

# President Obama's No Longer Saying He Will 'Degrade And Destroy' ISIS. Is This Significant?

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Dec 13, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alryys-awbama-tkhly-n-bart-adaf-tnzym-aldwlt-alaslmyt-wtdmyrh-fhl-yktsy-dhik-dlalt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alryys-awbama-tkhly-n-bart-adaf-tnzym-aldwlt-alaslmyt-wtdmyrh-fhl-yktsy-dhik-dlalt)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

---

**Given the phrase's apparently swift demise, it may be a long time before another president uses such language as a guiding military strategy.**

In his Oval Office address following the San Bernardino attacks, President Obama didn't announce any substantive change in U.S. counterterrorism strategy. But he did make a noteworthy shift in his rhetoric toward the Islamic State (or ISIL, as he prefers).

Specifically, the President dropped the phrase "degrade and ultimately destroy," a term employed vis-a-vis ISIL by the President and his senior advisors since September 2014. Instead, he declared, "The threat from terrorism is real, but we will overcome it. We will destroy ISIL and any other organization that tries to harm us." Gone, it appears, are ill-defined efforts at "degrading" the enemy on the road to its ultimate destruction.

If he sticks to this new rhetoric, it will mark the early demise of President Obama's unique contribution to America's military lexicon. This moment should not pass without notice.

On August 29, 2014, President Obama first described U.S. strategy as to "degrade ISIL over the long term." Until that time, "destroying" ISIL did not appear to be on the agenda. Then, just days later, following the release of horrific video of ISIL's beheading of an American journalist, he amended this during a visit to Estonia to "degrade and destroy," saying "Our objective is clear, and that is to degrade and destroy ISIL so that it's no longer a threat not just to Iraq, but also to the region and to the United States." At a September 5 news conference in Wales, he settled on the somewhat looser phrase "degrade and ultimately destroy." That was the key phrase in the opening sentence of his September 10 address to the nation on U.S. counterterrorism strategy: "My fellow Americans, tonight I want to speak to you about what the United States will do with our friends and allies to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL." With rare exceptions, that phrase -- sometimes conditioned by "ultimately," sometimes not --

remained the consistent refrain of U.S. strategy until San Bernardino.

Interestingly, ISIL was not the first enemy President Obama targeted with a strategy of "degrade and destroy." That distinction goes to al-Qaeda. In a November 2009 press conference with the Indian prime minister, he said: "We are going to dismantle and degrade [al-Qaeda's] capabilities and, ultimately, dismantle and destroy their networks."

But what is particularly noteworthy is that, with that usage, President Obama became the first commander-in-chief ever to use the two verbs -- "degrade" and "destroy" -- in the same sentence in any military context. For that observation, one can thank the invaluable resource of the University of California at Santa Barbara's "American Presidency Project," which has made searchable every presidential word ever written or spoken.

Before President Obama, only five chief executives even used the verbs "degrade" and "destroy" in the same sentence. For two of them -- Teddy Roosevelt and Bill Clinton -- the topic was environmental conservation. "If we of this generation destroy the resources from which our children would otherwise derive their livelihood, we reduce the capacity of our land to support a population, and so either degrade the standard of living or deprive the coming generations of their right to life on this continent," wrote Roosevelt in the 1909 report of the National Conservation Commission. In an eerily similar vein, Clinton told a national forest conference in 1993 that a new forestation plan "should produce a predictable and sustainable level of timber sales and nontimber resources that will not degrade or destroy our forest environment."

In his 1976 State of the Union address, Gerald Ford used the verbs in a passage about drug abuse. "Hard drugs, we all know, degrade the spirit as they destroy the body of their users," he said, arguing for mandatory penalties.

More than a century earlier, two of our least auspicious presidents -- James Buchanan and Andrew Johnson -- also used the verbs in a single sentence. Just months before the outbreak of the Civil War, James Buchanan was under vicious political attack; he fired back against a congressional vote of censure with a message in which he wrote "The absence of all proof to sustain this attempt to degrade the President whilst it manifests the venom of the shaft aimed at him, has destroyed the vigor of the bow."

And most ironic of all was Johnson's use of the phraseology when he vetoed an 1867 law giving the vote to freed slaves living in the District of Columbia: "To give [suffrage] indiscriminately to a new class, wholly unprepared by previous habits and opportunities to perform the trust which it demands, is to degrade it, and finally to destroy its power...."

Johnson's strategy of obstructionism was overwhelmed by politics; those freed slaves eventually got the vote and suffrage was neither degraded nor destroyed. Similarly, President Obama's rhetoric of a more measured, incremental approach to ISIL -- an approach that began with degrading it and grew to include a commitment to its eventual destruction -- was also overwhelmed by politics.

In this case, the urgent need Americans have to feel secure apparently compelled the president to drop the amorphous concept of "degrading" our enemy. In times of crisis and war, Americans like their enemies defeated, not weakened. The president didn't say when victory would come nor did he offer new tactics to achieve it. But at least it was a start.

Rhetoric, of course, is only a small piece of reality. So far, the president does not seem to have matched military capabilities with his newly defined political intentions. But given its swift demise, it may be a long time before another president identifies "degrade-and-destroy" as a guiding military strategy.

*Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.* ❖

## RECOMMENDED



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

## TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

