

# Obama's Real Foreign-Policy 'Mumbo-Jumbo'

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## The president dismissed his critics on Syria for offering half-baked policy advice, but maybe the real problem is in the White House.

**P**resident Barack Obama revealed much on Oct. 2 when he lashed out at critics of his foreign policy. His response did not focus on basic policy choices but rather administrative tradecraft: "When I hear people offering up half-baked ideas as if they are solutions, or trying to downplay the challenges involved in this situation -- what I'd like to see people ask is, specifically, precisely, what exactly would you do, and how would you fund it, and how would you sustain it? And typically, what you get is a bunch of mumbo jumbo." Even Hillary Clinton was targeted, allegedly because she is no longer privy to what the Joint Chiefs are advising. Implication: shut up.

At a superficial level, the president has a point, but at a deeper level he gets things wrong. First, on how democracy works; second, on how the national security bureaucracy operates; and, third, how his presentation of his foreign policy complicates outside judgment.

First, being the beneficiary of mind-numbing top secret discussions in the Situation Room doesn't guarantee wise foreign-policy decisions. If so, we would not have marched into North Korea, launched the Vietnam War, or invaded Iraq in 2003. In a democracy, the people and their elected representatives, even if bereft of briefings by the top brass, must pass judgment on an administration's foreign policy. A first-term senator with no military expertise, Obama did just this with the Bush administration on Iraq, often correctly.

Understandably, outside criticism usually focuses on reviewing outcomes, rather than getting into policy details, which requires "insider knowledge." But when, as discussed below, the administration is slippery on its bottom lines and the assessment of its outcomes, the public has to get into the policy implementation "inputs" side to keep this administration honest.

And on the inputs side, what the president didn't tell us is that the national security bureaucracy, including the military under normal circumstances, will usually default to entropy, wrapped around exactly the things he cites --

who funds what, how to sustain an operation, and on and on. The key phrase here is "under normal circumstances." If the top leadership decides a situation is not "normal" and demands action, the bureaucracy will deal with the knots that usually bind it. The administration's response to the Islamic State's growing threat to Iraq before Mosul fell in the summer of 2014 was to cite the numerous National Security Council meetings held to review the problem, without perceivable decision. But when the Islamic State problem really got bad with Mosul's fall in June 2014, the president dispatched thousands of troops to Iraq and then began bombing the Islamic State.

With the U.S. military, a second reason for inaction is an unwillingness to commit if the president doesn't have his heart in a project, as seen in his administration's unworthy public denial of responsibility for its own Syrian insurgent training program failures. In short: If this president wanted a no-fly zone in Syria, more active combat operations against the Islamic State, or some other policy within America's enormous diplomatic and military capabilities, he could have it tomorrow and let the bureaucracy scramble to figure out the funding, sustainment, etc.

The third reason why critics get wrapped around the axle on operational questions is that this administration often does not talk straight to the American people on its real objectives. While some (Gideon Rose in the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs*) argue that the president is executing a traditional liberal internationalist foreign policy, the president's policies suggest that he is pursuing a revolutionary turn in foreign policy away from the post-1945 Pax Americana.

There is a case for such a turn, but the administration does not make it. Rather it claims to be in the traditional policy mainstream -- observers sometimes cite Eisenhower -- while seemingly producing contrary results. For example, while officially claiming the Iran deal was only a technical nuclear agreement, the administration frequently hints at a transformational partnership with Iran. Such bifurcation of basic goals puts critics in a pickle. Between 1968 and 1976, America openly debated on what basic foreign policy it should have, but that is not happening today. The administration affirms longstanding policy goals, but public statements (Obama's 2014 West Point speech) and actions (the response to Putin this past week) suggest otherwise. When one challenges "outcomes" (e.g., the failure to make progress on defeating the Islamic State), the administration invariably argues that "it's a long-term struggle," "[we] must address the social and political root causes," or, its favorite, any opponent's transgression is a "quagmire" that is "doomed to failure."

Thus unable to debate the administration on underlying policies, critics focus on specific implementation inputs of those policies (see, for example, the "forward observers," "anti-tank weapons to Kiev," or "12-mile South China Sea challenge") while doubting whether the president is really serious about them at bottom. This then generates the "mumbo-jumbo" rejoinder as operational implementation details are usually beyond most outside analysis.

The solution would be for the president to start succeeding in his stated policies to preserve America's alliances and the global security system, which, even he admitted at the UN, is under attack, or forthrightly to change them to reflect what he really wants and for which policies he will take risks. That would end the mumbo-jumbo, from critics and from him.

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