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Opinions

President Obama's foreign policy paradox

By Robert Kagan,

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Whether one likes President Obama's conduct of foreign policy or not, the common assumption is that the administration is at least giving the American people the foreign policy they want. The majority of Americans have opposed any meaningful U.S. role in Syria, have wanted to lessen U.S. involvement in the Middle East generally, are eager to see the "tide of war" recede and would like to focus on "nation-building at home." Until now, the president generally has catered to and encouraged this public mood, so one presumes that he has succeeded, if nothing else, in gaining the public's approval.

Yet, surprisingly, he hasn't. The president's approval ratings on foreign policy are dismal. According to the [most recent CBS News poll](#), only 36 percent of Americans approve of the job Obama is doing on foreign policy, while 49 percent disapprove. This was consistent with other polls over the past year. A November poll by the Pew Research Center showed [34 percent](#) approval on foreign policy vs. 56 percent disapproval. The CBS poll showed a higher percentage of Americans approving of Obama's economic policies (39 percent) and a higher percentage approving his handling of health care (41 percent). Foreign policy is the most unpopular thing Obama is doing right now. And lest one think that foreign policy is never a

winner, [Bill Clinton's foreign policy ratings](#) at roughly the same point in his second term were quite good — 57 percent approval; 34 percent disapproval — and Ronald Reagan's rating was more than 50 percent at a similar point in his presidency. That leaves Obama in the company of George W. Bush — not the first-term Bush whose [ratings were consistently high](#) but the second-term Bush mired in the worst phase of the Iraq war.

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Nor are Obama's numbers on foreign policy simply being dragged down by his overall job approval ratings. The public is capable of drawing distinctions. When George H.W. Bush's overall approval ratings were tanking in the last year of his presidency, his ratings on economic policy led the downward trend, but his foreign policy ratings stayed above 50 percent. According to the CBS poll, Obama's overall approval rating is 40 percent, four points higher than his foreign policy rating.

So we return to the paradox: President Obama is supposedly conducting a foreign policy in tune with popular opinion, yet his foreign policy is not popular. What's the explanation? I await further investigation by pollsters, but until then I offer one hypothesis:

A majority of Americans may not want to intervene in Syria, do anything serious about Iran or care what happens in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt or [Ukraine](#). They may prefer a minimalist foreign policy in which the United States no longer plays a leading role in the world and leaves others to deal with their own miserable problems. They may want a more narrowly self-interested American policy. In short, they may want what Obama so far has been giving them. But they're not proud of it, and they're not

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grateful to him for giving them what they want.

For many decades Americans thought of their nation as special. They were the self-proclaimed “leader of the free world,” the “[indispensable nation](#),” the No. 1 superpower. It was a source of pride. Now, pundits and prognosticators are telling them that those days are over, that it is time for the United States to seek more modest goals commensurate with its declining power. And they have a president committed to this task. He has shown little nostalgia for the days of U.S. leadership and at times seems to conceive it as his job to deal with the “reality” of decline.

Perhaps this is what they want from him. But it is not something they will thank him for. To follow a leader to triumph inspires loyalty, gratitude and affection. Following a leader in retreat inspires no such emotions.

Presidents are not always rewarded for doing what the public says it wants. Sometimes they are rewarded for doing just the opposite. [Bill Clinton enjoyed higher approval ratings](#) after intervening in Bosnia and Kosovo, even though majorities of Americans had opposed both interventions before he launched them. Who knows what the public might have thought of Obama had he gone through with his planned [attack on Syria last August](#)? As [Col. Henry Stimson observed](#), until a president leads, he can't expect the people to “voluntarily take the initiative in letting him know whether or not they would follow him if he did take the lead.” Obama's speech in Europe Wednesday shows that he may understand that the time has come to offer leadership. Whether or not he does in his remaining time in office, perhaps his would-be successors can take note.

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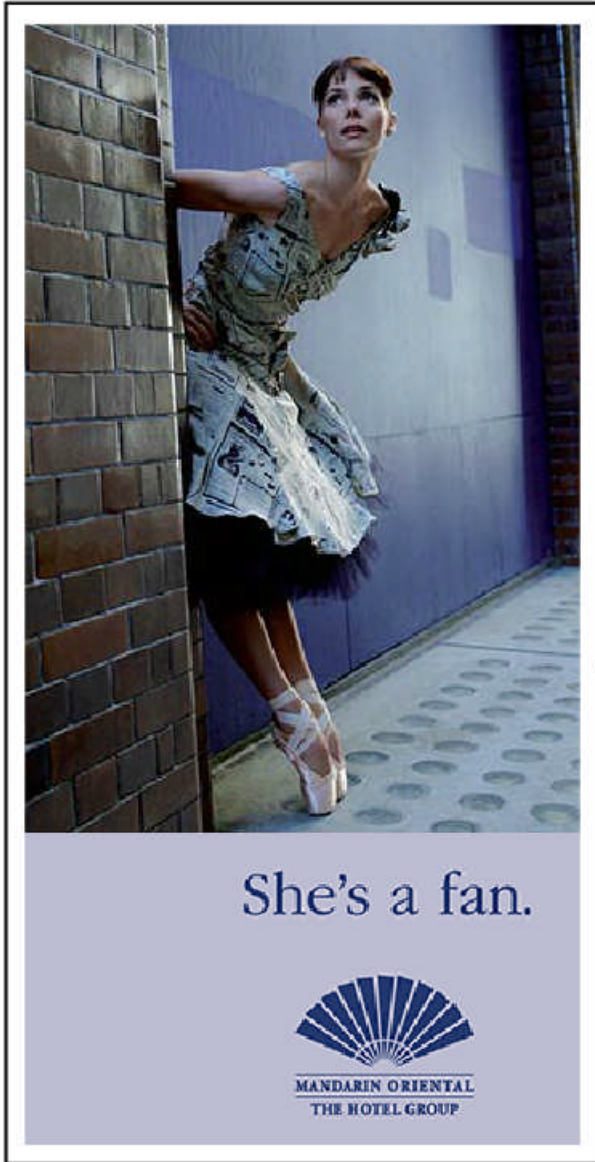
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