief of staff. **Paul Volcker**, who is head of Obama's new economic recovery advisory board, was a Rotary Foundation fellow at LSE from 1951 to 1952.

Larry Summers, who was a visiting academic at LSE in 1987, is head of the White House's National Economic Council.

Jason Furman (MSc 1993) was senior economic adviser during Obama's presidential campaign.



A London memento with a touch of class

LSE
Library
British Library of Political
and Economic Science

Charles Booth's maps are now available as reproductions for sale featuring streets colour-coded according to Victorian social status, from 'upper-middle and upper classes – wealthy' to 'lowest class – vicious and semi-criminal'. Where did you live? What was it like around LSE? Discover at www.lse.ac.uk/booth

To purchase, please quote the relevant map sheet number/s (below) and 'LSE Magazine'.
Tel: +44 (0)20 7955 7223 Email: document@lse.ac.uk

£14.95 per map sheet (£79.95 for full set of 12) includes VAT and UK postage.
Additional £3 for overseas orders.

Thank you for supporting the Library's work

1 East: Isle of Dogs,
Millwall, Limehouse, Bromley,
Stepney [485 x 623 mm]

2 North East: South Hackney,
Clapton, Stoke Newington,
Dalston [421 x 400 mm]

3 North: Stoke Newington,
Highbury, Islington, Finsbury
Park, Tufnell Park, Barnsbury
[502 x 460 mm]

4 North West: Somers Town,
Camden Town, Kentish Town, Belsize
Park, Primrose Hill, Hampstead, St
John's Wood, West Hampstead,
Kilburn, Maida Vale [531 x 485 mm]

5 East Central: Stepney,
Whitechapel, Spitalfields,
Bethnal Green, Shoreditch,
Haggerston [368 x 485 mm]

6 West Central: Hoxton,
Clerkenwell, Bloomsbury,
Fitzrovia, Holborn, Covent
Garden, Soho [525 x 425 mm]

7 Inner West: Westminster,
Marylebone, Mayfair, Paddington,
Bayswater, Kensington,
Chelsea [554 x 485 mm]

8 Outer West: Kilburn,
Kensal Green, Notting Hill, West
Kensington, Fulham, Hammersmith,
Shepherd's Bush [609 x 430 mm]

9 Inner South: Rotherhithe,
Camberwell, Southwark,
Walworth, Kennington, Lambeth,
Vauxhall [670 x 382 mm]

10 South West: Wandsworth,
Battersea, Clapham, Putney,
Fulham [700 x 388 mm]

11 Outside South: Peckham,
Camberwell, Dulwich, Brixton,
South Lambeth [574 x 417 mm]

12 South East: Blackheath,
Greenwich, Lewisham, Hatcham
Park [485 x 535 mm]