Kaplan and Boot debate the Success of Obama

On October 18, 2010 over 250 members of the extended Cornell community gathered in Call Auditorium to hear Max Boot and Fred Kaplan debate the success and failure of President Obama’s foreign policy. The discussion was part of the Einaudi Center’s Lund Critical Debate Series, and was moderated by Professor Peter Katzenstein.

Boot spoke first, stating, "I have some bad news for Obama, supporters - he hasn't kept his campaign promises. I also have some good news for Obama’s opponents - he hasn't kept his campaign promises." Boot went on to explain that the rigors imposed by the executive office have made Obama end up in a "more reasonable place" than his campaign pledges had projected. While Obama promised a break with the past, he has delivered "conventional thinking." True to his campaign pledges, stated Boot, Obama has been the model of diplomacy where Afghanistan and Pakistan are concerned. However, he continued, Obama hasn't made much progress towards his promises regarding energy security, the climate change goal of an 80% reduction on greenhouse gas emissions has not been met, and the Copenhagen summit can be viewed as a foreign policy failure. Boot added that rendition, wiretapping and military tribunals have continued, and the sheer number of drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan are increasing.

Boot contended, although Obama was elected to much global acclaim, that according to the Penn Global Attitudes survey released in June 2010 general opinion of the United States has slipped in important Muslim countries such as Egypt and Turkey, which are widely viewed as regional allies of the United States. Tensions with China have increased. The ambitious goal Obama laid out during his campaign of a world without nuclear weapons is even further from becoming a reality since Iran is closer to having this capability than ever before. On the contrary, said Boot, Obama made no attempt to engage with Iran's "Green Movement" to encourage regime change. Other campaign goals, such as a Middle East peace accord, have not been pursued.

Kaplan responded, "Max Boot says Obama's foreign policy has been a failure because we don't have a Middle East peace accord. If every president had to live up to his campaign rhetoric, then nobody would get a passing mark." Relations between the United States and
China, he continued, weren't in good shape as Bush left office. Obama, on the contrary, has favored a "mixed approach" of sanctions and collaboration with foreign policy partners to represent our interests in the region. Kaplan contended that, as China makes more aggressive feints into the South China Sea, the Obama administration has made it clear that the United States won't tolerate this behavior.

Insofar as the Middle East is concerned, continued Kaplan, the Bush administration was opposed to doing anything at all. Their idealism, he said, prevented them from responding to the expansion of settlements in disputed territories which is at the root of much of the current tension between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Although Obama talked about the vision of a world without nuclear weapons during his campaign, he also said that it was unlikely to happen in his lifetime. Rather, argued Kaplan, Obama spoke of his desire to create through foreign policy the conditions in which disarmament would be possible.

Boot then gave his response to Kaplan's rebuttal. He agreed that all campaign priorities can't be lived up to, but still took Obama to task for making so many broad and sweeping promises of hope and change that would be even less possible to achieve. He was, however, pleased that Obama has ended up more of a centrist than he seemed to be while campaigning, though he has likely alienated much of his support. His inaction, Boot continued, has made Obama's foreign policy less of a disaster than it promised to be.

Kaplan argued that when Hezbollah crossed the Lebanon - Israel border in 2006, the Arab League offered a strong condemnation which provided an opening for the Bush administration to act decisively. However, continued Kaplan, the Bush administration put no effort into Middle East diplomacy whatsoever, as distracted as they were by the two wars they had pursued. Kaplan concluded, "Obama may be the unluckiest president in terms of the economy and foreign policy messes he inherited."

Katzenstein then opened the debate to questions from the floor. When Boot was asked to comment on the response of the Obama administration to challenges posed by relations with Pakistan, he responded, "Pakistan is truly the problem from hell. Obama hasn't come close to solving it but neither has Bush or any of his predecessors." While he viewed the increase in drone strikes as a continuation of an effective policy, Boot pointed out that there had still been no confrontation over Pakistan's covert support of the Taliban and that this confrontation was needed for a successful outcome in Afghanistan.

The next questioner asked, "If McCain had won the 2008 presidential election, how would his policy towards Russia be different and what improvements would be made?" Boot, who had been one of McCain's campaign advisors, predicted that there would have been quite a bit of continuity with the policies of the Bush administration. McCain, he continued, didn't make lots of flashy promises like Obama did, and would never have cancelled the hard-won Bush initiative to increase anti-ballistic missile defenses in Eastern Europe.

Kaplan stated that although Bush was hoping to shore up Russia in an alliance against China, the first thing he did was to alienate them by backing out of the ABM treaty in order to place missile defenses in Eastern Europe. He continued that McCain would not have pursued anti-proliferation or demanded a halt to uranium enrichment by Iran, and that Obama has created an environment in which cooperation with Russia is possible, whereas McCain would not have sought it.
Another question, "What can Obama do to encourage regime change in Iran?" was directed to both debaters. Boot responded that Obama could have taken the path of the Reagan administration in June 1987 and encouraged a peaceful revolution when afforded the opportunity to do so by rise of the "Green Movement" in June 2009, and that he has wasted the first two years of his administration with a non-policy on Iran. Kaplan rebutted that the perception that the United States is interfering in domestic Iranian politics could, to the contrary, lead to setbacks in both the growth of the "Green Movement" and in our relations with Iran, and added that, "There is no Gorbachev in Iran."

Katzenstein exercised his moderator's prerogative to direct a final question to both debaters, and asked how we could even know if an administration's foreign policy was a success. Kaplan responded that it was too early to offer a valid appraisal, but that in general Obama is moving things in a positive direction given the limited leverage the United States has on problems in the world today. He encouraged the audience to look at what Obama had set out as goals in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and then look at how well he has lived up to those ideals.

Boot agreed that we need a broader perspective than the past two years under the current administration to make a good evaluation. He continued that Bush wasn't lucky because the events of September 11, 2001 had occurred on his watch, and that Obama hasn't faced a comparable crisis yet. He concluded that the sign of a successful administration is confidence in its ability to transcend the problems it confronts, and that it's supposed to be hard to get things done in our system because it was set up that way to encourage moderation.

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