

Journalists often gang up on our presidents. Dwight Eisenhower was dismissed as an inarticulate golf-playing do-nothing by the political elites of his time. In reality, he adeptly handled the earlier years of the Cold War and set forth policies that saw us through a half century. Lyndon Johnson saddled himself with the Vietnam War and was reviled by journalists, academics, and the young, leaving office as a failure. Today, we realize what an astonishing president he was: an unlikely southerner who pushed through the first laws benefitting Black citizens since Lincoln.

Foreign policy has always been tricky for a nation protected by two oceans and unthreatening neighbors. Our earliest presidents warned us to not get entangled in Europe's wars. Then, until the issue of slavery was resolved by the Civil war, we remained isolationist. How could we represent democracy abroad when we had slaves at home? But once that war ended, we entered the international arena, flexing our muscles as an emerging great state. President Teddy Roosevelt received a Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the end of a brief (and humiliating) war between the Russian and Japanese Empires.

We reluctantly entered World Wars I and II, neither of which could have ended satisfactorily without us. The Cold War was our longest conflict, an ideological conflict between the modern Western world and USSR's communist dictatorship. We won that one.

One thread characterizes American foreign policy: not permitting any one hegemon (power) to rule over the European and Asian continents. Germany, Japan, and Russia had the potential to become this kind of power. We fought them, leading alliances that were sharp and effective.

A second thread is protecting the global economy, freedom of the seas, and free flow of oil. This has involved us, whether we like it or not, in the Middle East, a region that, without our stabilizing influence, is nasty, contentious, and not a candidate for democratic rule of law. Rule of law, even under a dictator, is better than anarchy and religious factions.

This president sees that our involvement in the Middle East is less strategic now with our own flourishing energy independence. He annoys the chest-thumpers who always prefer a robust military response; instead, he carefully selects which bad actors to hit. His instinct is like Teddy Roosevelt's advice: walk softly but carry a big stick.

Unfortunately, the big stick is tired, thanks to overuse by his predecessor in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is using it as smartly as he can, despite a temporary absence of bipartisanship in our foreign policy and European allies who are (as always) timid in taking on bullies.

In Syria, which he correctly viewed as a tar pit, he refused to use air power to help remove dictator Assad. We now know there are worse things than dictators, such as anarchist Islamists and tribalism. Our intervention in Libya (goaded by France and Senator McCain) removed Gaddafi, but look what followed!

In Iraq and Afghanistan, he has withdrawn our troops when their so-called democratically-elected presidents refused to protect our forces from being subject to their law. Instead, he is using our power in a drone and shadow war against the Islamists rushing into the void. He nailed Osama bin Laden and is organizing international forces against the Islamist monster, ISIS. We have begun an air war there, giving heart to such opposition as the Kurds.

The US has been struggling with finding the right overall policy for the post-Cold War world. This requires thinking, not shooting from the hip. It also requires the support of Congress and war-weary citizens. The President will do this by producing a doctrine that is both thought out and deadly to our enemies.

It takes Machiavellian thinking to deal with Russia and the Ukraine without firing a shot, as it does in dealing with Iran, a master chess player, over their nuclear development. Chess is war by other means.

No president before him saw Pakistan as more enemy than ally. Obama shrewdly refused

to notify Pakistan when he sent the SEALs to kill Osama Bin Laden. Many historians think better of him than do the chattering classes.

683 words

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