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Reviewing Obama’s Flawed Foreign Policy Record

By Daniel Larison
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record and addresses its critics. She concludes:

With his cautious and noncommittal foreign-policy approach, Obama pleased no one. But we shouldn’t be too quick to describe his foreign-policy legacy as an abject failure: we may well miss him when he’s gone.

Ashford makes several good points, but I don’t “miss” Obama and I’m fairly confident that I’m not going to for the same reasons I laid out ^[2] last year. I don’t doubt that Obama was still the better choice on foreign policy than Romney in 2012, and I wouldn’t take back a single criticism I made of Romney during the campaign, but that doesn’t change the fact that Obama made a number of egregious, unforced errors that mar his record. The worst and probably most consequential error was the decision to support the Saudi-led war on Yemen, which his administration backed unstintingly for most of the last two years while the coalition pummeled and starved Yemen. The official line is that this was done to “reassure” the Saudis and the other Gulf states following the nuclear deal, but this wasn’t necessary. The U.S. didn’t have to be involved in the wrecking of Yemen, but chose to back its despotic clients in a vain bid to keep them happy. That decision has contributed to the creation of one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world, and it has made the U.S. deeply complicit in the war crimes of the governments that it has armed and aided from day one. Because of our enabling of the coalition bombing campaign and our support for their blockade, the U.S. is partly responsible for creating

conditions in Yemen that now threaten millions of people with starvation or death from preventable diseases. Whatever other good or mediocre policies Obama may have had during his presidency, he is responsible for ordering U.S. support for this war and he ought to be judged very harshly for that.

The other long-lasting, harmful foreign policy legacy Obama has left is the normalization of permanent war and presidential warmaking. Despite presenting himself as the president responsible for ending foreign wars, Obama has continued some, started others, and joined another. The result is that the U.S. was at war somewhere for his entire presidency, there is no place where it was at war when he took office that it is not still fighting today, and there are at least a couple new countries where the U.S. is involved militarily thanks to his decisions. Obama has initiated wars on his own authority twice in his presidency, and then expanded one of those wars to multiple countries. I happen to think both of those wars were unnecessary and haven't served American interests, but that isn't my point here. Even if you think those interventions were justified, they were waged without Congressional authorization, and they provide ready-made excuses for this president and his successors to start wars on their own. The absurd claim that the 2001 AUMF authorizes current operations in Iraq, Syria, and Libya isn't credible, but it has provided a fig leaf to permit open-ended war without any input from Congress. It's true that Congress has shamefully abdicated its responsibilities during this period, but that doesn't excuse Obama for his actions. He has handed over extensive, essentially unchecked power to initiate wars to his successor, and there is not much reason to think that Trump won't use that power.

There are other things in Obama's foreign policy that I haven't agreed with, but to my mind these stand out as the worst and most inexcusable flaws in Obama's record. So, no, I won't miss the president that did these things. Obama may not have been "abject failure" on foreign policy, but he made some exceptionally bad decisions that will have lasting consequences for the U.S. and for several other countries that have been harmed in the process.