

Political Conditions United-States

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Body

Election 2000

As the 2000 presidential race began to take shape, Vice President Al Gore - the competent second-in-command during both Clinton terms, in an administration that presided over the country's greatest-ever boom - seemed the Democrats' almost inevitable nominee. Yet the association with President Clinton also touched Gore with the taint of scandal and impeachment. A former New Jersey senator, Bill Bradley, was Gore's only major challenger for the Democratic nomination. Both men offered similar centrist-to-liberal planks. Bradley's run, however, faded quickly; Gore had the nomination well in hand going into the later state primaries.

On the Republican side, the contest for the presidential nomination was filled with more fire. An early favorite was Texas Gov. George W. Bush, formerly an oilman and owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team. A nostalgia factor played strongly into Bush's appeal -- he was the son of the former president, Clinton's immediate predecessor, and though the senior Bush bowed out an unpopular leader, those distressed by the Clinton scandals now recalled his tenure as one of dignity and stability. The younger Bush faced a handful of minor rivals for the 2000 Republican nomination, and one serious one, Arizona Senator John McCain.

The influence of money on politics was moving up the issue agenda from a matter for commonplace grouching to a hot-button concern. Sen. McCain, along with a Democratic colleague from Wisconsin, Russ Feingold, were long-time sponsors of a campaign finance reform bill, the main thrust of which was to ban "soft money," the term for unlimited donations to parties that could then be funneled to support particular candidates or causes. The bill was repeatedly introduced and rejected, a rather unsurprising outcome in that politicians were being asked to dismantle the very system that produced their incumbency. This helped secure the image of typical office holders as awash in questionable funding, and of McCain as a courageous, principled maverick. McCain was a refreshing candidate in many ways. His entourage traveled in a bus christened the "Straight Talk Express." Although his policy positions, aside from advocacy of campaign finance reform, were for the most part very conservative, he attracted a substantial following of moderate and independent voters. The early Republican primaries seesawed between McCain and Bush: McCain scored a stunning win in New Hampshire; Bush dominated in South Carolina; McCain recovered to win Michigan. Despite McCain's early momentum, Bush emerged as the strong front-runner after "Super Tuesday," March 7, 2000. Within a few weeks, his nomination as the Republican presidential candidate was essentially sealed.

The two major parties are the substance, but not the sum, of U.S. presidential politics. As in most quadrennial election years, 2000 saw an array of minor-party candidates announce presidential ambitions. The most significant among them was the nominee of the Green Party, Ralph Nader. Nader had decades-long recognition as a

consumer and environmental crusader, and had been instrumental in organizing the activist Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs). He dismissed Republican-Democratic differences as largely inconsequential, maintaining that both main parties' dependence on corporate money undermined their capacity for responsible stewardship of either the environment or the democratic process. Nader set a goal of winning five percent of the total popular vote. Another upstart party with reasonably strong name recognition was the Reform Party, which behind the banner of Ross Perot had won support from nearly one in every five voters in 1992. Perot ran again in 1996, much less successfully. The nomination was up for grabs in 2000, and in a bitter struggle, a defector from the Republicans, conservative commentator Pat Buchanan, wrested it from other aspirants. Buchanan's far-right views were anathema to many of those who had helped to create the Reform Party. He didn't figure to be much of a factor in the election, however, the tortured circumstances of the vote in Florida made Buchanan an inadvertently key player in deciding the presidency, as will be discussed shortly.

As the summer nominating conventions neared, the Republican and Democratic nominees-in-waiting chose their respective running mates, the vice presidential candidates. Bush tapped Dick Cheney, an oil industry executive, the defense secretary in his father's cabinet, and before that a Wyoming congressman. A consensus analysis was that Bush had made a safe choice-someone who projected practiced competence to balance criticism of Bush as too callow for the nation's top job, and who explicitly harkened back to the last Republican administration.

Gore's selection, quite a bit more dramatic, was the senator from Connecticut, Joseph Lieberman. Lieberman was variously described as an independent, moderate or somewhat conservative Democrat. Notably, he was the first member of his party to express disapproval and dismay over President Clinton's involvement in and handling of the Monica Lewinsky affair. He was thus a shrewd pick in that Lieberman helped distance Gore from the White House scandal. Also notably, Lieberman was the first person of Jewish background ever on a major-party presidential ticket.

The two candidates' positions on substantive issues often displayed nuanced rather than stark differences. Both acknowledged that changes in the health care system were needed to reduce the number of uninsured Americans. Both crafted proposals to deal with the financing crunch that Social Security, the national retirement fund, faced in the medium-term future. Both devised plans to redistribute a growing federal budget surplus, in some manner, back to the people. Both pledged to keep the country strong militarily, though Bush distinguished himself from his opponent by being a more vociferous proponent of increased Pentagon funding who was, nonetheless, somewhat more cautious about engaging U.S. forces abroad.

On Social Security, Bush called for a partial privatization scheme that would allow workers to take a percentage of the Social Security tax now automatically deducted from their paychecks, and at their discretion invest this money in some form of private-sector-based growth equity such as mutual funds. Gore opposed any Social Security privatization; he advocated a national savings program, in which the government would provide matching funds for savings accounts started by the lowest-income Americans. Bush stressed he would deal very simply with burgeoning federal revenues by returning them to taxpayers in the form of an across-the-board income tax cut. Although Bush's tax proposal included a new lower marginal rate for the bottom income bracket of taxpayers, the wealthiest citizens, who pay a disproportionate share of income taxes, would receive a disproportionate share of the relief. Gore also proposed some tax cuts, but targeted them to middle-income families with children.

Bush and Gore had significantly different ideas on how to upgrade education. The Texas governor advocated giving parents of children who attended substandard public schools a means to place them in more effective learning environments -- by increasing the availability of charter or magnet schools, and more controversially, by allowing families access to a portion of public education funds, which they could use to pay for tuition at private or parochial schools. In the favored Republican terminology, such a plan was "parental choice" the Democrats labeled the proposed program "vouchers," and held that diverting funds from already struggling public schools would only force beleaguered parents into settling for even lower-quality education for their children. Vice President Gore strongly rejected shifting school funding into a voucher or private school option plan. He focused instead on comprehensive improvements to the existing system of public education, though he agreed with Bush on the need to institute more rigorous standards and accountability.

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"Choice" was a word with a different kind of resonance, as well, in the campaign. One of the most dramatic accomplishments of a more militant phase of the women's movement that crested in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, determining that women had a constitutional right to choose to terminate an unwanted, unplanned pregnancy. Since this watershed, opponents of legalized abortion, led by conservative religious groups, had sought to reverse the effect of *Roe v. Wade*, whether by statute, constitutional amendment, or gradual reconfiguration of the judiciary into a body more agreeable to their position. In fact, during the twelve years under Republican administrations between the 1980 and 1992 elections, a sequence of appointments to the nation's highest bench had molded a substantially more conservative Supreme Court. The 7-2 majority in *Roe* had dwindled, in abortion-related cases that infrequently plied through the judicial system to the top court, down to 5-4. During the campaign, Vice President Gore stressed his commitment to upholding the *Roe v. Wade* ruling, and did not hesitate to emphasize the leverage the next president would probably have in shaping the direction taken in future years by the federal courts. Bush, by contrast, soft-pedaled the abortion issue. When queried, he stated a wish to make abortions less frequent, but never said outright that his goal was to make them illegal.

The campaign, while followed less than intensely by most Americans, was consistently close. Polls showed that Gore, after his selection of Lieberman proved popular, benefited from a stronger than usual post-convention "bounce" -- a commonly observed upswing in support for a candidate in the wake of publicity surrounding his or her nomination. Three televised presidential debates and one vice presidential debate were relatively inconclusive. Perhaps, insofar as Bush faced low expectations tied to skepticism about his intellectual abilities, the Republican contender reassured many voters simply by avoiding major gaffes in his debate performances. Conversely, Gore's stage-managed debate presentations -- contrived grimacing coupled with pushy interruptions on one occasion, switching to unruffled, near-reticent affability for the next round -- could have benefited from more spontaneous humanity, even human fallibility. People who focused more on personableness than on policy issues gravitated to Bush as a more attractive candidate. Among those making a policy-based selection, cleavages were plain: social conservatives, tax cut proponents and those committed to unbridled free enterprise preferred Bush; voters favoring stronger government regulation to manage the economy and to protect workers and the environment gravitated to Gore, as did strong proponents of abortion rights and gay rights. On the left edge of the political spectrum a confounding factor existed in Ralph Nader. In a close race, the relative strength of Nader's support could play a role in determining which major candidate won the presidency.

Opinion data indicated Bush gradually overtaking Gore's slim early lead to emerge barely ahead a few weeks before the election. In the last days before the vote, Gore mounted a nearly round-the-clock campaign blitz, focusing much of his effort on the crucial, undecided state of Florida, while Bush maintained a less cluttered stump speech schedule and spent more time at his Texas ranch. Voter preference sampling just before the election showed that the contest was too close to call. And indeed it was. The evening of Nov. 7, 2000, dissolved into an amazing series of bumbles, stand-offs, legal fights and irresolution that extended for the next five weeks. George W. Bush, in the end, became the nation's 43rd president as a result of a U.S. Supreme Court decision issued on December 12.

As the election neared, pollsters could not determine a clear popular choice for president among the electorate as a whole, yet the Bush-Gore race was undecided in comparatively few states. California was solidly in Gore's column; Bush was a shoo-in in his home state of Texas; New York and Pennsylvania looked good for Gore. Bush was projected to be an easy winner in most southern, Rocky Mountain and High Plains states. Gore prevailed in much of New England, the Middle Atlantic seaboard, and Upper Midwest.

Early returns on election night were favorable to Gore, in line with the expected outcome. The campaigns had already assumed, confidently or regretfully according to their respective allegiances, that voters in the more liberal and industrialized eastern states would award blocks of electoral votes to the Democrats. The pendulum swung Bush's way, again not surprisingly, as southeastern states reported invariably pro-Republican tallies. Based on exit poll data that turned out to be erroneous, all major TV networks projected that Gore would be the winner in Florida. The projection was so early that voting precincts in the Florida Panhandle -- unlike most of the state, in the Central rather than Eastern time zone -- had not yet closed.

About an hour later, news anchors shamefacedly retracted the Florida projection. Florida, for the time being, went back into the undecided category. The episode was the first in a compendium of miscues and controversies associated with the 2000 election that historians and political scientists will undoubtedly comb through for decades.

Amazingly, the networks incorrectly projected the Florida result a second time, at about 2:00 a.m. on the East Coast, when they called the state for George W. Bush. The projection, like the one for Gore early in the evening, again held for about one hour. Then it had to be withdrawn when a burst of late returns from urban, heavily Democratic counties moved the two candidates' vote totals into almost literally mathematical balance. Vice President Gore had already called Bush offering his congratulations and an informal concession. He was preparing a formal concession speech that he expected to deliver shortly. But as his advisers tracked the still-incoming results, they alerted him that the election was, almost certainly, not over. Florida law ordains that any election in which opposing sides accrue vote totals within one-half percentage point of each other shall be subject to an automatic recount. Florida's presidential totals were much closer than that, in the range of 0.01 percent or one out of every 10,000 votes cast. By 3:00 a.m., Gore had called Bush back to "un-concede." Knowing that the winner of Florida's 25 electoral votes would be the next president, the candidates and country awaited the mandatory recount, which would take two days to complete. However, the microscopic margin in the state virtually assured that no official winner could be declared before several thousand overseas absentee ballots were also completely counted, a process that would delay formal declaration of the winner until at least Saturday, Nov. 18.

With all eyes on Florida, the automatic recount, conducted on the Wednesday and Thursday immediately following Election Day, showed that a Bush lead of 1,784 votes in the first tabulation had dropped to about 300, out of some 5.9 million votes cast in the state. Heightening the drama and the rancor, the governor of Florida was Jeb Bush, brother of the Republican candidate.

Multiple controversies erupted on Wednesday, November 8, the day after the vote. Palm Beach County was the locus of an especially strident one. This jurisdiction used an oddly configured ballot, a so-called "butterfly" design, that technically deviated from ballot configuration criteria in Florida law and had apparently confused thousands of voters. Starting when the polls were still open, voters came forward who claimed that, misled by the ballot design, they had punched a hole that would be tabulated as a vote for Pat Buchanan when they had intended to vote for Al Gore. Indeed, Buchanan collected about 3,400 votes in the county, decisively his best county-level showing in all Florida, although Palm Beach is heavily Democratic, with a large Jewish population-demographics that completely contradict its vote tally as a hotbed of Buchanan support. Protesters demanding a "re-vote" included elderly Holocaust survivors, their anguish exacerbated because Buchanan has published work that some critics have termed Nazi apologia. Moreover, some 19,000 Palm Beach County ballots had been thrown out as invalid "overvotes," showing two holes punched for president, in many cases for Gore and Buchanan. Buchanan himself acknowledged that a large majority of the votes for him in Palm Beach, along with the Gore-Buchanan overvotes, were actually meant for Gore.

A court challenge to the Palm Beach result was among the first of the many lawsuits filed in connection with the presidential election in Florida. Although it was not resolved for weeks, ultimately being decided at the state Supreme Court level, in the end the questionable Buchanan total was permitted to stand. Voter error was found not to be grounds for holding another election. This conclusion stemmed, first, from the fact that a sample ballot had been promulgated and no one objected, and second, from language in Florida's election statute that allows some leeway in the ballot design to accommodate automated or electronic voting machinery.

African American college students and others came forward, saying Florida officials had denied them admission to the polls although they were validly registered voters. In some cases, people with common names were told, when they arrived at polling places, that they had no right to vote because they were convicted felons. Apparently, the situation occurred because a screening firm with conservative political ties, hired by Katherine Harris, had compiled a ban list circulated to precinct officials that simply listed felons by name, with no effort having been made to ferret out a legally excludable felon from someone who happened to have the same name. In addition, accounts surfaced of police roadblocks in black neighborhoods that may have intimidated some drivers on their way to the polls. Civil rights complaints arising from some of these incidents have been filed and are being scrutinized by the federal government.

Republicans presented their own claims of unfairness. The botched early-evening projection of a Gore win in Florida may not have been a machination of the liberal media, as a few branded it, but many Bush supporters believed that it induced a significant number of would-be last-minute voters in the Panhandle, a strongly Republican area, to stay home. As well, a controversy erupted over scrutiny used to discount certain absentee ballots.

In the end, disparate treatment of absentee ballots broke both ways. The Gore campaign denied that any directive existed to single out ballots sent in by armed forces members, presumably somewhat more inclined to vote Republican, for particular scrutiny. The vice president stated, as he would repeat many times, that his goal was to let every vote be counted. Two lawsuits filed against Republican-majority counties, Martin and Seminole, sought to have about 25,000 Republican absentee votes in these jurisdictions invalidated because county officials had admitted Republican Party volunteers into the courthouse to add voter identification numbers, a required item on an absentee ballot applications. Democrats making similar requests were denied. These cases, which went to court in early December, resulted in rulings in favor of the defendants, subsequently upheld by the Florida Supreme Court. Thus the attempt to disallow Republican votes was refused. The courts making this determination noted that, despite their decision to let the matter rest, the county officials' actions were improper. The judges involved in the Seminole and Martin cases, along with the Palm Beach butterfly ballot case, although Democrats, ruled in favor of Republican interests. In all other legal proceedings surrounding the vote in Florida, court rulings fell completely along partisan lines.

Meanwhile, two conclusions regarding the election results became apparent. First, the vote was incredibly close. The margin of irregularity and counting error swamped the margin between the two candidates. One could validly term the tale the ballots told a statistical tie. Second, the chance that the campaigns, either or both of them, would accept the upcoming result without undertaking some type of legal challenge was vanishingly small.

Florida election law authorizes candidates to request hand recounts of machine-tabulated ballots. Aware of large "undervotes" in three large, Democratic-majority counties -- Palm Beach, Miami-Dade and Broward -- Al Gore's campaign made that request for these jurisdictions on Thursday, November 9, just as the mandatory automated recount was concluding. The term "undervotes" refers to ballots read as blank by tabulating machinery. In a punch-card system, this can occur when the piece of paper meant to create a hole representing a vote has not been cleanly removed. As millions of people were about to learn, that would-be hole is called a chad.

Gore brought in former U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher to speak for his cause and coordinate possible legal efforts. Shortly, the Democrats would add attorney David Boies, recently lionized as the man who bested Bill Gates in the Microsoft antitrust case, to their team. The Republicans, girding for the next phase of the fight, countered Christopher's appointment by giving James Baker, the man who under the elder Bush held the same cabinet position, an analogous role. So, as the absentee votes were being compiled in the days following the election, dueling former U.S. secretaries of state had become part of the panorama. But it was Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris who stepped into the spotlight.

On Monday, November 13, Harris announced that the deadline for all county election returns would be 5:00 p.m. the next day, although the final count of overseas absentee ballots was not due until Saturday the 18th. At this point, Palm Beach County officials had decided to proceed with the manual recount Gore requested, while the other two counties Gore had asked to conduct manual recounts were still considering the matter. Harris asserted that Florida law allowed no deviation from a final certification of results seven days after the election. The Florida election statute contains conflicting provisions, and switches between the words "may" and "shall" regarding the secretary of state's role in and timing of the certification. Harris, reading a badly written law that obviously never contemplated the scenario of an excruciatingly close statewide race to decide the U.S. presidency, invoked the authority of a fixed deadline as trumping the statutory provision for a manual recount. Meanwhile, the Bush lawyers, in the first lawsuit initiated directly by one of the campaigns, had asked the Federal District Court in Atlanta to halt the manual recounts. The federal judges refused to do so.

A lower state court held that the Florida secretary of state's authority did grant her "discretion" to consider, or reject, manual recounts. However, this discretion was not "arbitrary." In response to this ruling, Harris ordered counties undertaking hand counts to submit to her written explanations stating why they considered them

necessary. When Broward and Palm Beach counties sent in their explanations and resumed counting, Harris went to court, unsuccessfully, to stop them. Her position was that manual recounts were only appropriate in cases of fraud, software failure or breakdown of voting machinery.

Meanwhile, the Gore lawyers had filed suit after Harris attempted to place a deadline of one week after the election on the certification of regular election returns from the counties. This filing, seeking to allow and include manual recounts, was fast-tracked to the state supreme court. On Friday, November 17, the state justices ordered that the attempt to certify Florida's presidential vote be put on hold, and announced that they would hear arguments on the question of manual recounts that coming Monday. Thus, on November 18, the day previously set by Secretary of State Harris for final certification, passed with her hands tied. The absentee votes were tallied, showing George W. Bush ahead in Florida by 930 votes. But he was not yet the official winner.

On Monday, November 20 -- nearly two weeks after the election -- the state Supreme Court ordered manual recounts to continue, but set a five-day time limit for their completion. In Miami, West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale (Broward), the three local election canvassing boards confronted the problem of how to proceed with a manual recount, in the absence of any guidance more explicit than language in the Florida election statute that ballots should count if they show "the intent of the voter." Broward completed their count, in which Gore gained about 300 votes, within the deadline set by the state Supreme Court. The Palm Beach process sputtered, their recount process derailed by squabbles over whether to count ballots with "dimpled" or "pregnant" chads, marks on the card where no edge of the little square of punch-out paper was actually detached. The Gore forces argued, in a contention they would later file in court, that the Palm Beach canvassers were being too conservative in interpreting the intent of the voter. An even bigger controversy was brewing in Miami-Dade. The dominant population center of the state, with a Democratic majority but an influential bloc of staunchly Republican anti-Castro Cubans, Miami by most analyses held the key to the election. When the Gore team had first asked for a manual recount in Miami, the county canvassing board examined ballots from a few sample precincts, and decided that the small gain for Gore the sample showed was insufficient to justify counting the whole county over again by hand. But in the wake of the Florida Supreme Court decision, they reconsidered and began a full manual recount. Then, on November 23, a Thursday, Miami-Dade officials again reversed course. They announced that the five-day deadline, which was coming up at 5 p.m. Sunday, allowed them too little time to complete a full recount; therefore, they had decided to submit the original election results for certification. Just before this announcement, a noisy pro-Republican demonstration, allegedly including a substantial proportion of paid rather than spontaneous demonstrators, was taking place just outside the elections office where the counting was taking place. Some demonstrators had even entered the recount venue itself. The circumstances of the halted count led to angry charges by Democratic partisans that raw intimidation had frustrated proper resolution of the undecided election.

Another bombshell dropped the next day. By this time the Federal District Court and the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals had rejected the Bush lawyers' suits asking for federal court intervention against manual recounts, implicitly signaling the view that Florida's election controversy should be resolved at the state level almost as a matter of settled law. It is historically rare for the U.S. Supreme Court to consider reversing a federal court decision; and ostensibly the ideology of the nation's high court, as it has developed since Nixon's presidency, and to an even greater extent since the administrations of Ronald Reagan and the elder Bush, strongly favors state autonomy over federal interference. Nevertheless, the U.S. Supreme Court announced that it would grant the Bush campaign's request and hear an appeal of the Florida Supreme Court ruling that reinstated the hand recounts. The justices scheduled oral arguments in Washington for Friday, December 1, one week from when they took the case.

On Sunday, November 26, the day the state Supreme Court had set for final tabulation including hand recounts, Secretary of State Katherine Harris certified Florida's presidential election results, awarding George W. Bush the state by a margin of 537 votes. This tally included the manual recount from Broward County, but not the one from Palm Beach, which had turned in a revised total after the 5 p.m. deadline. Gore's lawyers responded by moving on to the next stage of recourse provided to dissatisfied losing candidates under Florida election law, known as contesting the result. A trial on the contest, in a lower-level state court, was scheduled to begin in Tallahassee on Saturday, December 2, one day after oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Gore lawyers also asked the Tallahassee court to let hand recounts resume before the contest case was heard; this motion was denied.

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On Thursday, November 30, the Republican-controlled Florida legislature voted to call a special session for the purpose of naming electors. This essentially meant that if Gore obtained the recounts he was seeking, and in this tally overtook Bush to become the winner, Florida would have two slates of electors competing to be seated in the Electoral College. This has occasionally happened in U.S. history, but is of little consequence if the dispute is over a small state's delegation and there is no potential to change the overall election result. The last time such a conflict bore pivotally on a presidential election was in 1876. The circumstances of that long-ago vote were eerily similar to the 2000 controversy. Both times the controversy dragged on into December, both times the presidency hinged on the electoral vote from Florida, and both times votes by Republican Supreme Court justices swung the outcome to a Republican candidate who had lost the popular vote. The 1876 fight between Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes closed in Hayes' favor with an 8-7 vote by a 15-man congressional and judicial commission appointed by Congress to resolve the issue.

At the U.S. Supreme Court, Harvard constitutional law scholar Laurence Tribe argued on behalf of Gore, and Theodore Olson, a former law partner of Ken Starr, represented Bush. Some justices asked sharp questions of both sides, and the outcome remained enigmatic. Over December 2-3, attention shifted back to Tallahassee. There, the embattled campaigns called statisticians, experts on voting machines and voting procedures, and election officials as witnesses, in a rare weekend session of the circuit court that comprised the first phase of Gore's contest effort seeking to resume and accept manual recounts. Monday, December 4 dealt Gore a double loss. In the morning, the U.S. Supreme Court vacated the Florida Supreme Court's ruling that manual recounts should proceed. The circuit court judge in Tallahassee, N. Sanders Sauls, after spending much of the day reviewing the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, denied Gore's contest.

Still, this was not yet a total defeat for the Democrats. The U.S. Supreme Court had, in effect, asked the Florida Supreme Court justices to clarify their recount order, but it had not at this point prohibited recounts with finality. Observers speculated that the nation's top justices had settled on this route as the one way they could rule unanimously, and thus avoid making their partisan division public. Moreover, the pro-Bush outcome in Tallahassee wasn't the end of the contest road; the Gore legal team immediately appealed Judge Sauls' ruling to the Florida Supreme Court.

The Florida Supreme Court heard oral arguments on Gore's contest appeal on Thursday, December 7. The next day, in a stunning victory for the Gore side, though by only a 4-3 margin, the state justices voted to order and admit manual recounts of undervotes in all Florida counties. The reversal of the circuit court decision found Judge Sauls' determination that the Democrats were not entitled to a recount, because they had not proven it was probable that a recount would change the election result, to be in error. The Democrats had shown, if not a probability, at least a possibility that manually recounting the ballots would produce a different outcome. That, according to the majority of the state supreme court, was sufficient to allow the hand count.

The recount would occur under state judicial supervision. The contested ballots from Miami, Broward and Palm Beach had already been trucked to Tallahassee for the circuit court case; recounts in the other counties would take place in the jurisdictions where the votes were cast. Thus, the recount entailed inherent decentralization. The process would be broader in scope but outwardly little different from the original round of hand recounts by county canvassing boards, except that a judge or judicially designated supervisor, rather than the boards themselves, would have to decide what type of mark on a ballot adequately conveyed the "intent of the voter." The state supreme court justices deliberately refrained from attempting to craft specific guidelines for the recount beyond this statutory language, so as not to subject themselves to rebuke at the federal level for legislating from the bench. The state supreme court extended the recount of undervotes statewide in order to forestall a possible federal legal challenge based on disparate treatment of voters by jurisdiction, which might be claimed to violate constitutional guarantees of equal protection or due process. The decision sought to deal simultaneously with Gore's appeal for a contest, and with the U.S. Supreme Court order to vacate the Florida high court's previous ruling that upheld the recount.

On Saturday, December 9, the day after the state justices put the manual recount process back in motion, saw tallying of ballots from Miami-Dade begin in Tallahassee. Palm Beach and Broward counties had already conducted hand recounts, so a re-examination of their ballots, which were now also in Tallahassee, was not needed to fulfill

the state supreme court order. Officials in many other jurisdictions were at a preparatory stage of the task. The hope was to complete the statewide manual recount by Tuesday, December 12, under a normal schedule the day when a state's Electoral College members are chosen. However, electors were set to meet in their respective state capitals on December 18 for the actual casting of Electoral College ballots, so some slippage from the Tuesday deadline might have been tolerable.

Bush's lawyers had appealed the Florida order reinstating recounts, as soon as it was given, to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta. This court, as it had done before when the Republican campaign appealed the Florida Supreme Court's first pro-recount ruling, rejected a claim that Bush would suffer "irreparable harm" from a hand counting of ballots. The federal appeals court again refused to grant a hearing to consider the Republicans' argument that the hand counting should cease. Then, in mid-afternoon on Saturday, the U.S. Supreme Court by a 5-4 vote issued a stay halting the recount. The nation's high court announced it would conduct a hearing to decide the ultimate issue, whether or not manually recounted ballots were admissible, on the coming Monday, December 11.

The order for the stay was written by one of the most conservative justices, Antonin Scalia. In it, Scalia opined that "a majority of the Court, while not deciding the issues presented, believe that the petitioner [Bush] has a reasonable probability of success." Expounding the dissenting view was Justice John Paul Stevens. Stevens, a Nixon appointee, castigated the ruling's basis for granting the stay -- the assertion that not to have done so would have irreparably harmed the plaintiff, Bush. Contrariwise, Stevens wrote, the stay action brought the danger of doing such harm to the respondents, the Gore side, and to the American public. "Preventing the recount from being completed," Stevens asserted, "will inevitably cast a cloud on the legitimacy of the election." The judicial texts supporting and opposing the stay made it clear that the respective sides disagreed as to whether manually tallied ballots were "legally cast votes." The justices also drew battle lines on the equal protection-due process argument against manual recounts that Bush's lawyers would advance in the upcoming hearing. Stevens' dissent characterized these claims by the Republicans as "federal constitutional questions that were not fairly presented to the court whose judgment is being reviewed," i.e. the Florida Supreme Court. Scalia, while homing in on what he saw as a constitutionally dubious process, in manual recounts, "of letting the standard for determination of voters' intent. . . vary from county to county," explicitly entertained the possibility that uniform, hence constitutional, standards could still be set.

Along with everything else it did, the stay brought the party-line divisions of the Rehnquist court forever into the open. Democrats were shocked and enraged that a high court that so often prided itself on deference to the states had revived a case that lower federal courts had repeatedly sent back to the state level. Republicans tendered the opinion that, since the matter had gone on too long already without resolution, having a court, supposedly above politics, dictate the election would at this point be preferable to the likely alternative-that alternative being parallel slates from Florida contending for seats in the Electoral College, followed by the election fight being tossed into the overheated political atmosphere of the U.S. Congress.

For the second round of oral arguments before the Supreme Court, the Democratic side replaced Laurence Tribe with David Boies, known for both sweeping, spontaneous command of complex sets of facts and for his somewhat disheveled look. The Republicans' lead attorney was again Theodore Olson, reprising his role in the high court's first election-related hearing at the beginning of the month. The Democrats' hopes revolved around the high court's two "swing" justices, Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy. There was no chance that the three justices furthest to the right, Scalia, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, and Clarence Thomas, would deviate from the pro-Bush votes they had cast in granting the stay. It was equally certain that the court's liberal wing -- John Paul Stevens, David Souter, Stephen Breyer, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg -- would hold firm in line with their initial votes against the stay. But perhaps one or both of the remaining two justices, even though they voted for the stay, could be persuaded that the Florida Supreme Court's ruling to proceed with manual recounts should not be reversed. This could happen, desperate Gore supporters hypothesized, either through a cogent states' rights argument (wasn't the concept of protecting states' rights to the fullest extent possible the cornerstone of this court?) or, more idealistically, through an equity argument, a legal fleshing out of Al Gore's insistence that democracy in essence consists of counting every vote.

Finally, at nearly 10:00 p.m. Eastern time, a 65-page ruling was released, so complex that media analysts who were not well-versed in legal scholarship initially found its import elusive. But it soon became plain that the decision, which included a concurrence by Rehnquist and separate dissents by each of the four liberal justices, awarded the election to George W. Bush. The ruling's main thrust was that the manual recount process, because it lacked a uniform standard for interpreting voter intent, violated the rights of citizens, as voters, to equal protection under the law. The decision further criticized the Florida Supreme Court for ordering re-examination of undervotes but not overvotes, which also might discernibly show voter intent. Most galling, to the defeated Democrats, the court majority invoked time pressure considerations: the need for the Electoral College to be seated immediately. Days before, the stay had imposed a delay that increased this time pressure. So, Democrats could argue, had a series of moves by Republican-partisan Florida officials, beginning with the week and a half between Election Day and the deadline for overseas absentee ballots, when Katherine Harris fought rather than administered Gore's request for a manual recount.

In broad outline, the case against manual recounts took the form of a slowly emerging search for standards, and in the end finding what standards there were insufficient, in the manual recount option extended to losing candidates in close Florida elections as it applied to Al Gore. Commentators observed that the Florida Supreme Court was in a classic double bind: if it had tried to specify guidelines, the Rehnquist court would doubtless have reversed it for making law it was constrained merely to interpret. Ranging more widely, analysts saw a deeper equal protection problem never raised by the pro-Bush plaintiffs or the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative majority. The high court's 2000 election decision halted recounts because of the possibility that the same chad could receive disparate evaluation by different recount teams. A greater disparity in citizens' exercise of their right to vote arises from the observed fact that decades-old voting equipment used in some jurisdictions consistently produces much higher error rates than more technologically advanced voting equipment used in other jurisdictions. Justice Breyer took note of this issue in his dissent, describing the Florida Supreme Court's attempt to institute a recount as a step toward alleviating unfairness to citizens whose jurisdictions used the least effective vote-recording technology. Although the manual recount process would be flawed, Breyer maintained, in stopping it altogether the U.S. Supreme Court was addressing a minor disparity by letting a major one stand.

Seven justices, all except Stevens and Ginsburg, found that there was a constitutional problem in disparate treatment of voters in the manual recounts. However, two of these seven, Breyer and Souter, who had voted against the stay on Saturday, voted against the reversal as well, so that the court's final decision in *Bush v. Gore* was, like the vote to stay, by a 5-4 margin. The two justices who found the Florida Supreme Court's manner of instituting manual recounts constitutionally deficient, but voted with the minority not to reverse the Florida case, believed that the U.S. Supreme Court was wrong from the start in taking up the matter. They felt that the Bush lawyers' attempt to halt the count raised this constitutional issue in an inappropriate, sidewise fashion, and that letting the recount proceed uninterrupted would, under the circumstances, have comprised better jurisprudence than interfering.

Justice Stevens wrote the briefest dissent, at seven pages, but his ringing final paragraph is likely to be the most quoted verbiage of the entire decision in distant future decades. He said, "Although we may never know with complete certainty the identity of the winner of this year's presidential election, the identity of the loser is perfectly clear. It is the Nation's confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law."

Al Gore made a concession speech the next night, Wednesday, December 13, expressing strong disagreement with the Supreme Court decision but accepting that George W. Bush would legitimately become the next president. On December 18, the Electoral College, assembling separately in all the state capitals, formalized the result with a 271-267 vote in favor of Bush. Many Democrats, convinced that Gore was by a thin margin the real choice of voters who went to the polls in Florida, were, and remain, angry about what they saw as a stolen election, successfully pulled off by Florida's state government and legislature, and sealed by U.S. Supreme Court approval. But, despite talk about attempts to sway the votes of susceptible electors and thus flip the result in the Electoral College, this last step in choosing the president passed routinely.

George W. Bush became the fourth president elected despite losing the popular vote. The others were John Quincy Adams in 1824, in an election decided in the House of Representatives; Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, whose

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accession to office was brokered by a commission of congressmen and Supreme Court justices; and Benjamin Harrison, who served four years between the first and second terms of Grover Cleveland. In 1888, U.S. voters overall gave Harrison some 100,000 fewer votes than Cleveland, but Harrison received an Electoral College majority by recording narrow margins of victory in some populous states.

Various independent examinations of Florida presidential ballots, undertaken by journalism and research organizations and facilitated by Florida's latitudinous open-records "sunshine" law, ensued. The results suggest a variety of results ranging from a close Bush victory in cases of strictest standards within the original four counties, to a Gore victory in more loose counts and in state-wide counts.

In general, Bush easily carried small towns and rural areas; Gore won hugely in inner cities; suburbia was closely split. These geographic disparities in voter preference coincide with a slate of even starker dichotomies in the voting pattern of different social and ethnic groups. Fifty-three percent of men voted for Bush, compared to 42 percent of women. Gore gained two-thirds of the Hispanic vote, two-thirds of the votes cast by people in households that include members of labor unions, and 59 percent of the Asian-American vote. Seventy-six percent of gays and lesbians voted for Gore. Most strikingly, 92 percent of African Americans supported the Democratic candidate. All these figures are estimates compiled from exit poll data.

On the Congressional level, the Democrats raised their House minority from 210 to 212 seats. There are also two independent representatives who usually vote with the Democrats; including these, the margin of the Republican majority declined to just six seats, down from 25 seats after the 1994 election. In the Senate, the Democrats pulled even; each party with 50 senators, compared to 46 Democrats and 54 Republicans before the election. Ironically, the Democrats were able to pull even in the Senate only because Joe Lieberman lost his bid for vice president; if he had won national office, Connecticut's Republican governor would have appointed a member of his own party to the vacated seat. The tie left the Republicans with a bare majority, since Vice President Dick Cheney, in his constitutionally assigned function, serves as president of the Senate, with the authority to cast a tie-breaking vote on any deadlocked measure. New senators elected in 2000 include former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton representing New York; Jean Carnahan, who won in Missouri weeks after her husband, Gov. Mel Carnahan -- who was running for the Senate against the incumbent, John Ashcroft -- died in a plane crash; and two other women, Debbie Stabenow of Michigan and Maria Cantwell of Washington. The total number of female U.S. senators was now 13, an all-time high. Hillary Rodham Clinton also received the distinction of being the first woman in American history to function as both a First Lady and a United States Senator.

The George W. Bush Presidency

As he prepared for and assumed office, George W. Bush faced deep divisions in the country, along with questions about both his capabilities and his very legitimacy. These divisions and questions arguably posed the greatest political challenge faced by any new president in living memory. The new chief executive's ability to achieve bipartisan cooperation and conciliation, a capacity ascribed to him in some analysts' appraisal of his tenure as governor of Texas, would surely be tested. Bush delivered a well-received inaugural address, emphasizing points of commonality over a more partisan political agenda. He appointed several well-regarded moderates to his cabinet and other important executive posts, including former general Colin Powell as secretary of state; businessman Paul O'Neill as treasury secretary; New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman as Environmental Protection Agency administrator; and Democrat Norman Mineta, who moved from Commerce Secretary under Clinton to Transportation Secretary under Bush.

Other choices Bush made for his inner circle were more divisive. His initial selection for labor secretary, former broadcast commentator and columnist Linda Chavez, was criticized for positions she had taken against minimum wage increases and workplace health and safety regulations. It then became known that Chavez had let an illegal immigrant from Guatemala stay in her home. The Guatemalan woman had performed occasional household chores and received small sums of money from Chavez, who described the arrangement as ordinary reciprocal courtesy between hostess and guest. Others claimed it smacked of skirting labor, tax and immigration law. Shortly after this episode was publicized, Chavez withdrew herself from consideration. Bush subsequently named Elaine Chao, former head of the United Way charity, to be labor secretary; Chao was easily confirmed.

Another controversial nominee was interior secretary-designate Gail Norton, a Colorado lawyer and former state attorney general once affiliated with James Watt, who was forced to resign as Ronald Reagan's interior secretary, and with a property-rights group, the Mountain States Legal Foundation, that has sought to weaken environmental laws. Norton renounced some of her previously expressed opinions before the Senate committee considering her nomination. In the end, she won confirmation quite handily despite the continued misgivings of several major environmental organizations.

The biggest battle over Bush's cabinet choices revolved around the conservative former senator from Missouri, John Ashcroft, the new president's pick for attorney general. Throughout his political career Ashcroft voiced sharp opposition to abortion, gun control, gay rights, and hate crimes legislation. A number of Democratic senators announced they would vote against Ashcroft's appointment to head the Justice Department. However, ultimately, Ashcroft was confirmed and went on to head the Justice Department.

Bush's popularity in the first year of his presidency seemed to reflect the general division across the country between Republicans and Democrats. He was highly popular among members of his own party and, indeed, he commanded general approval across partisan lines. However, many of his policies were not well-received by Democrats, Independents, environmentalists, as well as international cadres.

The United States' withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, the rejection of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the former Soviet Union, and Bush's reluctance to enter the Middle Eastern fray, created a perception of an isolationist presidency on matters of international significance. The disappearance of social issues from the national agenda, such as Social Security, as well as Bush's policies on the environment were cause for concern from his ideological opponents within Democrat factions. His reinstatement of a Reagan-era executive order banning use of U.S. funds to support any family planning agency overseas if it either sponsors abortion services or refers women to such services angered feminists and third world development experts, although it was lauded by Catholics and Bush's evangelical base of support. Even within his own party, his opposition to proposed campaign finance caused some friction between Bush and his former rival, John McCain.

On the other hand, Bush took a centrist direction in regard to education. He stated that a federal commitment to raising public school standards, along with steps to ensure that schools met the higher standards, would form the centerpiece of his first major legislative initiative. His own comments and those of the new education secretary, former Houston schools superintendent Rod Paige, de-emphasized the role vouchers would play in the prospective program. The education aspect of Bush's emerging agenda quickly won strong bipartisan support.

For many Americans, however, the economy was suddenly becoming more of a worry. The country had posted years of surging job and income growth, but economic data compiled just before Bush's inauguration showed a major slowdown in the rate of increase. The incoming economics team believed that a broad tax cut, in line with one of Bush's major campaign promises, would be especially appropriate under pre-recessionary conditions, since the cut should supposedly lead to a rise in consumer spending, which should in turn stimulate business and productive activity. The Democrats in Congress, however, had certain reservations about a tax cut intended to benefit business and the top 1 percent of the population in disproportionate relation to the rest of the population base. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan significantly boosted the chances for a tax cut in late January. When he testified before the Senate Budget Committee, he gave the idea a qualified but -- in the opinion of many knowledgeable observers -- surprisingly warm endorsement. The tax cut became a reality but much criticism has emerged since its passage as the economy devolved, unemployment increased, the Clinton-era surplus was continuously depleted, and the national debt increased.

Another development in 2001 was Vermont Sen. Jim Jeffords changing his allegiance from the Republican party to independent at the end of May. In doing so, he single-handedly changed the balance of power in the Senate from the Republicans to the Democrats for the first time since 1995. South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle replaced Trent Lott of Mississippi as Senate majority leader.

Sept. 11, 2001 and the Aftermath

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The United States, as its citizens and the world knew it, changed at 8:45 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time on Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001. What was the relatively secure life of the American dream turned into frightening nightmare. On a clear, early autumn morning, an airplane flew into the south building of the World Trade Center in New York City, and initially, many thought it might have been an accident - a single-engine plane, a pilot out of control. All too quickly, though, it became apparent just how out of control the situation was.

Media outlets had barely finished reporting that the airplane was a passenger jet, American Airlines Flight 11 enroute from Boston to Los Angeles, when - live, on television - the world witnessed a second plane, United Airlines Flight 175, also enroute from Boston to L.A., rip into the north tower of the WTC at 9:03 a.m. Americans watched, stunned and horrified, as both of the tallest buildings in North America were wrapped in flames. Within 15 minutes, the Federal Aviation Administration closed all New York area airports, followed quickly by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which sealed off Manhattan by closing all bridges and tunnels to and from the island.

At 9:30 a.m., speaking from Sarasota, Fla., where he had a speaking engagement, President Bush said the country had suffered an "apparent terrorist attack." Ten minutes later, the FAA halted all flight operations in the United States as a precautionary safety measure. This marked the first time in U.S. history such a measure had been taken, but it turned out to be a very smart move. In the following weeks, box cutters and knives - similar to those the hijackers used on the ill-fated flights - were found on three additional planes scheduled to fly but grounded due to the FAA's precedent-setting measure.

At 9:43 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, forcing immediate evacuation. Then came the collapses: First, the south tower of the World Trade Center fell at 10:10 a.m. A portion of the Pentagon gave in a few minutes later. And news came that another hijacked flight, United Flight 73, had crashed outside Pittsburgh. Later reports would confirm that several passengers aboard the plane, aware of the other hijackings from cell-phone conversations with outsiders, decided to attack the hijackers. The net result was that, although all those on Flight 73 died, the plane apparently did not hit its intended mark. Whether that target was Camp David, the White House or the Capitol remains unclear.

At 10:24 a.m., the FAA announced that all flights already in U.S. airspace and destined for American cities were rerouted to Canada. All Canadian airports were closed and evacuated in preparation for the massive influx of redirected flights. Four minutes later, the north tower of the World Trade Center collapsed or imploded. It fell straight down on itself -- akin to the fall of vertical dominoes. Lower Manhattan was covered in smoke and debris. The fires did not end for weeks, the smoldering for months. By 10:45 a.m., all federal office buildings in Washington had been evacuated.

The rest of the day saw Americans glued to their televisions, as five warships and two aircraft carriers were deployed to protect the East Coast from further attack. By late afternoon, the FBI confirmed that "new information" indicated the primary suspect behind the terror was Saudi militant Osama bin Laden, who had also been implicated in the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies abroad.

At 8:30 p.m., President Bush addressed the nation, saying, "These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve." He added that the government would make no distinction between the terrorists who committed the acts and those who harbored them, essentially declaring war on Afghanistan, the last known hiding place of bin Laden. In addition to CNN, the three major television networks - ABC, NBC and CBS - suspended regular programming and covered the events nonstop for the next several days, without commercials.

As the events of the day unfolded, Americans were too much in shock to process what was happening. The nation would remain stunned for days and even weeks, and psychologists predicted an epidemic of post-traumatic stress disorder, not only for New Yorkers but for a large percentage of those who watched the terror happen via television. By 11 p.m., Attorney General John Ashcroft reported there appeared to have been five hijackers on each plane, armed with small knives and box-cutters. A total of 266 passengers and crew were killed aboard the four flights; an additional 125 were killed at the Pentagon.

The Pentagon, one of the largest office complexes in the world, was built during World War II and is the headquarters for the U.S. Department of Defense. Its five wedge-like sections that gave rise to its name cover three

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times the floor space of New York's Empire State building. The Capitol building could fit into any one of the five sections. More than 23,000 employees, both military and civilian, work in the 3,705,793 square feet of office space at the suburban Virginia complex. Despite its physical enormity, the Pentagon is one of the most efficiently designed buildings in the world; with 17.5 miles of corridors, arranged in a spider web pattern, it takes less than seven minutes to walk between any two points.

The World Trade Center twin towers, designed by Minoru Yamasaki, were built in 1973. At 1,362 feet and 1,368 feet, the two 110-story buildings were not only the tallest buildings in the United States - briefly, before the 1,450-foot Sears Tower in Chicago was erected - but they also were for nearly 30 years the very emblem of Manhattan and the United States' power in the world trading market, likely one of the reasons the terrorists marked them for destruction.

Terrorism had hit the World Trade Center once before, on Feb. 26, 1993, when a bomb exploded in a parking garage underneath the complex, killing six people and injuring 1,000 others. The explosion blew a 200-foot hole in the bottom of the north tower, causing an estimated \$300 million in damages. Those responsible - Mohammed Salameh, Nidal Ayyad, Ahmad Ajaj and Mahmud Abouhalima - weren't sentenced until 1994, when each received a 240-year prison sentence on charges of conspiracy, assault and possession of explosives. The trial was among the most massive the United States had ever seen: The government called 207 witnesses and produced 1,003 pieces of evidence. In 1997, two more men were linked to the bombing: Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, for arranging the bombing and recruiting others to help; and Eyad Ismoil, for driving the van containing the bomb. Both were given 240-year prison sentences. The presiding judge, Judge Kevin Duffy, reprimanded the terrorists with an eerily foretelling remark: "You might have succeeded in your nefarious plot to topple the north tower into the south tower," he said. "If that happened, we would have been dealing with tens of thousands of deaths."

It would take several months for rescue workers to remove the thousands of tons of debris at the site of the World Trade Center - the effort was still ongoing as of this writing, the mangled wreckage still smoldering. Casualty statistics were being updated daily. Many of the victims' bodies would never be recovered; the collapse of the towers created an inferno of several thousand degrees Fahrenheit, incinerating not only the people inside the building but also virtually all evidence of their work lives. Computers, desks and phones were all turned to ashes.

Of the companies hit by the September 11 attacks, Cantor Fitzgerald, a financial trading company, suffered the greatest loss: More than 700 of its employees never made it out of the World Trade Center.

President Bush guaranteed \$20 million in assistance to New York City, but neither he nor anyone else could say whether that amount would be enough. Americans and their allies around the world pledged money for victims' families and assistance to survivors.

On September 13, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld requested and received authorization to call up 50,000 National Guard and Reserve troops. The Army supplied 10,000, the Air Force 13,000, the Marines 7,500, the Navy 3,000 and the Coast Guard 2,000.

Nineteen men of Arab descent were eventually identified as the hijackers responsible for the September 11 attacks. Fifteen had entered the United States on business or tourist visas, and one had a visa to attend vocational school. According to immigration officials, none blipped the radar as potential terrorists. According to Ben Venzke of IntelCenter, it isn't surprising the alleged hijackers weren't on a "watch list." Low-level members of terrorist cells, not higher-profile members who are known to intelligence authorities, usually carry out suicide missions.

One of the disturbing aspects of the terrorism attacks was that once in the United States, the 19 men became what intelligence officials call "sleeper agents," people who blend in with the community and don't draw attention to themselves. They went to local gyms, drank in neighborhood bars, rented videos on Friday nights. Their children even played with neighbors. There was nothing clear to set these 19 men apart from any other Middle Eastern immigrants, and that is what many people have found incomprehensible.

Up to six of the hijackers had attended flight schools in Georgia, Florida and Oklahoma, renting short-term apartments and staying at hotels, always paying cash in advance. All but two avoided suspicion: Two weeks before

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the attacks, the FBI discovered information possibly connecting Khalid Al-Midhar and Salem Alhamzi to the bombing of the USS Cole. The FBI began searching for the two men, but they were nowhere to be found - until September 11.

By September 20, more than 4,000 FBI officials and 3,000 support personnel had extended their search for connections to the terrorists to numerous countries, detaining 115 "material witnesses" and searching for another 190 who might have information connected to the terrorists.

On September 24, investigators discovered an operations manual for a crop-dusting airplane during a raid of a suspected terrorist hideout. Some of the suspected hijackers had inquired about learning how to fly crop dusters and about rental prices, apparently with the goal of spreading biological warfare, specifically anthrax or smallpox. Right away, the FAA temporarily grounded all crop-dusters across America.

A global network of intelligence agents and investigators unraveled at least part of a terrorist web in Europe, one that stretched from the Netherlands to Spain. Each day brought news of several new arrests, in almost every country imaginable, always linking back, somehow, to Osama bin Laden.

Just when Americans were starting to understand and feel the impact of the attacks - most were in shock for a couple of weeks - Attorney General John Ashcroft announced there were probably numerous other intended hijackers still at large who had been thwarted by the national flight groundings. Further terrorist acts were almost a certainty. Senior intelligence officials told the media that known terrorist cells were behaving in ways that mirrored the activities of the hijackers prior to September 11. The American public was urged to be on alert.

Although crop-duster dissemination of biological warfare appeared to have been prevented, a new phrase soon crept into the American lexicon: anthrax letter. It began in Boca Raton, Fla., in the offices of American Media Inc., publishers of numerous supermarket tabloids including the National Enquirer and The Sun. A 63-year-old photo editor, Robert Stevens, was diagnosed with inhalation anthrax, the least common and most deadly form. Officials quickly closed the AMI building and began testing everyone who recently worked or visited there. Two more victims showed up, one with cutaneous, or skin, anthrax, which accounts for 95 percent of all cases and is rarely fatal; the other with inhalation anthrax. In the meantime, Stevens, the original victim, died.

The situation escalated. An assistant to NBC anchor Tom Brokaw developed a rash that turned out to be anthrax after handling a suspicious letter containing white powder and anti-Israeli and U.S. comments. A biological warfare expert at the New York Times received a similar letter, as did Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle, CBS' Dan Rather and an employee at the New York Post. Then it hit the House of Representatives. It seemed every day brought new anthrax letters, and employees of many corporations were warned to wear gloves when opening mail.

In the entire 20th century, there were only 18 documented cases of anthrax, almost all occurring in farm workers or veterinarians, since anthrax occurs naturally in the blood of many mammals in which they might come in contact.

The FBI narrowed the hunt for a source to a one-mile radius near Trenton, N.J., where both the Daschle and Brokaw letters were mailed. Investigators determined the mailed anthrax was "virtually indistinguishable," which meant it all could have come from the same batch. Officials said the anthrax was not "war grade," and although that hardly rendered it harmless, at least it meant it wasn't as deadly as it could be. Experts said creating enough anthrax to make it a weapon of mass destruction was extremely difficult.

There was still no hard evidence linking bin Laden and his network to these anthrax attacks, but the many Americans believed he was involved. Officials said there was nothing to indicate bin Laden's Al-Qaida group ever used anthrax; however, U.S. intelligence sources have said in the past they had evidence of the terrorist network testing chemical weapons on animals in its training camps. It could be argued that Al-Qaida had the motive to send anthrax letters, targeting news media to limit Americans' access to information and taking aim at Congress to shut down U.S. citizens' democratic representation. More recent theories, however, suggest the possibility of a domestic terrorist.

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In 2002, one of the most significant developments in U.S. politics was the involvement of the Bush administration's foreign policy team in dealing with the Middle East conflict. At the start of his presidency, Bush was not inclined toward involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and ongoing Palestinian Intifada (uprising). As violence exponentially increased in this volatile region, Bush and his administration were increasingly pressured to take a more engaged and active role in brokering an end to the violence. Increased engagement was neither smooth nor imbued by congruity. In fact, the Bush administration was criticized for espousing a rather incoherent message to both Israel and Palestine.

The perceived incoherence may well be attributable to opposed factions within Bush's own cabinet. It was generally well-known that Secretary of State Colin Powell took a more integrative and engaged approach to global issues, preferring coalitions and international consultancy. In contrast, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, as well as other individuals such as Paul Wolfowitz, have been known for their more hawkish stances to international matters.

In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent "war on terrorism," in a national address, Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil" that had to be dealt with. Although each of these three nations cited dispute any accusations suggesting they are involved in terrorist activities, there was domestic support for an attack against Iraq and the removal of Sadaam Hussein from office. Most officials concurred, however, that war on two fronts -- both in Afghanistan and Iraq -- was not easily feasible, while international allies cautioned against any aggression directed at Iraq. Iran and North Korea were rarely mentioned in foreign relations discussions, even though they were featured as parts of the triad of "evil."

In May 2002, the Bush administration alleged Cuba had terrorist involvements. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, on the first-ever visit by a U.S. president to Cuba since the revolution in 1959, maintained that such claims were false. Carter called for democracy and human rights in Cuba, while also noting the need for normalized relations between the two countries. For his part, Carter has charted a far different approach to U.S.-Cuban relations than other U.S. presidents. Specifically, he has been forthright in his opposition against U.S. sanctions on Cuba and has actively pursued a policy of rapprochement between the two countries. In contrast, the Bush administration expressed its intent to further tighten the economic embargo -- in place since 1961 -- and it also recently added Cuba to the list of states it accused of supporting terrorism.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Bush enjoyed astronomically high approval ratings from the American public, albeit with some degree of erosion as time passed. These ratings eroded a bit with recent revelations that he and certain members of his cabinet had been warned of a potential hijacking plot back in the spring-summer of 2001. A congressional inquiry eventually ensued and the decision was made to convene an independent investigative panel.

The spate of corporate scandals, including the bankruptcies of major corporations such as Enron and WorldCom, also added to a sentiment of doubt about the financial and economic direction the country is heading. The Vice President's tenure as CEO at the Halliburton Corporation also came into play, as charges of questionable accounting practices -- similar to Enron -- emerged in regard to this company as well. An embarrassing video of Dick Cheney touting the benefits of Arthur Anderson's creative accounting practices and consulting acumen also emerged; Arthur Anderson was the accounting and consulting firm serving both Enron and Halliburton. The close association of corporations, such as Enron and Halliburton, with the Bush administration, may also have an effect upon the public's perceptions. Nevertheless, Bush managed to successfully disassociate himself from these financial scandals, despite the fact that most Americans polled believed the Republican Party to be "the party of big business." Even begrudging signature on a corporate reform bill did not substantially reduced public support for him.

Still, the feeling of mistrust about the fulcrum of the financial industry in the United States led to marked volatility in the stock markets, which had itself fed into mass uncertainty about the economy. Although economic indicators suggested a recovery from the recession-like climate in the country, there was no concomitant recovery in the jobless rates. Some analysts predicted that recovery from recession might, in fact, not include a recovery in the job

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market. Against this backdrop, most Americans said that they believed the economy -- and not terrorism -- was the most significant issue in the United States as the country moved into the latter part of 2002.

The popularity of both George Bush and the Republican agenda would also face a certain degree of challenge in the Congressional elections of 2002. Nevertheless, Democrats remained reluctant to charge forth with any forthright criticism or attacks on Bush, presumably due to his continued popularity and very favorable approval rates.

There was some shift in this approach as the issue of an attack upon Iraq entered the public purview. The Bush administration was highly vocal about its intention to topple the administration of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, with or without international support. It believed that Iraq was precipitously close to obtaining weapons of mass destruction and they called for "pre-emptive" action against Iraq. This position resulted in a cleavage within the Republican ranks. On one hand, the "hawkish" types within the Bush administration, such as Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Rice, all favored decisive "pre-emptive" military action against Iraq. In contrast, Secretary of State Powell, military commanders such as Zinni, Clarke and Schwartzkopf, as well as a cadre from the first Bush administration's camp, such as Scowcroft, Eagleberger, and Baker, expressed a preference for multilateral diplomacy efforts ahead of resorting to war footing.

Meanwhile, Tom Daschle and other Democrats in Congress were highly cautious about what kind of action should be taken. Their position was shared by a significant number of Republican voices in Congress, including Republican Senator Chuck Hagel. Generally, Congressional leaders wanted to see more evidence linking Iraq to weapons of mass destruction, and they also wanted to be assured that congressional approval would be solicited before military action ensued.

The Bush administration began September 2002 by attempting to make the case for a war against Iraq. Despite a serious effort to shore up support for its position both at home and abroad, only the United Kingdom and a smattering of other countries expressed support for Bush administration's position on Iraq. Indeed, a substantial number of countries expressed dismay about the U.S. taking unilateral action against Iraq when other issues, such as the war in Afghanistan and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, remain unresolved. In order to deal with international and domestic skepticism, Bush addressed the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 12, 2002, regarding the threat posed by Iraq.

In September and October 2002, the United States Congress discussed and debated the provisions within its own draft of a resolution empowering the Bush administration to take military action against Iraq. Over time, it became increasingly clear that in order for it to pass both houses of Congress with overwhelming support, certain issues had to be reconciled. Specifically, some of the language in the draft had to be refined so its latitude was curtailed to some degree and the new version passed both houses of Congress.

Meanwhile, in late September 2002, former United States Vice President Al Gore, and United States Senators Ted Kennedy, Joe Biden, Chuck Hagel, James Byrd, John Kerry, among others, weighed in on the Iraq debate by criticizing the Bush administration's foreign policy on the matter. Gore's comments were the strongest critique of a possible war with Iraq from any prominent American politician.

Then, in the week of Oct, 1, 2002, discussions commenced in Austria regarding the re-admittance of weapons inspectors to Iraq. Inspectors from the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Committee (UNMOVIC), headed by Hans Blix, were charged with searching for biological, chemical and ballistic weapons.

At about this time, a small delegation of United States congressmen also traveled to Iraq to lobby the Saddam Hussein's government to allow the re-admittance of weapons inspections and to examine the humanitarian situation. Their efforts, not unlike those of former weapons inspector Scott Ritter, were criticized at home.

George Bush was scheduled to give a national address on the issue of Iraq in early October 2002. His speech was preceded by anti-war protests across the world and a defiant declaration from Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, that he would not voluntarily relinquish power. Debate in the United Nations continued in regard to the Iraq issue, and finally passed in November 2002. The resolution demanded unfettered access for U.N. inspectors to search for

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weapons of mass destruction. The United States claimed that military force would follow any failure on Iraq's part to comply with the resolution.

On the home front, Democrats, Republicans and a small number of other candidates took part in the mid-term elections in early November 2002. Republicans hoped to defy convention by capitalizing on President Bush's popularity and preventing an erosion of seats in Congress from the party which inhabits the White House. Meanwhile, as the economy suffered, Democrats were hoping to augment their position with modest gains in Congress and in several key gubernatorial races across the country. Analysts predicted that Republicans would hold the House, perhaps even gaining a few seats. Democrats would likely hold the Senate by a margin of one or two seats.

In fact, Republicans not only held the House, but also gained the Senate, defeating the Democrats and taking control of both the executive and the legislative branch of government. The Democrats' only victories of note came in the form of gubernatorial races, most significantly in typically conservative states, such as Kansas. The Republican victories were impressive as mid-term elections typically have not favored the party in the White House. Many political observers suggested that Congressional Republicans had enjoyed this historic electoral success as a result of Bush's significant popularity.

In early December 2002, after a flurry of calls for change from both political wings, the Bush administration revamped its economic team. Earlier, in November, after several months of pressure and strident calls for him to step down, the head of the Security and Exchange Commission, Harvey Pitt, had also resigned. The new team was expected to move ahead with the Bush economic plan, which was characterized by further tax cuts.

Also on the political front in December 2002, Democrat Mary Landrieu won the Senate run-off in Louisiana. Landrieu, who was expected to face an extremely tight race, won by four percent -- a larger margin than was expected.

Political Developments in 2003

Incoming Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott was under fire in the last weeks of 2002 for remarks made at the birthday celebration of retiring Senator Strom Thurmond. Lott's apparent endorsement of Thurmond's former presidential bid, which was characterized singularly by support for racial segregation, caused outrage around the United States. Various interest groups called for his resignation, while the media caught criticism for failing to report the story in a timely and substantive manner when it first broke. Since the story gained traction in the media, Lott repeatedly apologized for his comments. Within the Republican party, there was an increasing chorus of voices admitting that Lott had become a liability and could not continue to be the party's leader in the Senate. Finally, on Dec. 20, 2002, Lott resigned as Republican Senate Leader and was succeeded by Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee. For its part, the Bush administration voiced a mixed message of support for Lott's leadership as well as dismay regarding his comments.

Meanwhile, the issue of race in the Republican party had not entirely evaporated. The focus shifted from Lott to the party's reluctance to criticize the racially-charged "southern strategy" of courting voters that hold pro-Confederate views. As well, there were increasing questions about how these issues would affect the voting patterns of African Americans and other minorities in the future.

Also on the domestic front, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, Vermont Governor Howard Dean, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina and former Minority Leader of the House Democrats, Richard Gephardt, announced their possible candidacies for the Democratic nomination for President in 2004. Meanwhile, in a surprise announcement that shocked even his closest aides, former Vice President Al Gore announced he would not seek the Democratic nomination. Most opinion polls showed him as the Democratic favorite, despite rumblings by political insiders to the contrary.

In early January 2003, the world was bracing itself for a potential war against Iraq. The build-up had been ongoing for several months and by Jan. 20, 2003, large numbers of U.S. and British forces were moving into the Persian

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Gulf. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had previously been more conservative in his attitude toward taking action against the Middle Eastern country, declared on Jan. 20, 2003, that "time is running out" for Iraq.

Some Americans expressed their displeasure with a possible war against Iraq by taking to the streets in protest the weekend before the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Observers estimated that anti-war protests in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, California attracted some 200,000 attendees from around the country.

Meanwhile, relations between the United States and North Korea devolved. In October 2002, North Korea announced it would be resuming its nuclear program. The United States and its allies stopped shipments of aid and fuel to North Korea for violating a pact made in the early 1990s that prohibits nuclear development, however, North Korea insisted that a nuclear program would be necessary without an external fuel source. As tensions escalated, the international nuclear weapons inspectors in North Korea were expelled, and by early 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Almost a year after George Bush's famous "axis of evil" reference, it became apparent that the North Korea regarded the United States' intentions to be both hostile and threatening to its interests, hence its systematic brinkmanship. International efforts were levied to bring some resolution to the situation, however, the Bush administration refused outright negotiations with the North Koreans and for their part, the North Koreans insisted on the establishment of a special non-aggression treaty. The Bush administration rejected such a measure.

Critics of the Bush administration's foreign policy openly questioned (1) the different approaches to Iraq and North Korea, (2) the harmful effects of the rhetorical phrase "axis of evil," (3) the lack of attention to the broader war on terrorism, (4) the disengagement with the Middle East crisis, and (5) the "go it alone" approach to world affairs, in areas ranging from military action to the environment.

The State of the Union address took place on Jan. 28, 2003. United States President George W. Bush discussed a number of domestic issues, before concentrating his attention on the case for military action against Iraq. The domestic proposals in Bush's address included a \$674 billion tax cut, Medicare reform tort reform, an AIDS/HIV package for Africa and the Caribbean, an end to late term abortions, a ban on cloning, an anti-bioterrorism program and research funding for hydrogen-powered automobiles. Little attention was given to the deficit and the broader United States economy.

On the issue of Iraq, Bush argued that the Iraqi threat was imminent, and as such, his government was willing to deal with the threat of Iraq, with or without international approval. Bush also delineated previously documented human rights abuses under Saddam Hussein's regime. He also alluded to an Iraqi-al Qaeda connection, although no new evidence on the matter was provided. Aluminum pipes were mentioned as proof of a clandestine nuclear program in Iraq, however, the IAEA made it apparent that such pipes could be used for nuclear weaponry and were suitable only for conventional missiles. Bush also said that the Secretary of State Colin Powell would present newly declassified evidence of Iraq's defiance of disarmament demands on Feb. 5, 2003.

The actual speech by Powell relied on British intelligence, tape intercepts and satellite imagery to highlight Iraqi non-compliance, an alleged al Qaeda connection, and an apparent pattern of deception by the Iraqis. Immediately after, the majority of Americans appeared to have been convinced by Secretary of State Colin Powell's address to the United Nations on the justifications for a war against Iraq.

Then, on Friday, Feb. 14, 2003, Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix and the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mohamed El Baradei gave a new weapons inspections report. On balance, the weapons inspections report offered by Blix and El Baradei suggested that the inspections process and concomitant disarmament could be carried out successfully. Blix's remarks included several challenges to the evidence cited by Powell in an earlier address to the United Nations. The credibility of Powell's evidence had earlier been shaken by the revelation that the British intelligence report, which Powell had referred to in his address, had included plagiarized, outdated and falsified information. Blix's challenge to the credibility of other aspects of Powell's evidence only served to further injure the United States' case for imminent military action against Iraq. Indeed, many experts surmised that the Bush administration had been blindsided by the tenor and content of the report.

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Nevertheless, Powell asserted that Iraq was rapidly running out of time to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441.

Two days after the weapons inspections report was delivered, United States National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stated that the Bush administration was not backing away from a war against Iraq, despite the hopeful tone of the report by Blix and El Baradei. In fact, Rice suggested that various members of the United Nations Security Council were indulging in a policy of appeasement in regard to Iraq. Rice had met with Blix before his United Nations address in order to inform him of the kinds of details that the Bush administration wished to see highlighted in the report. United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also noted that even if the United Nations decided not to take action against Iraq, the United States would have international allies in launching a war against Iraq.

In major cities across the United States and across the globe on the weekend following the latest weapons inspections report, protest rallies were held, many with participants numbering close to the one million mark. Complicating matters was the impasse with North Korea, which continued to simmer.

Just as the United States, along with the United Kingdom, presented a new resolution on Iraq's failure to disarm, American embassies and consular offices around the world sent urgent messages to the United States government. Many messages warned the government that global perceptions were changing. Analysts observed that the negative perceptions had much to do with Bush's modalities of expression, which were often viewed as brusque and imbued by unilateralism - traits that unfortunately were not always understood cross-culturally. At home, however, where cross-cultural translation was not an issue, Bush continued to enjoy high approval ratings from a public who enjoyed his tough stances and language.

The resignation of a career United States diplomat, John Brady Kiesling, added to the perception that United States foreign policy, under the Bush administration, was affecting America's influence within the global community. In his resignation letter to United States Secretary of State Colin Powell, Kiesling wrote, "The policies we are now asked to advance are incompatible not only with American values but also with American interests. Our fervent pursuit of war with Iraq is driving us to squander the international legitimacy that has been America's most potent weapon of both offense and defense since the days of Woodrow Wilson. We have begun to dismantle the largest and most effective web of international relationships the world has ever known. Our current course will bring instability and danger, not security." For its part, the Bush administration viewed its policy decisions to be crucially important for the security of the country.

On March 17, 2003, United States President George W. Bush addressed the nation, and, indeed, the world, about a prospective war against Iraq. His statement included an ultimatum to Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein. Earlier, in emergency discussions with allies from the United Kingdom and Spain in the Portuguese islands, the Azores, Bush announced that "The Iraqi regime will disarm itself or the Iraqi regime will be disarmed by force." Following the collapse of diplomatic talks with the United Nations Security Council, the second draft resolution was withdrawn as it faced impending defeat within the council. Instead, Bush decided to pursue military action against Iraq without a second resolution, and without extensive global backing. Washington had consistently stated that once the diplomatic process was exhausted, war was sure to follow.

By mid-March 2003, with a war in full force in Iraq, the United States removed all non-diplomatic staff from various countries in the Middle East, due to what the State Department described as "threats associated with a war against Iraq." As casualties increased, President Bush warned Americans that the war would not be short and may not be easily won. Nevertheless, by early May 2003, Bush declared the Iraqi mission to have been accomplished.

In May 2003, the United States presented a resolution to the United Nations Security Council in regard to Iraq. The resolution would suspend sanctions, legalize the sale of oil -- the revenues of which would be used for reconstruction purposes -- and transition the Iraqi "oil-for-food" program into the realm of United States control. Other administrative functions in Iraq were also formalized under the leadership of coalition functions.

By June 2003, the situation on the ground in Iraq was chaotic and regular small-scale insurgencies left a number of United States soldiers dead. Military families at home became increasingly alarmed. To be sure, the number of

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casualties in Iraq did not come close to those of Vietnam, despite the fact that the term "quagmire" -- so often used in reference to Vietnam -- began to surface in relation to Iraq. The Bush administration, however, maintained that progress was being made in Iraq.

In July 2003, a congressional report on pre-September 11 intelligence was also released. The report spurred questions about public statements made by United States National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on the White House's knowledge regarding terrorism threats. As well, it implicated members of an anonymous government for funding some of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorists. Many members of the public surmised that the anonymous government was that of Saudi Arabia, thusly raising questions about bilateral relations with that country.

By mid-2003, on the domestic front, the United States was faced with a troubled economy, characterized by rising jobless rates and slow growth. Contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination used the less than positive domestic outlook, as well as complications on the foreign policy front, to challenge and criticize the Bush administration. For its part, the government of President George Bush was faced with intensifying questions about the credibility of its intelligence leading up to the war against Iraq. The Bush administration brushed aside these questions emphasizing the success of two consecutive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq respectively. President Bush also continued to tout his economic "jobs program," as well as his other domestic proposals.

Political Developments in 2004

In March 2004, a year after the invasion of Iraq, President Bush opened his election campaign in Florida by emphasizing his defense of the United States-led invasion of Iraq as well as the war on terror, saying he would "defend the security of America, whatever it takes."

Meanwhile, just as the commission reviewing the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, was about to interview a number of key government officials, a counter-terrorism official of the Bush administration launched criticism of its handling of the war on terrorism. In an interview with CBS television, Richard Clarke said that Bush's top aides immediately tried to use the terrorist attacks in the United States as justification for a war against Iraq, even though it seemed clear that al-Qaida was responsible. Clarke also noted that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had said that the United States had to bomb Iraq because there were "no good targets in Afghanistan." Clarke also recounted a meeting with President George W. Bush in which the president seemingly pushed for a connection between the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Iraq.

In a related development, the United Nations' top two weapons experts, Hans Blix and Mohammed El Baradei both said that the invasion of Iraq a year earlier was not justified by the available evidence at the time.

As before, the Bush administration continued to assert that its actions in Iraq were vital to the interests of national security.

In May 2004, the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad (Iraq) was the site of disturbing revelations of prisoner abuse. United States forces were under fire as a result of reports and incriminating photographs of Iraqi detainees being abused in ways that, if proved true, would be in violation of the Geneva Convention and could technically be classified as torture. United States officials expressed dismay about the disturbing reports and photographs but asserted that the alleged cases did not constitute "systematic abuse" and reflected only the actions of a few. Amnesty International and the International Red Cross, however, claimed it had uncovered a "pattern of torture" and called for an independent investigation.

High-ranking Democrats in the United States issued calls for the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld even as President George W. Bush asserted there would be no change in his cabinet. A visit by Secretary Rumsfeld to Congress for an inquiry into the matter shed little light on the situation because investigations were still ongoing. Still, the visit to Congress drew demands by Vice President Cheney for Congress to "get off Rumsfeld's back." The political consequences of this matter were yet to be determined but at that time, the White House appeared to be backing Rumsfeld who said that he would resign if he thought he could not longer be "effective." For his part, President Bush repeatedly apologized for the apparent abuse of Iraqis by United States forces.

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Also in the spring of 2004, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), George Tenet, resigned from office, citing "personal reasons." His sudden resignation was accepted by President Bush who said he would miss the "strong and able" Tenet at the helm of the intelligence agency. The White House noted that Tenet had not been asked to resign while Tenet himself reiterated his decision on the basis of family obligations.

The CIA found itself at the heart of criticism over sketchy intelligence in the period leading up to the Iraqi war and over whether the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks could have been prevented. In particular, a panel investigating the terrorist attacks offered several scathing criticisms of the CIA for its failure to comprehend the magnitude of the threat of terrorism and of al-Qaida particularly. The panel's complete report was due to be completed in July. For these reasons, and despite all public remarks, speculation over the real rationale for Tenet's resignation emerged.

Only days after the announcement by Tenet, the United States was struck by the news that former President Ronald Reagan had died. Reagan had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease for several years, prompting his wife Nancy Reagan to go against President Bush in calling for stem cell research. A state funeral was held for Reagan while flags were ordered to fly at half mast.

In July 2004, the first part of the Senate intelligence committee report concluded that the CIA had distorted evidence about Iraq's weapons capability prior to the invasion of that country. The report noted that a 28-page document shared with the public in 2002 differed in meaningful ways from the classified version that had been given to Congress. Republican Senator Pat Roberts of the intelligence committee made the observation that if the more tentative version of the evidence been presented in a public forum, it was unlikely that the Congressional votes would have been sufficient to pass the resolution authorizing President Bush to go to war with Iraq. The matter of the CIA's selective declassification of information was also referenced by both the joint congressional inquiry and the independent commission investigating the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Election 2004

In the first part of 2004, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry (the junior Senator from Massachusetts) captured his party's nomination by claiming the necessary number of delegates.

Kerry went on to face criticism regarding his views on the Iraq war, particularly his vote authorizing the war. An advertising campaign by Bush also characterized Kerry as weak on defense and a "tax and spend liberal." On the other side of the equation, Kerry quite often characterized the Bush administration as reckless on foreign policy and unconcerned about regular working people. Whether or not these depictions gained traction among voters was yet unknown with polls in the first part of 2004 showing Kerry and Bush in a competitive race in November.

In July 2004, Kerry selected former rival Senator John Edwards as his running mate. The selection of the telegenic Edwards was generally well-received, although it was unknown as to whether or not he could effect an election win for Kerry.

Then, several weeks later, in the aftermath of the Democratic convention in Boston, Democratic Presidential nominee John F. Kerry held onto a modest lead over incumbent President George W. Bush. Leading up to the convention, several election polls suggested that John F. Kerry and President George W. Bush were ensconced in a statistical tie. Republican strategists said they expected a bump of up to 15 points. Democrats conversely said they expected only a modest bounce of just a few percentage points. They hoped the small uptick would be sustainable over the long-term, given the fact that the electorate had been so polarized.

For his part, President Bush continued to stump across the country in anticipation of his own convention moment in the spotlight at the end of August. Following the Republican convention in New York, which highlighted terrorism almost exclusively, Bush enjoyed double-digit leads among several media polls.

Well into September, Bush was able to hold on to a modest lead over Kerry and many political analysts expressed the belief that the president would cruise to victory. Some even characterized the impending presidential debates as "Kerry's last stand." Such a characterization was to take on even greater importance when Kerry was declared

to be the clear winner of the first presidential debate with Bush, effectively infusing much needed enthusiasm into his campaign.

Just as important was the fact that the momentum for Bush had been halted, as evidenced by polls showing his lead had evaporated. Indeed, in early October, the presidential race was a dead heat.

On November 2, the day of the election, exit polls showed Kerry with the lead over Bush. As election night wore on, it was clear that Bush had won the south and central states while Kerry won several coastal and Great Lakes states. Victory would come down to the state of Ohio. No winner was called on election night although Bush appeared to be leading in that state by 100,000 votes. The Kerry campaign went on to concede the election the next day although the counting of provisional ballots was yet to occur. Presumably, the Kerry campaign believed that even with the counting of provisional ballots, it was unlikely that ground could be made up in Ohio.

Even as the Bush campaign has prepared for a second term, complete with resignations and new cabinet appointments, the Green Party quietly called for a recount of the votes in Ohio. The recount, however, played no role in the official outcome of the election which gave Bush a second term in office.

Meanwhile, at the Congressional level, Republican dominance continued. In the Senate, Republicans held 55 seats while Democrats held 44 seats but benefit from a 45th seat held by an Independent (who caucuses with the Democrats). In the House of Representatives, Republicans held 231 seats, Democrats held 200 seats and an Independents held 1 seat.

Developments in 2005

Inauguration day occurred in January 2005. Bush's second-term agenda appeared to be dominated by proposed changes to Social Security, which was the focus of his attention for the first few months of the year.

A general lack of support for his privatization program for Social Security, frustration about the sluggish economy, effects of a weak dollar and the start of inflation, as well as the controversy surrounding the government's intervention in the rather emotional "right to die" case of Terri Schiavo, seemed to have culminated in notably low approval ratings for the president in March 2005. Indeed, a Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll showed Bush with an approval of 45 percent on March 23, 2005.

In April 2005, the Bush administration's nomination for Ambassador to the United States, John Bolton, was temporarily derailed. In a Senatorial committee meeting, allegations arose suggesting that the nominee had been abusive towards civic employees. As well, he was accused of distorting intelligence reports to fit his own policy agenda. These revelations sufficiently troubled two Republican Senators, who were initially inclined to support the president's choice for this role, that the agreement was made to suspend a vote until further inquiries had been made.

This nomination had already been decried by Democrats, non-partisan internationalists, as well as moderate Republicans such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell, on the basis of Bolton's well-publicized incendiary remarks against the United Nations. Indeed, it was Bolton's own hostility to the international body that caused several critics to wonder why he would want to work at an institution which he held in such contempt.

In May 2005, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee refused to support Bolton as the nominee for Ambassador to the United Nations. Instead, the committee referred the nomination of John Bolton to the full Senate for an "up and down vote" without a recommendation.

Republican Senator George Voinovich of Ohio joined his fellow Republicans in sending the nomination forward to the full Senate on the basis of a 10-8 committee vote along party lines. But Voinovich said he would not support Bolton's nomination and that he would lobby fellow senators on the matter. Indeed, the Ohio Senator stated that Bolton was "the wrong man for the job." Voinovich also did not mince words when he said, "It is my opinion that John Bolton is the poster child of what someone in the diplomatic corps should not be." Bolton thus has the dubious

distinction of being one of very few presidential nominees who will face a Senatorial vote of confirmation without a recommendation.

Although the White House asserted that the aforementioned charges against Bolton were unfounded, calls intensified for the Bush administration to withdraw Bolton's name from consideration. Democratic Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware said that the time had come for the president to rethink his choice. Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer of California meanwhile promised a fight on the floor of the Senate. Certainly, if Bush did not withdraw Bolton's name from consideration, Democrats could either work to persuade sufficient Republicans to vote against Bolton, or, alternatively, they could filibuster the nomination. For his part, Bush could appoint Bolton during a recess to the position and avoid conflict with the Senate Democrats, at least temporarily.

On the other hand, the nomination process by the Bush administration for the new national director of intelligence, John Negroponte, ended in success in April 2005. The former ambassador to Iraq was confirmed overwhelmingly and was positioned to oversee the new and powerful government department overseeing national intelligence matters.

Meanwhile, in April 2005, religious right supporters joined with Majority Senate leader Bill Frist to call for an end to the traditional filibuster option on the president's nominees for higher court judges. Supporters of this measure noted that an end to filibustering would facilitate the enactment the president's agenda. Opponents said that ending the filibuster would essentially terminate one of the options traditionally available to the opposition party to influence the political process. They warned that such a change would entail the removal of one of the political procedures aimed at ensuring a system of checks and balances. Observers said that both parties have used the filibuster option in parliamentary procedure to their own advantage over the years. (Note: The Senate, unlike the House of Representatives, has been a legislative body oriented traditionally toward more consensus decision making rather than simple majority rule. In the Senate, a member can discuss a concern indefinitely -- or "filibuster an issue" -- thus protracting the voting process. In order to override a filibuster, the leaders of the Senate must be able to procure 60 votes.)

In the backdrop of these developments in early 2005, an internal inquiry regarding abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison concluded that no high standing officials were to be held responsible. Observers warned that the report lacked objectivity since it was essentially an internal review bereft of requisite critical distance.

As 2005 went on, the investigation into the unmasking of a CIA operative, Valerie Plame Wilson opened questions about the White House's complicity in risking national security, and also brought the question of media freedom to bear. The issue is discussed more fully in the section titled "CIA Leak Case" below.

Whether or not these various matters had an effect on the Bush presidency and its second term agenda was yet to be seen. Polls, however, suggested that the effect on Bush might not be positive. For example, a poll by the Associated Press taken July 11-13, 2005, showed that a majority of people -- 56 percent -- disapproved of the job Bush was doing. His handling of various issues ranging from Iraq -- at 40 percent -- to Social Security -- at 35 percent -- were rated at all-time lows, while only 36 percent of respondents said they believed the country was going in the right direction. His personal rating was also affected, with 59 percent of respondents saying they did not believe him to be trustworthy.

Political analysts intimated that should the trend continue, Bush's agenda was at serious risk of being completely derailed as the president himself might become a "lame duck" of sorts less than a year into his second term. Those within the Bush administration and the Republican Party, however, have the advantage of political control of the two branches of government, as well as a reputation for excellence in political strategy. No doubt these elements, in conjunction with the President's own unique bond forged with the American people after the attacks of 2001, will be utilized to the president's benefit.

In July 2005, the political agenda shifted significantly when President Bush nominated federal appeals court judge John Roberts to fill the vacancy left by Sandra Day O'Connor on the Supreme Court. Bush said Roberts had "superb credentials and the highest integrity" suitable for a position in the country's top judicial institution. Roberts was appointed to the federal appeals court in 2003 and served under former President George H. W. Bush.

Although a strong conservative, Roberts' stance on controversial issues such as abortion, privacy rights, civil rights, and consumer rights, were yet unknown since his writings in these domains have been limited. While some advocacy groups suggested that Roberts' confirmation would be difficult, Democrats in Congress gave few signs that such would be the case.

The fall of 2005 commenced with the death of United States Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist. Only a day after his death was announced, President George W. Bush announced he had selected John Roberts, his original nominee to replace retiring Associate Justice Sandra O'Connor, as the new Supreme Court Justice. The selection, as well as its particular timing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (discussed below), emerged as a political hot topic as well. On Sept. 12, 2005, Senate hearings began on the appointment of Roberts. The White House hoped that the Senate approval process would be as fast as possible, culminating with an affirmative outcome. Indeed, at the end of September 2005, Roberts was confirmed as the new Supreme Court Justice.

On Oct. 3, 2005, President George W. Bush nominated his White House counsel, Harriet Miers, as replacement for Sandra Day O'Connor as Associate Justice on the Supreme Court. Miers has had no experience on the bench; however, she has been regarded as a Bush loyalist. Her experience has been concentrated in corporate law, although her credentials have also included her position as head of the Texas State Bar. Her public service experience has mostly centered in her work with the Bush administration.

As was the case of the recently-confirmed Justice Roberts, her lack of experience on the bench could mean a thin paper trail of judicial opinions – a factor which may prevent criticism upon which Democratic opponents can block her confirmation. Yet it was the political right that appeared to have levied the most vociferous objections to the appointment of Miers. For them, Miers was viewed as an unknown whose conservative credentials were regarded as suspect. Instead, they would have preferred a well-known standpoint conservative whose views on the case of Roe versus Wade would be unquestioned. Bush's assertions that he has known Miers long enough to feel secure about her feelings on such controversial cases have not sufficiently assuaged their doubts. Meanwhile, Miers' closeness to the Bush White House was expected to open her up to criticism about cronyism within the administration.

Such charges of cronyism may well take on the added weight of corruption in the aftermath of a number of scandalous charges against the Republican political establishment. The fall of 2005 was marked by the indictment of Majority Leader Tom Delay in the House of Representatives; questions about possible insider trading involving Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist; the indictment of Republican lobbyist, Jack Abramoff, on wire fraud and conspiracy charges; the arrest of the president's chief procurement officer, David Safavian in relation to the Abramoff case; and the investigation (discussed below) about the complicity of the White House in the aforementioned disclosure of the identity of a CIA operative, Valerie Plame.

Key Democrats began to use the phrase "Republican culture of corruption" as a catch-phrase a full year ahead of the 2006 mid-term elections. No doubt they were buoyed in October 2005 by more recent polling data. The Associated Press and Ipsos, CBS, NBC and the Wall Street Journal and the Pew Institute, all placed approval for Bush between 37 and 39 percent.

By the close of October 2005, amidst the rising negative feedback from the far-right religious wing of the Republican Party, in addition to critics who questioned both her credentials and closeness to the president, Harriet Miers withdrew her name from consideration for the Supreme Court. She said the reason was because she did not wish to disclose the details of her correspondence with Bush on the basis of executive privilege; however, most observers agreed that the real rationale was the political fallout of the nomination which placed the president at odds with the far-right religious factions of his party.

Days after Miers' withdrawal, Bush nominated Appeals Court Judge Samuel Alito to the position on the Supreme Court. As an arch-conservative whose positions on a number of cases placed him solidly in the far-right camp, it was expected that there would be furious partisan fighting over his confirmation.

Hurricanes of 2005 and Disaster Preparedness

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In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States unleashing unprecedented devastation across the region. The states of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana were all affected. The Category 5 hurricane -- the most dangerous on the intensity scale -- appeared headed for the large metropolis and historic city of New Orleans on the Louisiana coast and as a result, the city mayor ordered a mandatory evacuation. For those unable to evacuate, official shelter was provided at the city's Superdome sports arena and the Convention Center. By the time the hurricane hit the region, it had been downgraded to a Category 4, however, the intensity seemed undiminished given the degree of damage left in its wake. Days later, the levees which kept Lake Ponchartraine from flooding New Orleans broke. Because the city is below sea level, it was almost completely flooded. Although the historic French Quarter, which is located on slightly higher ground, was spared, the rest of the city was immersed. Visual images of water rising to the rooftops of buildings were shown with people -- either unable, or unwilling, to leave -- stranded on rooftops. Meanwhile, cities such as Baton Rouge, Houston and Atlanta were flooded with people who had evacuated the Gulf coastal region ahead of time.

For several days seeping into early September, the main story of the hurricane's aftermath and its associated flooding in New Orleans was that of the several thousands of people who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, often not even owning vehicles, who were forced to take refuge in one of the two designated shelters. It was in these two buildings -- the Convention Center and the Superdome sports arena -- that horror stories began to emerge of death, violence and rape, presumably spurred by a small subsection of criminal elements, in conjunction with the untold stress of the living conditions in a confined space. The details of those living conditions involved overheating, overflowing toilet facilities and a lack of basic food and water. Media broadcasts filled the airwaves across the world of people in these centers, as well as others lining freeways, begging for help, but with no place to go and no sign of relief efforts. Stories of attacks by criminal elements on the ground, as well as mass looting were also broadcast. Looting would itself become a topic of debate as some people exploited the lack of law enforcement on the ground, while many others had entered stores illegally simply to get food, water and supplies that the government agencies were not bringing. The images were so profoundly disturbing that newspapers across the world speculated that they might as well have emerged from a third world country, rather than the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. The racial subtext to the storyline -- its protagonists being mostly African American and from lower socio-economic backgrounds -- would provide fodder for some time, as it laid bare the reality of the dichotomy of rich and poor within American society.

Shortly after the disturbing images and narratives were disseminated across the world about the plights of the several thousands of people waiting for rescue and relief that failed to arrive quickly, questions arose about the federal government's response to the worst natural disaster in American history. The Federal Emergency Agency (FEMA), which had been placed under the aegis of the recently formed Department of Homeland Security, bore the brunt of the attacks. First, its director, Michael Brown, was characterized as being inept and having little or no experience in emergency management before his appointment. Next, local officials attacked FEMA for refusing to allow emergency response teams, water and food to get through to people in need, in the interests of bureaucracy. One local official, the President of Jefferson Parish, Aaron Broussard, characterized it as "murder at the hands of bureaucracy." Then, while horror stories of people dying at the Convention Center emerged, Brown said on television that he had only learned hours earlier, via the media, that there were people in that facility. But a few days later, he claimed that the people in that facility had been provided hot meals -- an apparent contradiction of his earlier statement, and one detailed in the Times-Picayune, the largest newspaper of Louisiana, within a scathing editorial. The Mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, was shown on television blasting other officials for giving press conferences while people were dying, and begged the world in an "SOS" of sorts for help to save the people of his city.

At the state level, the Governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, was ensconced in a power struggle with the Bush administration over jurisdiction of that state's National Guard. The Bush administration wished to federalize the Guard, but Blanco refused since federal powers would diminish the troops' authority to deal with the problem of lawlessness on the streets. The impasse resulted in little or no action as both sides attempted to rally for overriding jurisdiction. Blanco went on to face further criticism when it was suggested that she should have asked specifically for troops from the federal government, rather than simply asking the Bush administration to give the state of

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Louisiana all possible resources. At issue was a recording of Blanco admitting to her press secretary that she should have been more explicit in her request.

Criticism was unleashed mercilessly on the federal government, despite official statements about the appropriateness of such utterances. Critics wondered why proposed legislation by Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu, calling for federal funds to deal with the potential dangers facing New Orleans in the event of a hurricane or flood, had sat in Congress for several years. Others wondered about the purpose and efficiency of the newly-formed Department of Homeland Security, noting that if the United States was unable to deal with the threat of Mother Nature -- clearly predictable thanks to modern meteorology -- then, how could it possibly respond to the unpredictable threat of a biological or chemical attack in a large urban center? Indeed, how would it possibly be able to deal with the destruction of an entire city and its resident survivors? Still others wondered about the wisdom of spending billions of federal dollars in Iraq, where also several National Guard were deployed, at the expense of emergency disaster funding and a lack of National Guard troops on the ground at home. In fact, it was revealed that funds earmarked to improve New Orleans' precarious situation on the Gulf had been severely cut in order to direct those funds for the war in Iraq. In June 2004, Walter Maestri, emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, said in a piece by The Times-Picayune in New Orleans: "It appears that the money has been moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq, and I suppose that's the price we pay. Nobody locally is happy that the levees can't be finished, and we are doing everything we can to make the case that this is a security issue for us."

Meanwhile, Congressional records, federal reports and scientific studies on the environmental threat posed by a potential hurricane and flooding to New Orleans began to emerge from various databanks, leading to increased criticisms about poor judgment by those in government -- from the local to federal levels. At issue was the way in which funding has been allocated. To this end, Ron Fournier of The Associated Press reported that the Army Corps of Engineers asked for \$105 million for hurricane and flood programs in New Orleans in 2004. The White House curtailed that amount to about \$40 million. Yet at the same time, the Bush administration and the Republican-led Congress agreed to a \$286.4 billion for a highway bill with 6,000 pet projects, including a \$231 million bridge for a small and uninhabited Alaskan island.

In this way, even the president was not left unscathed. His harshest critics likened his slow response time here to the several minutes he spent reading to schoolchildren after being informed that the country was under attack on September 11, 2001. Others wondered about the whereabouts of his vacationing second-in-command as well as other members of the administration -- several of whom were unfavorably depicted at a time of dire need.

Republicans pressed back by pointing to the failures at the level of local government. As well, the Republican governors of Alabama and Mississippi, flanking Bush on visits to devastated areas of those states, were quick to praise the efforts of the administration, noting that it had been utterly responsive. Then, Bush delivered a positive message at a State Department ceremony on Sept. 9, 2005. There, he vowed to overcome the disaster saying, "America is a strong and resilient nation. Our people have the spirit, the resources and the determination to overcome any challenge." Still, his approval ratings showed that he had suffered political damage as a result of the government's handling of the disaster.

A CBS poll found only 38 percent approved of Bush's handling of the hurricane's aftermath, as well as a drop in confidence in Bush, with only 48 percent viewing him as a strong leader. (By way of comparison, in 2004, 64 percent viewed him as a strong leader.) According to Zogby polls, Bush's approval rating fell to 41 percent overall, while only 36 percent thought he was doing an acceptable job responding to the aftermath of the hurricane.

A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll offered slightly better news for Bush -- although only 35 percent thought he was doing a "great" or "good" job handling the hurricane's aftermath, a mere 13 percent of people were willing to outright blame the president for the problems in New Orleans. A Washington Post/ABC poll showed people split almost evenly on approval and disapproval of Bush's performance at 46 percent and 47 percent respectively. But a Pew Research Center poll showed his approval rating down to 40 percent, an AP-Ipsos poll showed him dropping

below the 40 percent mark to the high 30s, mirrored by a Newsweek poll, which showed him with a 38 percent job approval rating.

With increasing pressure being placed on the Bush administration to fire Brown, FEMA's head, by Democrats and other critics, on Sept. 9, 2005, Chertoff, the head of Homeland Security, announced a change in the chain of command. He said that Thad Allen, the chief of the United States Coast Guard, would take over leadership of the rescue and relief efforts on the Gulf Coast. Brown, was reported to have been reassigned to work on other disaster relief efforts in Washington D.C. Even with the replacement of Brown on the ground in the disaster-stricken region, however, the Bush administration gave no hint that it was no longer supporting the head of FEMA. In his statement, Chertoff said, "Mike Brown has done everything he possibly could to coordinate the federal response to this unprecedented challenge. I appreciate his work, as does everybody here." Only days earlier, Bush also expressed confidence in Brown saying that his FEMA head had done "a heck of a job." Chertoff's announcement came after the release of media reports that Brown had padded his resume -- an issue that the administration refused to comment about at the time of writing.

By Sept. 12, 2005, as questions of responsibility and accountability about the response to the aftermath of the hurricane were cast against every level of government, Brown resigned as head of FEMA. In his resignation speech, Brown said he made his decision "in the best interest of the agency and best interest of the president."

It is the question of blame that will form the political dimension of what began as a natural disaster, but which has metamorphosed into a humanitarian crisis. Indeed, many observers noted that although the fate of New Orleans began as a natural disaster and thus, could not be blamed on any one person, it quickly became a man-made catastrophe, as a result of the bureaucratic inaction of key government agencies, specifically charged with the task of dealing with such emergencies. It was not helped by the willful inattention to warning after warning from manifold environmental studies calling for improvement to the system of levees, which was intended only to hold back flooding from a Category 3 hurricane, as well as improvement plans to deal with the vulnerabilities of New Orleans' location on the Gulf and below sea level. To that end, Democratic Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton called for a commission of inquiry into the disturbing response to America's most devastating natural disaster.

That humanitarian crisis quickly took a human interest turn. The world watched as the tens of thousands of people from New Orleans were evacuated to other cities where volunteers tried to help put their lives back together, knowing that their city, their homes, their worldly possessions and, in many cases, loved ones, had been lost to them. The first city officially housing victims was Houston; however, other Texas cities also joined in the efforts, which spread across the country. But even as cruise ships were brought to harbor in Galveston, Texas, to provide more long-term housing for those evacuated to that state, many people were refusing to leave facilities like the Houston Astrodome because they were yet to find loved ones. Indeed, the ongoing saga and heartbreak of families separated in the melee of evacuation, and of children, parents and pets lost either through the chaos or because of the actual flooding, has been ongoing with no foreseeable end in sight.

Meanwhile, efforts began by the second week of September 2005 to drain New Orleans of its flooded waters, and to remove the remaining survivors in New Orleans. On Sept. 22, 2005, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released a report stating that the flood waters were highly contaminated with raw sewage, e-coli bacteria, lead, gas, oil, and various other substances.

But there was also a hint of good news as the midpoint of September 2005 approached and officials began to speculate that the death toll might not be as high as initially anticipated.

In other developments, former Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush began fund-raising for relief efforts, even as more federal relief funds were being released. Also, Louisiana's National Guard Unit returned from Iraq to help with the post-hurricane relief efforts. As attention shifted toward reconstruction efforts, it was revealed that a few companies with ties to the Bush White House would be benefiting with contracts in the aftermath of the hurricane. Shaw Group, and Halliburton subsidiary, Kellogg, Brown and Root, were two corporate clients of Joe Allbaugh, President Bush's former campaign manager and a former head of FEMA, which were selected to begin

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recovery work on the Gulf Coast. A third firm chosen to provide short-term housing for displaced people was Bechtel.

In September 2005, only weeks after Katrina, another hurricane, Rita, intensified in strength to Category 5 levels in the Gulf Coast of the United States. After a harrowing few days when Hurricane Rita appeared headed for one of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States -- Houston-Galveston -- it turned eastward and made landfall on Sept. 24, 2005, close to the Texas-Louisiana border. There were few deaths thanks to massive evacuations, prompted in the horrific aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast only weeks before. As well, the state of Texas sustained about \$8bn worth of damage from the hurricane. Most of the oil refineries located along the Gulf Coast of Texas had held up in tact and were expected to resume production shortly.

Evacuated residents of Houston, the fourth largest city in the United States, were being allowed back in phases under orders of the municipal and state government, led by Houston Mayor Bill White and Texas Governor Rick Perry. Evacuation routes were established to allow people to re-enter the city section by section. The main objective was to avoid the massive traffic congestion that plagued the evacuation of almost three million people preceding the onslaught of the hurricane. In the evacuation, many residents found themselves along a stretch of 100 miles (160 kilometers) of highways, still caught in traffic jams, in high temperatures of up to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, sometimes running out of gas, and frantic to get to safety before the arrival of hurricane conditions. Early reports suggest there were more deaths of Houston-Galveston residents associated with the evacuation, rather than the hurricane itself.

Meanwhile in Louisiana, searches were ongoing in the wetland areas to find people who may not have obeyed evacuation orders. The rain and storm surges caused by Rita created flood levels of up to nine feet (2.7 meters) just south of New Orleans, which had been badly hit by Katrina only weeks before. Indeed, the aftermath of Rita delayed recovery efforts in New Orleans from Katrina by several days. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco requested \$32 billion in federal funds to repair damage to the state's infrastructure caused by Katrina and Rita.

Both hurricanes have evoked questions about the economic ability of the United States to bear the costs of reconstruction after natural disasters, while at the same time conducting an extraordinarily expensive war in Iraq. They have also evoked questions about disaster preparedness in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001.

The CIA "Leak" Case

In mid-2005, a federal prosecutor, Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald, was investigating whether any officials broke the law by revealing the name of a United States covert agent.

Background

The issue first emerged in July 2003 when former ambassador, Joseph Wilson, wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times, which essentially charged that the Bush's administration had manipulated some of the intelligence on Iraq, in order to advance its case for war. In his opinion piece, Wilson said that he had traveled to Niger, on behalf of the government, and at the behest of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to investigate the claim that Iraq had attempted to purchase yellowcake uranium from that African country. He noted that he found no evidence to sustain that claim, which was the keystone of President George W. Bush's expressed justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq during his State of the Union speech. Wilson also noted that administration officials were unreceptive to his attempts to alert the administration to its questionable claims that Iraq had tried to acquire nuclear materials from Niger.

Soon thereafter, television commentator and newspaper columnist, Robert Novak, publicly revealed that Valerie Plame Wilson was a covert CIA agent in an article about the former ambassador, Joseph Wilson. In his article, Novak noted that Wilson was not a credible voice because he had been sent to Niger by none other than his own wife, CIA operative, Valerie Plame. In making this assertion, Novak cited two unnamed officials from the Bush administration as sources.

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In response, an outraged Wilson alleged that his wife's name had been leaked in that article deliberately, in order to punish him for challenging the administration, and also to undermine his credibility.

The situation inspired a federal investigation since, according to United States law, it is illegal for a government official to knowingly expose the identity of a covert agent. Since the publication of Novak's column in 2003, it was made clear that Valerie Plame was a weapons of mass destruction expert who had been working as a covert operative for the CIA for several years, and that her network of contacts had an extensive reach. Novak even revealed the name of the organization for which she was believed to have worked -- Brewster Jennings -- which was allegedly her "cover" for all the work she was carrying out on weapons of mass destruction for the CIA. Revelations about her identity sparked questions about whether or not the people within her network were placed in jeopardy as a result, and at the broader level, the degree to which the situation compromised national security.

Matthew Cooper, a Time magazine journalist who was called to testify by Fitzgerald, revealed in a July 2005 article that two years earlier, presidential aide, Karl Rove, told him that the Wilson's wife was a CIA agent. Cooper said that although Rove did not precisely disclose the name, Valerie Plame, he suggested that soon-to-be declassified information would surely cast doubt on Wilson's credibility. Cooper's testimony, as well as the publication of his article, occurred after he was threatened with jail time if he refused to cooperate. For his part, Rove denied involvement in the leaking of Plame's identity to the media. Rove's lawyer, Robert Luskin, was reported to have said that while his client did, indeed, discuss Plame with Matthew Cooper, her specific name was not uttered.

After a few days of silence since the matter captured the public purview, the White House expressed confidence in Rove. As well, the head of the Republican National Committee, Ken Mehlman, characterized the calls for the dismissal of Rove as "partisan smears." The support for Rove from the Bush administration and from the top ranks of the Republican Party was of no help to White House spokesman, Scott McClellan, who was under fire during daily press conferences. Members of the White House press and media corps relentlessly called on McClellan to reconcile his assurances in October 2003 that Rove and other key administration personnel were uninvolved in the leak with the current revelations which pointed to the contrary.

In response to the matter, the intelligence community in the United States was said to be outraged that one of their own operatives had been identified. Meanwhile, several Democrats, including former presidential contender, Senator John Kerry called on President Bush to fire Rove.

By mid-October 2005, as Special Counsel Fitzgerald's investigation was going on, Rove, testified before a grand jury for the fourth time. Although Rove's attorney, Robert Luskin, declined to state the details of his client's testimony, he said, "The special counsel has not advised Mr. Rove that he is a target of the investigation and affirmed that he has made no decision concerning charges." Luskin also said, "The special counsel has indicated that he does not anticipate the need for Mr. Rove's further cooperation." Because special counsel is not obliged to inform an individual in writing about his/her intent, Luskin's words offered little indication about the possible fate of his client. Meanwhile, federal prosecutors said that there was no guarantee that Rove would not be indicted.

Other key White House officials have also been involved in the investigation, including Vice President Dick Cheney's Chief of Staff, I, Lewis "Scooter" Libby. Matthew Cooper, referenced above, noted that he had discussed Wilson and Plame with Libby. Complicating matters was the fact that New York Times reporter, Judith Miller, had gone to jail for several weeks for failing to cooperate with the prosecution's investigation. An eventual decision by Miller to provide Fitzgerald with information about conversations shared with Libby about Valerie Plame led to her release. Newly discovered notes by Miller as well as certain recollections appeared to point to conversations about Valerie Plame and her husband, Joseph Wilson, a month before Wilson actually penned his damning opinion piece about the Bush administration's faulty intelligence used to bolster the case for going to war in Iraq. Following her testimony, Miller wrote an article in the New York Times delineating her involvement in the complex affair and disclosed that she could not recall who had disclosed the name of Plame to her. She also noted that Libby's attorney had conveyed his expectation that her testimony would exonerate the his client.

As such, the entire Plame affair has continued to be imbued with great confusion and speculation.

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Although the grand jury's term was due to end at the close of October, 2005, it was possible that an extension could be given. Of particular interest has been the nature of the possible charges to be levied by federal prosecutors. While proving that an person intentionally unmasked the identity of a covert CIA officer might be difficult, there are other possible paths that federal prosecutors might pursue, such as giving false statements, obstruction of justice, mishandling of classified information, as well as violations of the Espionage Act.

Top White House Official Indicted in CIA Leak Case

On Oct. 28, 2005, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby Jr., the Chief of Staff for Vice President Dick Cheney, was indicted on five felony counts. The charges set forth by the Grand Jury included one count of obstruction of justice under the aegis of Title 18 United **States** Code (U.S.C) Section 1503, two counts of perjury under the aegis of Title 18 U.S.C. Section 1623, and two counts of making false statements, under the aegis of Title 18 U.S.C. section 1001. If convicted on all five counts, Vice President Cheney's closest associate at the White House could face as many as 30 years in prison and \$1.25 million in fines. Libby is one of the first sitting White House officials to be indicted since the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant about a century ago.

As one of the most powerful individuals in the Bush administration, Libby was formally indicted on the five counts following an investigation by Special Counsel, Patrick Fitzgerald, who had been tasked with looking into the unmasking of a covert Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer, Valerie Plame Wilson -- the wife of former Ambassador Joseph Wilson.

Details of the Charges and the Investigation

The actual five-count indictment accused Libby of lying about how and when he learned about the classified identity of Valerie Plame Wilson within the CIA, and then conveying that information to certain journalists. Whereas Libby had claimed that he was at the end of a chain of information exchanges pertaining to Valerie Plame Wilson's classified identity, Fitzgerald charged that (1) Libby had been at the very start of that chain, and (2) that he had lied about it.

The Office of the Special Counsel also **stated** that Libby's actions endangered national security. Indeed the Office of the Special Counsel **stated**, "Disclosure of classified information about an individual's employment by the CIA has the potential to damage national security in ways that range from preventing that individual's future use in a covert capacity, to compromising intelligence-gathering methods and operations, and endangering the safety of CIA employees and those who deal with them."

Yet even after asserting that there had been grave damage done to the country as a result of the inappropriate "leaking" of Valerie Plame Wilson's classified CIA identity, the indictment did not charge Libby with knowingly revealing the identity of a CIA operative under the Intelligence Identities Protection Act (IIPA) of 1982. When asked during a press conference why Libby's indictment did not include charges under this particular statute, Fitzgerald made clear that such knowledge and intent would have to be proven. He also noted that he had not formulated charges under the Espionage Act because he felt that it required strict terms of interpretation whereby, again, knowledge and intent would have to be proved, or risk falling into something akin to the British Official Secrets Act.

Indeed, Fitzgerald said at the press conference that in order to charge Libby under either of those two laws, he would have to be able to prove that the Vice President's Chief of Staff knew at the time that he transmitted the information, that he appreciated it was classified information, and that acted with recklessness. In order to make these determinations, Fitzgerald needed to have a clear view of the events that transpired and instead, lies and obstruction had functioned as metaphoric "sand in the umpire's eyes," effectively obscuring his vision. He said, "In trying to figure that out, you need to know what the truth is. So our allegation is in trying to drill down and find out exactly what we got here, if we received false information, that process is frustrated." **Stated** differently, he suggested that the perjury, false statements and obstruction of justice, laid out in the charges against Libby, had functioned as forms of obfuscation, which prevented him from presenting other charges, such as violations of the IIPA or the Espionage Act.

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Asserting passionately that "truth is the engine of the judicial process," Fitzgerald noted that the charges, such as obstruction of justice and perjury, were no less significant than the actual revelations about the covert status of a CIA operative. He also suggested that his ultimate intent was to serve the interests of the people by making those responsible accountable to the law in some way. To this end, he stated, "But at the end of the day, I think I want to say one more thing, which is: When you do a criminal case, if you find a violation, it doesn't really, in the end, matter what statute you use if you vindicate the interest. If Mr. Libby is proven to have done what we've alleged -- convicting him of obstruction of justice, perjury and false statements -- very serious felonies -- will vindicate the interest of the public in making sure he's held accountable."

Questions Spurred by the Indictment

Meanwhile, the actual indictment of Libby has evoked, rather than resolved, a number of questions about the revelation of Valerie Plame Wilson's classified status and the machinations therein.

Notably, on Page 4 of the indictment under Item 4, an unnamed "Undersecretary of State" was reportedly asked by Libby about an ambassador's trip to Niger and then responded by directing the preparation of a report by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The unnamed Undersecretary also verbally advised Libby about that Wilson was said ambassador. A key question left unanswered concerns who this unnamed Undersecretary of State might be. Some media reports alleged that the unnamed Undersecretary might be Marc Grossman.

Likewise, on Page 7 of the indictment under Item 16, Libby was said to have had lunch with "the then White House Press Secretary" and during that meeting advised the Press Secretary both that "Wilson's wife worked at the CIA" and that such information "was not widely known." While it could be deduced that "the then White House Press Secretary" referred to Ari Fleischer, the broader question evoked from this note concerned what was actually done with the information shared at this meeting.

On Page 8 of the indictment under Item 21, Libby was said to have spoken with a senior White House official, identified as "Official A," who advised Libby of a conversation he/she had with columnist Robert Novak about the occupation of Joseph Wilson's wife. Another question left unanswered concerns the identity of "Official A." The use of the generic identifier, "Official A," was distinct from the unnamed individuals in the indictment who are identified by actual title. In fact, experienced prosecutors have noted that "Official A" might well be either a subject of interest or a target in an ongoing investigation. As such, there was widespread speculation that "Official A" might Karl Rove.

Finally, Cheney was also cited in the indictment on Page 5 under Item 9 as one source who advised Libby that Wilson's wife worked at the CIA in the Counter proliferation Division. Libby understood that the Vice President had acquired this information from the CIA. This particular piece of information could be particularly revelatory because the Counter proliferation Division (CPD) is part of the CIA's Directorate of Operations and not the Directorate of Intelligence. Quite clearly, the CPD is not a branch of the CIA that employs analysts but rather covert operatives, known in colloquial terms as "spies." Thus, this expressed statement within the indictment indicating Cheney's involvement may suggest political, if not legal, ramifications in the future.

Special Counsel Fitzgerald noted that the investigation would be ongoing. During the news conference after the Grand Jury handed down its indictments, he said, "It's not over." He declined, however, to go into further detail, and he also declined to comment on the involvement of Karl Rove, Vice President Cheney, or any other officials, warning that he would not make allegations about anyone not specifically charged in the indictment. In this regard, he stated that it would be legally wrong to name or discuss persons referenced or implicated but not actually indicted.

The Political Ramifications

Karl Rove, the chief advisor to President George W. Bush, was not indicted at the time, however, he remained under investigation. Media reports suggested that Rove and his lawyer provided Fitzgerald with information at the proverbial "eleventh hour," which resulted in the Special Counsel's decision to hold off on an immediate indictment. Nevertheless, Rove's conduct was apparently still under scrutiny by the Special Counsel's office because he initially

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failed to disclose to the prosecutors that he had a conversation with Time magazine reporter, Matthew Cooper, about Valerie Plame Wilson and her work at the CIA. Rove appeared before the Grand Jury four times as a result. While he escaped indictment on Oct. 28, 2005, and although he was expected to continue to work at the White House, Rove's involvement in the case, as well as his ongoing state of legal jeopardy, were expected to spur problems for the administration.

Similarly, Libby's closeness to Vice President Cheney could pose its own set of problems for the White House going forward. Libby's indictment could portend a scenario in which Vice President Cheney might be called before a court during a trial to explicate the rationale for the Bush administration's apparent campaign to discredit Ambassador Joseph Wilson.

Reaction

For his part, Libby resigned soon after news of his indictment was reported in the media. Later in the day he noted, "Today is a sad day for me and my family." Vice President Cheney issued a statement acknowledging that he had accepted Libby's resignation "with deep regret." He also said that Libby was entitled to a presumption of innocence and he praised his confidante as being one of the most capable and talented individuals he had ever known. Meanwhile, at a very brief news conference, President Bush said that he was saddened by the news but that the indictment would not keep the White House from doing its work. He also praised Libby for his service.

Not surprisingly, the feedback from leading Democrats was not quite so temperate. Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid said, "These are very serious charges. They suggest that a senior White House aide put politics ahead of our national security and the rule of law." He also linked the specific case with the wider conflagration over the war in Iraq, noting, "This case is bigger than the leak of highly classified information. It is about how the Bush White House manufactured and manipulated intelligence in order to bolster its case for the war in Iraq and to discredit anyone who dared to challenge the president." Senator John Kerry, the Democratic nominee for the presidency in 2004, characterized the case as "evidence of White House corruption at the very highest levels."

Ambassador Joseph Wilson, who, along with his wife Valerie Plame Wilson, were at the heart of the matter, issued a statement which read, "I continue to believe that revealing my wife Valerie's secret CIA identity was very wrong and harmful to our nation, and I feel that my family was attacked for my speaking the truth about the events that led our country to war."

Earlier, David Gergen, a former adviser to several presidents, including Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton, said on CNN that indictments in the case could have a massive impact on the Iraq war. "Because if there are indictments, it will not only be people close to the president, the vice president of the United States, but they will raise questions about whether criminal acts were perpetrated to help get the country into war," said Gergen. Nevertheless, despite these suggestions, Republicans and the White House were planning a defensive strategy to push back on political pressure. Also, Senate Majority Leader, Republican Bill Frist, expressed the view that the Senate would not investigate the matter further.

Timeline and Costs of the Investigation

For his part, in the news conference after the Grand Jury handed down its indictments, Special Counsel Fitzgerald said that he had hoped that the investigation would have been completed a year earlier. He intimated that testimony from key journalists, including jailed New York Times reporter, Judith Miller, had to be secured. This was because Libby had alleged that he learned about the identity of Joseph Wilson's wife and her occupation through journalistic contacts, even suggesting that Valerie Plame Wilson's occupational status was generally known. He explained that his investigation necessarily required the full vetting of such claims about the journalists.

After 15 months, Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald's investigation cost \$723,000, according to the Government Accountability Office. Observers have noted that its expenditure stands in direct contrast to Independent Counsel Ken Starr's investigation of President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, which cost the American taxpayers over \$50 million.

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See below for latest developments related to this matter. Of particular note was the fact that Karl Rove was not indicted as of mid-2006. As well, in July 2006, Vice President Dick Cheney was among 13 White House officials listed in a civil lawsuit regarding the aforementioned case. Other officials named in the lawsuit included presidential adviser, Karl Rove, and former aide to Cheney, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby. Rove had earlier escaped indictment by federal prosecutors in the case regarding the disclosure of the identity of former CIA operative, Valerie Plame Wilson. The lawsuit brought by Valerie Plame Wilson and Joseph Wilson accused officials of putting their lives at risk and stated, "This lawsuit concerns the intentional and malicious exposure by senior officials of the federal government of [Ms. Plame], whose job it was to gather intelligence to make the nation safer and who risked her life for her country."

Note: See the subsections below titled "Political Developments in 2006" and "Political Developments in 2007" for the further details regarding these matters, including the actual outcome of the federal case.

Charges of Torture and Secret Detainment Camps

United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in Europe in December 2005 for meetings with leaders and counterparts. Secretary Rice first arrived in the German city of Berlin for talks with newly-installed German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The original intent of the trip to Europe was oriented toward improving bilateral ties, which were largely strained as a result of the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent ongoing war. At the same time, although the new German Chancellor had a similar objective of improving ties in mind, Merkel also expressed concern about the conduct of the war on terror.

Partially driving Merkel's agenda were the media reports about a German citizen, Khaled el-Masri, who was detained in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and then transported to a prison in Afghanistan where he was jailed for several months and later released. In Germany, Chancellor Merkel said in a joint press conference with Rice that the United States admitted it had made a mistake in the case Khaled el-Masri.

But later as Rice traveled from Germany to her next European stop in Romania, senior United States officials denied that Rice had admitted that a mistake over el-Masri. Complicating matters was the fact that on Dec. 6, 2005, the American Civil Liberties Association (ACLU) filed a lawsuit on el-Masri's behalf against various Bush administration officials, including former Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet on the basis of supposed wrongful imprisonment. The talks in Germany between Rice and Merkel were also dominated by reports that the CIA transported terror suspects via German territory. There were suspicions that some of these trips might have been associated with the controversial practice of taking terror suspects to clandestine prisons outside the United States for interrogation.

Indeed, international attention was focused on the matter after the Washington Post reported that Europe was home to some of the United States CIA's "black sites" -- these secret camps used by the United States intelligence agency to interrogate terror suspects.

Before her trip to Europe, Rice acknowledged that terror suspects had been flown to other countries for interrogation but she also said that the Bush administration did not condone the torture of terror suspects. Rice claimed that terror suspects were transported by aircraft to other countries as part of a process called "rendition" and that such action was "a lawful weapon." Still, Rice refused to address charges that the CIA operated clandestine prisons where terror suspects were questioned without regard for international law. Indeed, Tom Malinowski, an official with Human Rights Watch, responded to Secretary Rice's silence on the allegations of secret prisons saying, "Condi Rice can't deny that secret prisons exist because they do. But she can't say where they are because that would embarrass the United States and put the host countries in an impossible position." He also accused Rice of mischaracterizing the actual nature of rendition. To this end, he said, "Secretary Rice made extra-legal rendition sound like just another form of extradition. In fact, it's a form of kidnapping and 'disappearing' someone entirely outside the law."

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Questions about the United States' conduct of the war on terror, as well as challenges to the lawfulness of its strategies and tactics, were expected to dominate the entirety of Secretary Rice's trip to Europe. Rice has explained United States methods saying, "If you don't get to them before they commit their crimes, they will commit mass murder. We have an obligation to defend our people and we will use every lawful means to do so." Nevertheless, the international community made it clear that it wanted answers about United States policy on rendition, interrogation of suspects, the treatment of prisoners, and its overall stance as regards torture. Indeed, even the United States' key ally in its invasion of Iraq, the United Kingdom, asked for "clarification" on the these issues.

The decision by President George W. Bush to veto anti-torture legislation authored by fellow Republican Senator John McCain, while simultaneously asserting that the United States "does not torture," only served to muddy the waters about what exactly constituted the Bush administration's policy. Indeed, a plethora of challenges were levied about the Bush administration's adherence to the conventions and protocols of international jurisprudence, such as the Geneva Convention.

Note: See the subsection titled "Political Developments in 2006" below for further details unfolding as regards these matters.

A Secret Surveillance Program

Following the publication of a story by the New York Times , it was revealed on Dec.16, 2005, that United States President George W. Bush had signed a presidential order providing for clandestine surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA). A day later, Bush acknowledged that he had personally authorized the NSA to eavesdrop on international telephone calls and to monitor electronic mail of people within the United States without seeking requisite legal warrants. Faced with accusations that secret monitoring of this sort was illegal, Bush defended his decision noting that it was a necessary and legal measure in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Bush said the program was designed to be used in a circumscribed manner "consistent with United States law and the Constitution" and aimed only at those with "a clear link" to al-Qaida or related terrorist organizations. Still, Bush administration officials declined to define the precise criteria used to establish such a link. They also declined to state the number of people who have been monitored.

During a press conference on Dec.19, 2005, Bush asserted that he would continue to authorize the secret surveillance program. Bush defended his actions by charging that he was doing what was necessary to protect American lives while expressing outrage that information about the secret monitoring program had been shared with the New York Times in the first place. He called for a full investigation into who leaked information about the wiretap program saying, "My personal opinion is it was a shameful act for someone to disclose this very important program in a time of war."

In response, Democrats as well as Republicans called for congressional investigations into the matter. Sen. Arlen Specter, the Republican Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee from Pennsylvania, said he intended to hold hearings. Specter noted, "They talk about constitutional authority. There are limits as to what the president can do." Since both the Attorney General as well as the White House counsel's office had apparently affirmed the legality of Bush's actions, Specter said he wanted Bush advisors to specify the legal authority used for bypassing the courts. Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada also called for an investigation into the President's secret monitoring program. Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, said that a bipartisan panel should be created to look into the matter.

Meanwhile, members of the Bush administration, such as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, stated that the president acted lawfully. Rice said on Fox News on Dec. 18, 2005, that Bush had "gone to great lengths to make certain that he is both living under his obligations to protect Americans from another attack but also to protect their civil liberties." President Bush and other administration officials also said that congressional leaders had been briefed about the program and as such, it had been enacted with congressional knowledge. But House Minority Leader, Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California said, in a statement on Dec. 17, 2005, that she had been told on several occasions about unspecified activities by the NSA and had, at the time, expressed strong concerns.

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Democratic Senate Leader Reid made clear his position that the administration bore the responsibility for the program. Reid said, "The president can't pass the buck on this one. This is his program. He's commander in chief. But commander in chief does not trump the Bill of Rights." Indeed, as noted by Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, left out of the discussion has been an explanation as to why the president, in his efforts to deal with the threat of terrorism, found it necessary to sidestep the law by failing to acquire warrants.

On Dec. 19, 2005, Vice President Dick Cheney said during an interview with ABC's Nightline show, "It's been briefed to the Congress over a dozen times, and, in fact, it is a program that is, by every effort we've been able to make, consistent with the statutes and with the law."

Several lawmakers, however, have seen things quite differently. They have pointed to the 1978 federal law, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which provides for domestic surveillance only in dire circumstances and only with court approval. Still others have pointed to the very constitutionality of Bush's presidential order to secretly monitor people, noting that the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution clearly protects against searches and seizures being carried out without warrants. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina characterized the secret monitoring program as "troubling." On Dec. 18, 2005 on CBS's "Face the Nation" program, he noted, "We are at war, and I applaud the president for being aggressive. But we cannot set aside the rule of law in a time of war."

Also on Dec. 19, 2005, Bush's Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez on NBC television's Today show stated that Bush had the authority to order clandestine monitoring via the authorization by Congress given in the days following September 11, 2001. Several member of Congress, however, were outraged at such a suggestion and said that "all necessary and appropriate force" had been given with respect to the use of military force in the fight against terrorism, and certainly did not allow the president to go against the Constitution and other laws of the land. To this end, also on NBC television, Democratic Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin said, "This is just an outrageous power grab. Nobody, nobody, thought when we passed a resolution to invade Afghanistan and to fight the war on terror, including myself who voted for it, thought that this was an authorization to allow a wiretapping against the law of the United States. There's two ways you can do this kind of wiretapping under our law. One is through the criminal code, Title III; the other is through the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. That's it. That's the only way you can do it. You can't make up a law and deriving it from the Afghanistan resolution. The president has, I think, made up a law that we never passed."

The revelations about the secret NSA program surfaced just as Bush was attempting to extend the life of certain provisions of the USA Patriot Act -- the domestic anti-terrorism law that was enacted following the 2001 terrorist attacks. The legislation increasingly became the topic of debate, particularly as regards the powers given to law enforcement agencies in accessing library and medical records and other personal data during investigations of possible terrorist activity. On Dec. 16, 2005, despite Bush's urging that it be renewed, the bill to re-authorize several contentious sections was rejected in the Senate. It was opposed by a bipartisan group of senators on the basis of its infringement on civil liberties. The opposition to the bill was sufficiently strong as to prevent Senate Republicans from acquiring the 60 votes needed to prevent a threatened filibuster (a parliamentary procedure which would prevent the bill's passage into law). In another blow to the Bush administration, on Dec. 15, 2005, Bush was forced to accept a bill proposed by Senator McCain expressly banning cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of terrorist suspects.

In the first days of January 2006, on a trip to San Antonio, Texas, Bush strongly defended his domestic spying program. In an exchange with reporters, he said that he was aware of people's civil liberties and the violation of their privacy but warned, "If somebody from al-Qaida is calling you, we'd like to know why." He went on to state, "We're at war." He also characterized the spying program as legal and condemned the disclosure of the program to the public saying that it had caused "great harm to the nation."

To this end, the United State Justice Department opened an inquiry into how information about the program was leaked to the New York Times newspaper. Charles Schumer, the senior Democratic Senator from New York, expressed support for a leak investigation generally, but challenged the shift in focus from the Bush administration's

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policy to the person who disclosed the information to the newspaper. In this regard, Schumer said, "To simply divert this whole thing to just looking at the leaker and saying everything else is just fine is typical of this administration. There are differences between felons and whistleblowers, and we ought to wait 'til the investigation occurs to decide what happened." The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) echoed similar sentiments when it criticized the administration for diverting attention in its attack against whistleblowers. Anthony Romero, the ACLU Executive Director, said in a statement, "President Bush broke the law...But rather than focus on this constitutional crisis, Attorney General Gonzales is cracking down on critics of his friend and boss."

For its part, the Bush administration has maintained its view that the spying program is legal and that congressional leaders were told of its existence. However, senators from both the Republican and opposition Democrat parties have conveyed grave concern about the inappropriate, intrusive and possibly nonlegal nature of the monitoring program. As well, some congressional leaders have said that the full extent of the program was not, in fact, conveyed to them in intelligence briefings.

Another report by the New York Times on Jan. 1, 2006, asserted that the top deputy of then-Attorney General John Ashcroft refused to approve key parts of the clandestine spying operation in 2004. The report noted that James Comey had expressed concern about the legality of the program by the NSA and had, in fact, refused to extend it. Officials of the Bush administration then went to Ashcroft, who had been hospitalized for gallbladder surgery, to acquire his approval. The article did not specify if Ashcroft gave his approval as requested. Nevertheless, the response by Comey suggested that even within the Justice Department, there have been serious questions about the actual legal basis of such a spying operation.

In a related development in December 2005, a report on NBC news revealed that the military has monitored and collected intelligence on anti-war groups across the country.

The documents also showed that the Pentagon was conducting surveillance at protests and possibly monitoring Internet traffic. The Washington Post newspaper reported that the Pentagon had ordered a review of the military intelligence program in the aftermath of the NBC News report. The leaked Pentagon papers were originally obtained by William Arkin, a former Army intelligence officer. In an interview with Amy Goodman on the Pacifica Network on Dec. 15, 2005, Arkin said, "Well, I got the documents from military sources. It is an actual database in an Excel spreadsheet, and it took some doing on my part to clean it up and eliminate the duplicate incidents and put it in a form that was useful to begin to understand what is it that we have here, because it's by no means clear what it is that is here. However, it identifies specific incidents, all in the United States, as well as the source of those incidents, that is, the report issuer and the classification. And it's in that actual data about the report issuer that one can see the degree of Pentagon monitoring in the United States of not just things that go on inside military bases, but also things that go on in our communities, from particularly suspicious incidents associated with military recruiting stations, which as you know are located all over the United States in malls and in shop fronts, in office buildings, and this is sort of the thin edge of understanding, and therefore, a smaller number of incidents that are associated with anti-war and anti-military protests or planned protests throughout the United States."

On February 6, 2006, the United States Senate Judiciary Committee met to examine the legality of

President Bush's warrantless eavesdropping program. The hearings began on a rather rough note when the Attorney General did not take a sworn oath prior to giving testimony.

At the commencement of the hearings, the Senate Judiciary Chairman, Senator Arlen Specter (Republican of Pennsylvania), expressed skepticism about the legal nature of the clandestine spy program and called for review by a special federal court. Specter noted that federal law clearly has "a forceful and blanket prohibition against any electronic surveillance without a court order." Specter, as well as several Senators from both parties, argued against the contention by Attorney General Alberto Gonzales that based on the September 2001 authorization to use force in Afghanistan, the president had executive authority to order such secret surveillance, effectively bypassing Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) courts. Indeed, the ranking member of the committee, Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat of Vermont) noted that although he believed that al-Qaida terrorists should be monitored,

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President Bush chose to illegally wiretap Americans' conversations without safeguards to protect civil liberties, as mandated by the law.

On August 17, 2006, a federal judge ruled that the National Security Agency's domestic wiretapping program, authorized by President George W. Bush, was unconstitutional. The judge ordered that it be shut down. The ruling, which invoked the constitutional separation of powers and the Bill of Rights, functioned as the first judicial assessment of the controversial program. Notably, Judge Anna Diggs Taylor on the United States District Court in Detroit ruled that the program violated the Fourth Amendment as well as a law requiring warrants from a secret court for intelligence wiretaps within the United States.

The judge also rebuked the policy stating that the framers of the constitution "never intended to give the president unfettered control, particularly when his actions blatantly disregard the parameters clearly enumerated in the Bill of Rights." Republicans denounced the ruling as the efforts of a liberal judge. As well, the Bush administration said that it strongly disagreed with the ruling and intended to appeal it.

This constellation of developments highlights the growing tension between the Executive Branch of government and an increasingly defiant Legislative Branch, which is less willing to do the bidding of the Bush administration. The tension also illuminates the increasing antagonism between the impetus to protect the public from terrorism, while at the same time, protecting the civil liberties and other rights enshrined within the Constitution, and which form the fulcrum for the American nation state.

Note: See the subsection titled "Political Developments in 2006" below for further details unfolding as regards these matters.

Political Developments in 2006

Senate confirmation hearings commenced in January 2006 for President Bush's Supreme Court nominee, Samuel Alito. While conservatives lauded Bush's nominee as the replacement for retiring centrist Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, opponents expressed concern that Alito's confirmation would lead to a significant shift on the bench to the right.

A federal appeals court judge since 1990, Alito also served as the United States attorney for the state of New Jersey and also worked as an attorney within the Reagan administration. The American Bar Association assessed Alito as "well qualified" to sit on the nation's highest court, however, his lengthy career means that he will have to explain several of his rulings -- some of which opponents have branded as "extreme."

Notably, in a 1985 memo that he composed in anticipation of employment with the Reagan administration, he wrote that he was "particularly proud" of his contributions in cases where the government argued the Constitution did not protect a woman's right to an abortion. In another controversial statement, he said he was proud to prepare cases arguing that racial and ethnic quotas should be prohibited. In 1991, he dissented in a 2-1 decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. In that specific case, he took the position in support of a Pennsylvania law requiring women to inform their husbands before having an abortion. It was a law struck down by the Supreme Court in 1992. In 2003 case of *Doe v. Groody*, Alito took the dissenting viewpoint arguing that police officers had immunity in regard to the unauthorized strip search of a mother and her 10-year-old daughter in their home, even though the warrant did not name them. Also of note has been the fact that Alito expressed concern about Warren Court decisions in the areas of criminal procedure. He also was concerned about the Establishment Clause as expressed in his stance on *Child Evangelism Fellowship of N.J., Inc. v. Stafford Twp. Sch. Dist.* in 2004. In his opening statements, Democratic Senators, such as Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, expressed concern about Alito's stance on presidential powers. A lawsuit filed against Nixon administration attorney general John Mitchell, who had ordered wiretaps of antiwar activists in 1970, was the subject of a 1984 memo in which Alito suggested that the administration should craft its "absolute immunity" argument with care. This issue holds relevance in the wake of recent revelations about a domestic spying program authorized by President George W. Bush and carried out by the National Security Agency (NSA).

For their part, Republicans who hold a majority in the Senate expressed confidence that Alito would get a quick and smooth confirmation hearing, not unlike that of Chief Justice John Roberts in the fall of 2005. However, the political climate in Washington D.C., became increasingly heated in early 2006. Democrats were buoyed by Bush's low approval ratings (between 35 and 39 percent in early 2006 according to the Pew Institute); a spate of corruption scandals, including the fall of Tom DeLay from the position of Republican majority leader in the House of Representatives and the indictment of top aides in the White House, such as Lawrence Libby. There was also increasing criticism surrounding presidential power, manifested most clearly following revelations about the NSA clandestine surveillance program, allegations of secret CIA prisons in Europe, and the justification of torture as an appropriate methodology.

Despite Democratic opposition, however, President Bush was able to celebrate a political victory at the confirmation of Alito as a new justice for the Supreme Court. The selection of Alito occurred in the aftermath of the loud and vituperative opposition by right-wing religious supporters in regard to his earlier pick of Harriet Miers. Indeed, following several difficult months, which were marked by increasing opposition to the war in Iraq, corruption scandals and the mishandling of Hurricane Katrina, the president had been in search of some political success as he sought to repair his badly damaged political capital.

Despite Bush's success in getting his two Supreme Court Justices on the highest bench, his administration was faced with a number of challenges across the political landscape in early 2006.

From the arena of foreign policy to the sphere of domestic politics, there was further damage to the administration's credibility, exacerbated by poor public confidence on the performance of the government, as illustrated by prevailing low job approval ratings for President Bush. Congressional Republicans fared little better according to polling data, which showed Democrats likely to benefit from the spate of ethics scandals facing Congressional Republicans and their allies outside of government.

Fortunately for the Bush administration, it did not have to face another re-election campaign. However, left to be seen was whether or not Congressional Republicans would suffer at the polls in the 2006 mid-term elections to be held in nine months.

Following is a discussion of some of the latest issues facing the Bush administration and Congressional Republicans.

First, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) insider claimed that the government used flawed data to craft its case for war in Iraq.

Paul Pillar, the CIA national intelligence office for the Middle East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, asserted that the Bush administration used the public's fears of terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to falsely create "the notion of an alliance" between the al-Qaida terrorist network with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, even though there was no substantial evidence to support such a stance.

In an article in the journal, *Foreign Affairs*, Pillar wrote, "the administration wanted to hitch the Iraq expedition to the 'war on terror' and the threat the American public feared most, thereby capitalizing on the country's militant post-9/11 mood." The article titled, "Intelligence, Policy and the War in Iraq" made the case that the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq first and later improperly selected data to construct the public case for war. To this end, he said that the administration indulged in "cherry-picking" of intelligence, rather than "using the intelligence community's own analytic judgments." In his piece, Pillar also charged that the administration went to war without consideration of any of the strategic-level intelligence assessments regarding Iraq. As a result, it was ill-equipped to deal with the post-war scenario on the ground. While these arguments have been made before by several critics of the Iraq war, Pillar's contention is one of the first attacks by a high-ranking insider from within the intelligence community.

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For its part, the White House did not offer any specific reaction to these charges about the selective use of intelligence on Iraq.

Second, legal records revealed that "Scooter" Libby claimed that he had been authorized by his superiors to leak classified information about Iraq in mid-2003, for the purpose of defending the Bush administration's case for war.

Libby apparently told a federal grand jury that he disclosed information from a classified National Intelligence Estimate under instruction from his "superiors," and for the purpose of justifying the invasion of Iraq. Libby's grand jury testimony was contained in court papers filed in connection with his aforementioned indictments.

In an article published by the National Journal, Murray Waas explained that during the same period when Vice President Cheney and his Chief of Staff at the time [Libby] had been personally informed that there was no credibility to the claim that Saddam Hussein had attempted to procure uranium from Niger, Libby and other senior administration officials were ensconced in an effort to discredit Ambassador Joseph Wilson who had reached the same conclusion as the CIA assessment. CIA analysts composed a classified memorandum titled, "In Response to Your Questions for Our Current Assessment and Additional Details on Iraq's Alleged Pursuits of Uranium From Abroad," in which they stated the following: "We no longer believe there is sufficient credible information to conclude that Iraq pursued uranium from abroad." Despite the clear intersection of the findings by both the CIA and Wilson, a coordinated campaign to discredit Wilson was apparently carried out from within the White House, leading to the disclosure of the identity of Wilson's wife as an undercover CIA officer (discussed above).

The subsequent indictment of Libby noted that he had been informed of Valerie Plame Wilson's undercover work on weapons of mass destruction by the Vice President. The indictment read, "Libby was advised by the Vice President of the United States that Wilson's wife worked at the Central Intelligence Agency in the Counter-Proliferation Division. Libby understood that the Vice President had learned this information from the CIA." While it would not have been illegal for the Vice President to discuss the covert nature of Valerie Plame Wilson's status among colleagues with security clearances, the possible involvement of Cheney in the leaking of any classified information has raised questions in Washington.

Indeed, Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, characterized the possible leak of intelligence as "inappropriate" while Senator George Allen, Republican of Virginia, cautioned that no one should be releasing classified information. For its part, the White House declined to comment on the matter.

Third, the aforementioned surveillance program carried out by the National Security Agency (NSA) was expected to take center stage in mid-February 2006 as the Senate Intelligence Committee was scheduled to vote to convene hearings into the matter. The controversial spying program has been heralded by the Bush administration as a necessary means to fight terrorism. A week earlier, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and asserted that the President had simply exercised his broad executive powers at a time of war, which essentially dispensed with the need to acquire warrants via Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) courts. During the Judiciary Committee hearings, Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, argued against the contention by Attorney General Gonzales that based on the September 2001 authorization to use force in Afghanistan, the president had executive authority to order such secret surveillance, effectively by-passing FISA courts. Indeed, the ranking member of the committee, Senator Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, noted that although he believed al-Qaida terrorists should be monitored, President Bush chose to illegally wiretap Americans' conversations without safeguards to protect civil liberties as mandated by the law. Earlier, United States District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, along with her predecessor, Judge Royce Lamberth, both expressed strong reservations about the legality of the clandestine surveillance program.

Fourth, the domestic agenda offered little reassurance to the embattled White House. On February 10, 2006, former head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Michael Brown, said that he had warned top officials within the White House that Hurricane Katrina would be "our worst nightmare." In his testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Brown also claimed that he had informed the White House of the levee failures and massive flooding in New Orleans on the day the devastating hurricane roared

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ashore. His assertions contradicted the **stated** position of the Bush administration that it was unaware of the severe damage caused by Katrina until well after hurricane had passed. Brown was unable to explain to the Senate committee why his communication with the White House did not garner responsive feedback.

A few days after Brown's testimony, an investigation concluded that both the White House and Michael Chertoff, the Homeland Security head, failed to act decisively when Hurricane Katrina struck. The investigation was aimed at looking into the slow pace of relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina. While then-FEMA director, Brown, has been at the forefront of the attacks against the government's response to the devastating hurricane, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report raised questions about the lack of leadership exercised by Homeland Security head, Chertoff. Notably, the report said that Chertoff should have classified Katrina as a catastrophic disaster -- a move that may have well helped spur more rapid response by relief agencies. The GAO charged that the White House possessed no clear chain of command and placed the blame squarely at the feet of President Bush for failing to designate one specific official to coordinate the decision-making associated with the disaster.

For his part, President Bush said in 2005 that he accepted responsibility for the government's poor response. Nevertheless, as the matter of Katrina has returned to the political landscape, the administration is moving toward a more defensive position. On February 13, 2006, Homeland Security Adviser to the White House, Frances Fragos Townsend, said: "I reject outright the suggestion that President Bush was anything less than fully involved."

Fifth, accusations by Democrats that the Republican leadership in Washington has been enmeshed in a "culture of corruption" appeared to have gained momentum at a time when the media began to further explore the closeness of the connections between Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff and the Bush administration, including President Bush himself. Abramoff was indicted on various corruption charges in 2005 and pled guilty in early 2006 to crimes including conspiracy, tax evasion, wire fraud and mail fraud. An article in the Associated Press **stated** that Abramoff and his associates had approximately 200 connections of some sort with White House contacts during Bush's first year in office. Indeed, there were reports that Abramoff's own personal assistant became a senior adviser to **top** Bush advisor, Karl Rove. White House spokesman Scott McClellan dismissed the Bush-Abramoff relationship as precisely non-existent, even going so far as to say, "The president does not know him, nor does the president recall ever meeting him." Indeed, Bush told reporters that he did not know Abramoff. Bush said, "I've never sat down with him and had a discussion with the guy." But such assertions have shown themselves to contradict certain facts and have also suggested that Bush and his aides may have downplayed the degree of closeness between the White House and the disgraced lobbyist.

Notably, photographs by Time and the Washingtonian clearly depicted President Bush with the Republican lobbyist, while Abramoff's own emails also indicated a high level of access for his associates to the White House. Abramoff has also recounted conversations shared with Bush, including good-humored discussions about their children. The revelations have reinforced growing questions of the administration's credibility and have led to calls for greater disclosure into the nature of the relationship between Abramoff and the White House.

It should be noted that the revelations about the staff of Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic Senate Leader, having had some contact with Abramoff has garnered less attention. Still, a Washington Post article in February 2006 **stated** that Reid wrote at least four letters helpful to native tribes represented by Abramoff, and Reid's staff apparently met with the lobbyist's team about possible legislation. For his part, Reid has said that he never met Abramoff personally. In a news conference, he insisted that his conscience was clear and redirected his attack to the Republicans saying, "This is a Republican scandal and they can try to spin-doctor it." Whether or not the public will actually view the Abramoff connections as a problem for Republicans rather than politicians collectively was yet unknown.

Sixth, Congressional Republicans attempted to fend off the "culture of corruption" by appointing John Boehner to the position of Majority Leader in the House in February 2006. Boehner, an eight-term congressman from Ohio won over Roy Blunt of Missouri in a 122-109 vote on the second ballot.

Positioning himself as the reform-minded candidate, he capitalized on rising anxieties about corruption within the party as his fellow Republicans voted to replace Tom DeLay, who has been faced with money-laundering charges in Texas and, as a result, was forced to give up his leadership role in the House of Representatives. Blunt, as part of DeLay's leadership team, has enjoyed strong ties with Washington's K Street [lobbyist] community. In contrast, Boehner has presented himself as an outsider to this cadre of powerful Washington power-brokers. Still, in the past, some of Boehners choices raised eyebrows, such as the infamous act of passing out checks from tobacco lobbyists on the House floor. For his part, DeLay announced in early 2006 that he would not reclaim the House majority leader post, although he said he did intend on seeking re-election in his Sargarland, Texas district. He also maintained the view that he was innocent of all charges and was the victim of an overly-zealous prosecutor. DeLay meanwhile landed a seat on the House committee that oversees justice issues as well as a seat on the Appropriations Committee. Bill Burton, spokesman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, reacted to these appointments saying, "Allowing Tom DeLay to sit on a committee in charge of giving out money is like putting Michael Brown back in charge of FEMA — Republicans in Congress just can't seem to resist standing by their man."

Meanwhile, in a rather strange turn of events, Vice-President, Dick Cheney accidentally shot and injured a man during a quail hunting trip in Texas on February 11, 2006. The victim, Harry Whittington, was taken to Corpus Christi Memorial Hospital. There, he was reported to be in stable condition. On February 14, 2006, however, it was reported that Whittington was moved to an intensive care following a mild heart attack. The local sheriff's department was investigating the incident, which did not take on scandal proportions, but managed to evoke questions when the White House failed to immediately disclose the incident. The matter was another twist in a rather negative stream of events for the Republicans in both the executive and legislative branches of government. If and how the Republicans can move the news cycle in a more advantageous direction was yet to be seen.

A controversial deal giving an Arab company control over six ports in the United States came under fire in mid-February 2006. In the deal, Dubai Ports World -- a company from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) -- would takeover control of ports in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans and Miami.

Because banking institutions in the UAE were linked with the transmission of terrorist funding, and because two of the Sept. 11, 2001 hijackers were from the UAE, some lawmakers in the United States said the deal would make the United States more vulnerable to terrorism. Indeed, critics of the deal have detailed the UAE's record as an operational and financial base for the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorists. As well, the report by the independent commission investigating the 2001 attacks noted that the government had explored possible links between the officials from the UAE and notorious al-Qaida leader, Osama bin Laden. Critics have also pointed to the dubious distinction of the UAE being one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan prior to its overthrow in 2001. These associations notwithstanding, some lawmakers were opposed to the notion of "outsourcing" such a sensitive enterprise as ports authority to any foreign entity whatsoever.

Such opposition was bipartisan ranging from both Democratic Senators from New York, Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton, to Bill Frist, the Republican Senate Leader from Tennessee. Republican Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert of Illinois also objected. Frist said he would move forward with legislation to block the deal if the Bush administration did not delay it.

The White House, however, has steadfastly defended the deal with President George W. Bush threatening to veto any law blocking the deal. The administration claimed that counterterrorism experts had looked into the arrangement and decided there was no threat of national security at stake. The administration also stated that the UAE should be regarded as an ally in the war against terrorism. The White House further noted that control of the ports by the UAE should be treated no differently from a similar deal with any foreign country, much in the same way as there were no objections to British control of United States ports. A British company had earlier been responsible for the same functions.

Still, problems for the administration abounded when it was revealed that the White House waited too long before briefing the Congress about the deal, and later, when the President claimed he was unaware of the sale of the port authority until after it had been approved. With the possibility of a presidential veto looming, Democrat Senator Bob

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Menendez of New Jersey urged colleagues to force Bush to exercise his first veto saying, "We should really test the resolve of the president on this one."

By late-February 2006, as a political firestorm intensified over the matter, the White House got a reprieve when Dubai Ports World offered to submit to a second review of potential security risks associated with the takeover of operations at the six United States ports. Documents asking for a 45-day investigation of plans to administer the shipping terminals were sent to the White House. Included in the offer was a pledge that during the investigatory period, a London-based British citizen would have authority over the company's operations. As well, the offer included the commitment that its chief security officer in the United States would be an American. The company reserved the right to sue, however, if the results of the second review did not match up with the previous favorable findings.

Acceptance by the Bush administration of a second review decreased the likelihood that Republican lawmakers would introduce legislation to either delay or block the deal. Indeed, Republican Representative Peter King of New York, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said, "If it is what it appears to be, to me there's no need at this time to go forward with emergency legislation. Obviously we have to hold it in reserve and see what happens." As well, Senator Frist shifted his hard-line opposition saying, "We all trust the president. We are behind the president 100 percent and believe his decision is, in all likelihood, absolutely the right one. But until we have the opportunity to ask the same questions so that we can go back to our constituents and have that same comfort level, we're just asking for a pause."

On the other side of the partisan aisle, Democrats responded to the new mood by Frist by calling him a "flip flopper" for changing his stance on the issue. Meanwhile, Democratic Senator Schumer of New York welcomed the willingness of Dubai Ports World to submit to further review but cautioned that "the devil is in the details." He also said that Congress should be afforded the opportunity to approve or reject the administration's decision saying, "If the report is completed and kept secret and only given to the president, who has already come out for the deal, it will not reassure Americans."

The reprieve represented by the 45 day delay, however, was of limited significance after Republican Senator Susan Collins of Maine, the Chair of the Homeland Security Committee, released an unclassified portion of a Coast Guard assessment during a congressional hearing on the port takeover. The assessment was made during the United States government's review of the transaction and warned that numerous "intelligence gaps" prevented a determination of potential terrorism risks involved if Dubai Ports World took over administration of the six ports at stake. The intelligence gaps involved questions about the security of the port operations, the background of the company's employees, and foreign influence on their actual operations.

The Senate Homeland Security committee was apparently told that the Coast Guard's concerns had been allayed during a review by a panel that had looked into some national security concerns.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said, "There was a broader intelligence community assessment done as part of the review that addressed such questions, and there were no unresolved national security issues at the end of the process." Also at the White House, John Negroponte, the director of national intelligence, said that he "strongly recommended" going forward with the deal. President George W. Bush said, "The deal wouldn't go forward if we were concerned about the security for the United States of America."

Notably, this particular deal was approved in January 2006. Approval for such a transaction has to be given by the Committee on Foreign Investments in the United States (CFIUS), which falls under the aegis of the Treasury Department. Interestingly, John Snow, the Treasury Secretary, functioned as the chairman of the CSX rail firm, which sold its own international port operations to Dubai Ports World in 2004 -- a year after Snow left that firm to join the Bush administration. The connection has raised further questions about the manner in which approval for the deal was garnered. By way of example, Senator Schumer noted, "The more you look at this deal, the more the deal is called into question."

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For her part, Senator Collins expressed dismay regarding the entire situation saying, "I am truly troubled by the review process that was followed with respect to this purchase. The more I learn, the more questions are raised." She sternly noted that security concerns should have triggered a broader, 45-day security review of the merger in the first place when concerns were raised, and not at this late stage. She introduced resolution condemning the handling of the matter by the CFIUS, urging the 45-day review, and directing CFIUS to inform legislators of its findings prior to the completion of the deal with Dubai Ports World.

Meanwhile, critics have echoed Collins' concerns, observing that the process has been conducted in a "backward" manner -- giving approval to the deal first and conducting the investigation after the fact.

They have said that the very existence of "intelligence gaps" should have triggered a 45-day national security review in the first place. According to a 1993 congressional measure, an extensive review is mandated in transactions with companies that are owned by foreign governments and where such a transaction "could affect the national security of the United States." Moreover, critics have suggested that the sudden appetite for the 45-day investigation was really a political strategy by the White House aimed at quelling the massive public outcry against the deal. Still others have charged that judging by Frist's newly-found confidence in the sale of the port authority, the entire 45-day investigation was bound to be a farce of sorts.

They expressed skepticism that a new investigation would render different or probing results.

In other developments, Representative Frank LoBiondo, a Republican from New Jersey, promised to bring forth legislation requiring United States citizenship of port security officials. It was the type of measure popular with participants at a workers rally at the Port Newark Container Terminal who expressed strong opposition for foreign control over its ports in the wake of the terror attacks of 2001. One of the leaders of the Teamsters Union, Ron Carver, who was in attendance noted, "There is no reason to allow the UAE to play a (security) role."

Both the state of New Jersey and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey have filed respective lawsuits seeking to block the deal.

Also in February 2006, violence in Iraq intensified following attacks on a sacred Shi'a mosque. The level of violence sparked speculation about civil war in that country and contributed to the downward spiral in support on the domestic scene. Meanwhile, congressional hearings on the clandestine NSA surveillance program and on the controversial Patriot Act were ongoing. Amidst these developments, a CBS poll of February 28, 2006 showed President Bush's approval ratings at an all-time low of 34 percent, but still above Vice President's approval of 18 percent. Other polls taken between February and March by CNN/USA Today/Gallup, Ipsos, and NBC/Wall Street Journal all showed similarly low approval ratings for the president in the 30s.

In March 2006, Democrat Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin proposed the censuring of President George W. Bush for authorizing a clandestine and possibly illegal domestic spying program. In an interview with the Associated Press, Feingold said, "The president has broken the law and, in some way, he must be held accountable." It was a view shared by several legal scholars who have pointed to violations of the Fourth Amendment and FISA. After analysis of constitutional and statutory considerations, a bipartisan group of legal experts, which included Judge William Sessions (former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation under President Ronald Reagan), concluded that the warrantless electronic surveillance of persons within the United States fails to identify any plausible legal authority for such actions. For his part, Bush has claimed his inherent authority as commander-in-chief, as well as the 2001 congressional "use of force" authorization, gives him the power to authorize such surveillance.

The five-page censure resolution was scheduled to be introduced on March 13, 2006. It stated that President Bush violated the law and "repeatedly misled the public" when he set up the secret domestic spying program within the National Security Agency in the months following the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Explaining his rationale for seeking to censure the president, Feingold said, "Congress has to reassert our system of government,

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and the cleanest and the most efficient way to do that is to censure the president. And, hopefully, he will acknowledge that he did something wrong."

The outspoken Wisconsin Democrat, who has increasingly been mentioned as a possible presidential contender in 2008, said he had not discussed the censure with other senators. Nevertheless, he noted that the resolution made sense based on bipartisan criticism leveled at Bush with regard to the matter. He also asserted that the president's actions were "in the strike zone" of being an impeachable offense. Feingold, a passionate critic of the Bush administration, was also the only senator to vote against the USA Patriot Act, which expanded the government's surveillance and prosecutorial powers following 2001. He also voted against the 2002 resolution authorizing Bush to use force in Iraq. In addition, Feingold was the first senator to urge a withdrawal timetable for United States troops in Iraq.

The White House did not offer an immediate response following news of Feingold's censure move. Senate Majority Leader, Republican Bill Frist of Tennessee, characterized the proposal as "a crazy political move" and warned it could weaken the United States during wartime. In an appearance on ABC's program, "This Week," Frist said he hoped al-Qaida and other enemies of the United States were not listening to the infighting since it could send the message that there was a lack of support for the commander-in-chief. Likewise, Republican Senator John Warner of Virginia said on CNN's "Late Edition" that Feingold's move was "political grandstanding" intended to weaken the president.

Political grandstanding aside, Feingold's censure measure came a day before the release of a new Gallup poll showing a continued lack of popular support for the president. His 36 percent approval rating -- a new low among all Gallup polls of Bush -- fell among the range of several other recent polls showing Bush with 34 percent to 38 percent of support. Whether or not Bush's exceptionally low approval ratings would translate into support for Feingold's move to censure remains unknown.

Historically, a censure resolution has been used only once in United States history. In 1834, President Andrew Jackson was censured by the Senate after he removed the country's funds from a bank in opposition to the will of the Whig Party, which held control over the Senate. While, impeachment is the only constitutional punishment for a president, the House and Senate can punish membership through the use of censure. Moves toward impeachment, however, are not off the proverbial table. In the House of Representatives, Democratic Representative John Conyers of Michigan was pushing forth legislation that would explore possible grounds for impeachment of the president. Like Feingold's censure measure, his efforts were expected to be met with resistance in the Republican-controlled Congress.

Also in March 2006, the United States Senate considered anti-immigration legislation, which had been earlier passed by the House of Representatives. Moving away from the House's version of the bill, which criminalized humanitarian assistance by groups and individuals to illegal immigrants, the Senate Judiciary Committee adopted an amendment by Democratic Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, which would protect church and other charitable groups, as well as individuals, from criminal prosecution for providing food, shelter, counseling or medical care to illegal immigrants. Affirmative votes in the committee by Democrats and a smattering of Republicans also cleared the way for many illegal (also known as "undocumented") immigrants to eventually seek citizenship in the United States. The Judiciary Committee also voted to substantially increase the number of Border Patrol Agents systematically through 2011.

The House version of the bill would make being an undocumented immigrant a felony. It would also criminalize non-emergency aid or assistance by groups or individuals, and it proposed the construction of a 700-mile wall along the 2,000 mile United States-Mexican border. These measures drew the ire of human rights and immigrant rights groups and spurred mass protests in major cities across the country. Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza declared her opposition to the House version of the bill saying, "We will not accept enforcement-only approaches." Jorge Medina, a Honduran immigrant expressed his outrage saying, "This is not about legislation any more. This is about feelings now. We are Americans, too. We are not from Mars and we are not from the moon." Also among the demonstrators were members of the clergy -- with many of them wearing handcuffs to protest the House's action of criminalizing humanitarian assistance. Democratic Senator, Hillary

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Clinton of New York, railed vehemently against the hardline provisions passed in the House saying that version would criminalize "even Jesus."

The legislative developments in the Senate came even as human rights and immigration rights activists demonstrated outside the Capitol. Still at issue was the issue of a "guest worker" program advocated by President Bush. For his part, Bush warned critics of his "guest worker" program that they were stoking anti-immigrant sentiment. To this end, he said, "No one should play on people's fears or try to pit neighbors against each other. No one should pretend that immigrants are threats to America's identity because immigrants have shaped America's identity." On this issue, Bush had unlikely allies ranging from former Republican presidential rival, Senator John McCain of Arizona, who joined with Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy in crafting an alternate bill, which would

allow illegal immigrants to become eligible for permanent residency after working for six years.

Speaking at talks in Cancun with the leaders of Mexico and Canada, Bush explained that he wanted to push forward with the idea of a comprehensive immigration bill. In this regard, and amidst the growing immigration storm in the United States, he explained, "By comprehensive, I mean not only border security - a bill that has border security in it, a bill that has interior enforcement in it, but a bill that has a worker permit program in it." It was a perspective that differed sharply from the House version of the immigration bill that already was passed,

and one that had more in common with the Senate versions championed by moderate legislators in the upper chamber.

On the eve of a two-week spring recess, a compromise bill to reform immigration law failed to pass the Senate on April 7, 2006. The bill at stake would have both improved enforcement of border, and provided a pathway for some illegal immigrants to gain normalized status and eventually seek citizenship. Among some Republicans, however, the bill was viewed as a proposition for amnesty, which would ultimately reward immigrants who illegally enter the United States.

The failure of the legislation to pass came after leaders from both the Republican and Democratic Party announced that they had reached a deal that they expected to be well-received across party lines. Differences over immigration among Senators, however, bubbled back up to the surface and essentially defeated the bill, which fell 22 votes short of the 60 votes required to withstand procedural obstacles. The failure to pass the compromise bill in the Senate has essentially stymied efforts to pass immigration reform legislation during the 2006 election year. Left unknown was whether or not the matter would be revisited anytime soon. Regardless, mass protests were planned for April 10, 2006 by immigration advocates seeking humane treatment for undocumented workers in the United States.

In a separate political development, Tom Delay, the former majority leader in the United States House of Representatives, announced in April 2006 that he would be resigning from politics. Delay, one of the most powerful Republicans in office, had earlier stepped down from his leadership post amidst charges of misuse of campaign funds. Compounding his legal -- and political -- predicament was the revelation that Delay's former top aide also admitted conspiring with lobbyist Jack Abramoff to corrupt public officials.

Meanwhile, on April 6, 2006, it was revealed that Vice President Dick Cheney's former top aide, I. Lewis Libby, told prosecutors that President George W. Bush authorized the leak of intelligence information about Iraq, which was linked with the disclosure of the identity of a clandestine operative for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Valerie Plame Wilson.

References in court papers filed by by prosecutor, Patrick Fitzgerald who indicted Libby on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, suggested that President Bush and Vice President Cheney placed Libby in the position of passing on sensitive information to reporters regarding pre-war intelligence about Iraq. Supporters of the administration responded by saying that if this were true, then the president had the authority to do so. Regardless of the legality of the matter, leaking such information would contradict the stated position of the president on several occasions. Thus, it left some analysts speculating about the potentially dangerous political fallout.

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Political foes, such as Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean, responded by accusing the president of revealing classified information in order to advance his own agenda. He said, "The fact that the president was willing to reveal classified information for political gain and put the interests of his political party ahead of Americas security shows that he can no longer be trusted to keep America safe."

House Representative Jane Harman, the senior Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, said, "If the disclosure is true, it's breathtaking. The president is revealed as the leaker-in-chief." For its part, the White House remained silent on the matter one day later.

Six retired generals in the United States spoke out against Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in mid-April 2006. Included among those voicing opposition to Rumsfeld's leadership were retired Army generals Wesley Clark, Charles H Swannack Jr., John Riggs, John Batiste and Paul Eaton. In addition, retired Marine generals Anthony Zinni and Gregory Newbold both also voiced their concern over Rumsfeld's track record.

During a media interview, former NATO Supreme Commander (Ret.) Gen.Wesley Clark backed the clamor calling for Rumsfeld to resign. "I believe secretary Rumsfeld hasn't done an adequate job," said Clark, who ran for the Democrat presidential nomination in 2004. "He should go." Clark continued by stating that Rumsfeld had lost the confidence of some officers in the military -- specifically, those needing "somebody in the military chain of command who will listen." Clark also weighed in on U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, saying that both Cheney and Rumsfeld were instrumental in pushing the country into war with Iraq although there was "no connection with the war on terror".

Ex-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, offered the counterpoint by defending Rumsfeld and criticizing the calls for his resignation. Said Myers, "My whole perception of this is it's bad for the military, and for military relations, and it's very bad for the country." He also characterized the vocal criticism by the six retired generals as "inappropriate."

The criticism by these top retired generals apparently fell on deaf ears within the White House. Notably President George W. Bush reaffirmed his confidence in Rumsfeld's "energetic and steady leadership." And for his part, Rumsfeld also dismissed suggestions that he should resign.

On May 8, 2006, following the resignation of Central Intelligence Agency chief Porter Goss, United States President George W. Bush appointed Air Force General Michael Hayden to lead the intelligence agency. Hayden's apparent involvement in the controversial domestic spying program as well as his military background drew bipartisan criticism and evoked questions about whether or not his nomination would be easily confirmed.

The immigration debate heated up in the United States in the spring of 2006, immigrant advocates joined together for "Un Dia Sin Inmigrantes" or "A Day Without Immigrants." May 1, 2006 was marked by massive rallies, boycotts of work, school and commercial activity, as well as church services, candlelight vigils, human chains, voter registration drives, and other measures aimed at bringing attention to immigrants rights and contributions to United States society.

While some Americans have expressed anger at the rights and recognition demanded by illegal immigrants -- such as amnesty for illegal entry into the country and a path to citizenship -- some businesses decided to support illegal immigrants by closing their businesses. Many companies, such as Tyson Foods and Gallo Wines, made the decision to close up shop for the day, partly to show support, and also because their operations were unable to function without the presence of immigrant laborers.

Regardless of whether or not "Un Dia Sin Inmigrantes" or "A Day Without Immigrants" will have the kind of impact activists were hoping for was yet to be seen. Left unknown was also the question of whether or not punitive anti-immigration legislation recently passed the House of Representatives would stand in the face of such strong grass roots opposition. The fate of more moderate legislation authored in the Senate, which aimed to increase protection of the borders while also addressing immigrant integration, was likewise unknown.

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Nevertheless, the debate about immigration in American globalized society was now on the table. For many observers, the issue was reminiscent of controversial civil rights activism decades earlier. Such activism gave rise to a massive cultural shift in favor of identity movements, as well as civil right legislation and human rights policies.

In May 2006, a Washington Post poll showed President George W. Bush with an approval rating of 33 percent. A Wall Street Journal/Harris poll logged the president at an historic nadir of 29 percent during the same month. First Lady Laura Bush said that she did not believe the polls, while Bush's advisor, Karl Rove, attributed the low poll numbers to the public's immense dissatisfaction with the ongoing war in Iraq. However, discontent among Bush's conservative base on the issue of immigration may also have factored into the scenario.

As well, revelations involving phone records of Americans may have spurred even further dissatisfaction.

On the latter matter, it was reported in the national daily newspaper, USA Today, that AT&T, Verizon and BellSouth turned over records of tens of millions of their customers' phone calls to the National Security Agency (NSA) soon after the 2001 terrorist attacks. It was alleged that this NSA program was building a data base of all calls made within the country. President Bush sought to allay the fears that the NSA was carrying out a major dragnet and said, "We are not mining or trolling through the personal lives of innocent Americans." Instead, he argued that the government was simply seeking to protect Americans from terrorism while at the same time protecting privacy rights.

Nevertheless, Senator Patrick Leahy, the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee expressed shock about the revelation saying, "It is our government, it's not one party's government. It's America's government. Those entrusted with great power have a duty to answer to Americans what they are doing." Such sentiment appeared to be bipartisan in the Senate with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina saying, "The idea of collecting millions or thousands of phone numbers, how does that fit into following the enemy?" Meanwhile, the Republican Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, said he would call on the telephone companies to appear before the committee to respond to such concerns. But allies of the Bush administration, such as Republican Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, defended the program saying, "I don't think this action is nearly as troublesome as being made out here, because they are not tapping our phones."

Presumably, he was making a comparison with the NSA's other program of warrantless domestic surveillance.

On May 30, 2006, Henry "Hank" Paulson, the chairman of investment bank Goldman Sachs, was nominated to the position of United States Treasury Secretary. His nomination came at the same time that John Snow announced that he was resigning from the position after three years of being in that job. In other news, General Michael Hayden was sworn in as the new head of the CIA following the unexpected resignation of Porter Goss. In June 2006, Transport Secretary Norman Mineta resigned.

As noted above, in July 2006, Vice President Dick Cheney was among 13 White House officials listed in a civil lawsuit regarding the aforementioned case involving the identity of a covert Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative. Other officials named in the lawsuit included presidential adviser, Karl Rove, and former aide to Cheney, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby. Rove had earlier escaped indictment by federal prosecutors in the case regarding the disclosure of the identity of former CIA operative, Valerie Plame Wilson.

For her part, Plame Wilson argued that the White House attempted to destroy her career in the CIA as punishment for the criticisms levied by her husband, Ambassador Joseph Wilson, about the Bush administration's case for going to war in Iraq (discussed above). The lawsuit brought by Valerie Plame Wilson and Joseph Wilson accused officials of putting their lives at risk and stated, "This lawsuit concerns the intentional and malicious exposure by senior officials of the federal government of [Ms. Plame], whose job it was to gather intelligence to make the nation safer and who risked her life for her country."

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In August 2006, as noted above, the NSA program of domestic spying returned to the public purview when a federal judge ruled that it was unconstitutional and had to be immediately halted. The ruling came after the American Civil Liberties Association (ACLU) brought the case before the courts.

On the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks, ceremonies marking the tragic events took place in the United States. As the United States began these commemoration ceremonies, a video was broadcast of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy leader of the al-Qaida network responsible for the 2001 terrorist attacks, calling on Muslims in the world to continue to resist American power. In the videotaped address, he also warned that al-Qaida intended to target Israel and the leadership of Arab countries in the near future.

A day after the anniversary of the 2001 terror attacks, Syrian authorities thwarted an attempted terrorist attack against the United States embassy in Damascus on September 12, 2006. While a Syrian security guard was shot by the attackers, there were no other casualties. Syrian authorities then shot dead those responsible. The scenario could easily have ended tragically since it was revealed that a car packed with explosives was found in close proximity to the embassy but was never detonated. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice thanked Syrian authorities for their efforts in handling the situation.

Meanwhile, on September 6, 2006, United States (U.S.) President George W. Bush acknowledged the existence of secret Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) prisons (discussed above).

The existence of such prisons, said to be located in Europe, as well as the use of the controversial practice of "extraordinary rendition" (i.e. transporting terror suspects to certain locations for interrogation purposes), garnered much criticism from legal scholars as well as human rights advocates in recent times.

For his part, Bush, in finally admitting that such a practice has indeed ensued, argued that it was an essential tool in the war on terror. He also said that those in CIA custody were treated humanely. In his remarks, Bush additionally noted that key terrorist suspects, including

the alleged mastermind of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, have been moved from CIA custody and taken to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, ahead of trial. Also noteworthy was the fact that Bush said that he would ask Congress to pass laws making clear the rules of engagement regarding the war on terror.

Across the Atlantic, members of the European Parliament were reacting to President Bush's acknowledgement by demanding the truth about the apparent secret CIA prison camps on European terrain.

For some time, European governments had denied that such facilities exist. However, with confirmation from the United States to the contrary, it was likely that the existing investigation into the matter would be invigorated. Reflecting the views of many European parliamentarians, Wolfgang Kreissl-Doerfler of Germany said, "The location of these prison camps must be made public. We need to know if there has been any complicity in illegal acts by governments of EU [European Union] countries or states seeking EU membership."

In a related development, in mid-September 2006, Spain's Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos acknowledged that his country may have been a stopover for controversial and secret CIA flights. In testimony before European parliamentarians investigating claims that the CIA established secret prisons or "black sites" where terrorism suspects were held, Moratinos said that the United States led Spain to believe that there was nothing untoward about the flights stopping in Spain, and certainly no secret passengers. At issue were 60 flights stopping at Palma de Mallorca and Tenerife.

The admission about secret CIA prisons came on the heels of an announcement that the United States Pentagon was issuing new guidelines for the treatment of military detainees, essentially bringing them in line with mandated provisions of the Geneva Convention. In the past, the Bush administration has argued that detainees were unlawful

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combatants undeserving of protections under the Geneva Convention. As well, it has asserted that certain provisions within the Geneva Convention were unclear -- an argument disputed by experts on international jurisprudence who have argued that the Geneva Conventions are intended to protect soldiers from all countries.

Regardless, it was believed that a ruling in June 2006 by the United States Supreme Court may have spurred these moves by the Bush administration. In that [Hamdan] case, the country's highest court ruled that (1) only Congress had the right to authorize military commissions at Guantanamo and not the president;

(2) such commissions required higher standards of legal safeguards; and (3) the relevance of the Geneva Convention remained in tact. Some analysts suggested that in the wake of that ruling, the Bush administration was now trying to retroactively set forth legal protections for somewhat modified procedures of what was already in practice.

There was also the prevailing belief that upcoming congressional elections had also motivated the moves by the Bush administration. With public support for the Republican Party at an all-time low, the Bush administration and its allies in Congress were hoping to hold on to their lock on power by advancing the war on terror.

That objective may have been somewhat thwarted when former United States Secretary of State Colin Powell and three respected Republican Senators on the Armed Services Committee -- John Warner of Virginia, John McCain of Arizona and Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, defected from President George W. Bush's proposal on military commissions.

On September 14, 2006, the Senators joined with Democrats to pass an alternative bill.

At issue was Bush's push for legislation (intimated above) authorizing the establishment of military commissions at Guantanamo Bay to try foreign terrorism suspects. The move was made in the wake of the (aforementioned) Supreme Court ruling against the Bush administration, saying that it did not have the authority to craft new standards of justice and warned that its current system of trials contravened against the Geneva Conventions.

Opponents of the Bush proposal have said that it would (1) redefine the parameters of the Geneva Conventions, (2) compromise the country's global reputation and moral authority, (3) invite other countries to similarly reinterpret the global standards of the Geneva Conventions, and (3) ultimately place United States soldiers at risk of torture by other regimes with differing interpretations of international protocols.

By September 22, 2006, the Bush administration was able to forge a deal with rebelling Republican Senators on the matter. In the new agreement, the prohibition of torture of suspects, as well as parameters for treatment, would be spelled out in the domestic War Crimes Act. This provision contrasts with Bush's original demand that would redefine the Geneva Conventions. The new agreement would allow the Bush administration to resume military tribunals, which were suspended since the time of the aforementioned Supreme Court ruling. However, a concession by the Bush administration meant that evidence, including some classified material, would be more readily shared at these tribunals. At the same time, stringent regulations would guard against the acquisition of evidence via torture.

The Path to Elections 2006:

The "Bush" Effect

President George W. Bush won re-election in 2004 and fellow Republicans have had clear control of both houses of Congress for some time. But since the 2004 election, disenchantment with both Bush and the Republicans in Congress has grown increasingly among the American public, as illustrated by ever-devolving approval ratings for both. Although Bush is not running for re-election, the closeness of the White House to the Republicans in Congress means that there could be a "Bush" effect on Republicans in vulnerable congressional districts and states. Indeed, even as polling data showed that Bush's popularity was on a downward spiral, generic polling data

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in the spring of 2006 showed that Democrats held more support than Republicans ahead of the mid-term elections of 2006.

Problems for Republicans

In the previous two years alone, a number of controversial issues have come to the fore as follows:

- the indictment of a top Bush executive for identifying a clandestine Central Intelligence Agent;
- the practice of "extraordinary rendition" to "black sites" or secret detention facilities abroad where torture may have been carried out on detainees;
- resistance to anti-torture legislation;
- a Supreme Court ruling that essentially chastised the administration's failure to apply the Geneva Conventions to detainees;
- the revelation that the administration authorized the wiretapping of domestic telephone calls without requisite warrants and by bypassing "FISA" courts;
- the decision to allow an Arab country to control some of the country's major ports;
- immigration policy;
- the insertion of Republican legislators into a right to die case [Teri Schiavo] in Florida ;
- the issue of stem cell research;
- the position on global warming despite overwhelming scientific evidence attesting to the urgency of the climate crisis;
- energy independence and the high price of gas;
- the defeat of policy proposals on Social Security reform;
- corruption scandals, the most famous of which included top Republican Tom Delay and Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff;
- the incompetent handling of post-Katrina effects in New Orleans ;
- revelations about flawed or deliberately "cherry-picked" evidence leading to the invasion of Iraq followed by growing opposition to the handling of the war there;
- doubts among the American public that the war on terror is being won and that the country is more secure.

Clearly, the issue of Iraq has dominated the concerns of many voters. Realizing the importance of issue among voters, President Bush launched a media offensive touting his efforts in Iraq and the war against terrorism (which, for Bush, remain connected) in September 2006.

Although Bush's poll numbers moved slightly upward and as election races somewhat tightened, the effect was limited. Indeed, a number of revelations came into the public purview essentially nullifying the effect of this campaign.

It began with the leaked National Intelligence Estimate. On Sept. 23, 2006, the New York Times reported that the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that the threat of global terrorism had actually worsened rather than improved in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. The NIE

-- an authoritative assessment of national security concerns --

attributed the United States-led invasion and occupation of Iraq to be the primary reason for this increased threat, largely because of its role in spurring Islamic radicalism and "jihadism."

The threat of terrorism continued to dominate the public purview a day later on the Fox News Network when former United States President Bill Clinton said that although he failed to kill terrorist figure Osama Bin Laden, he had

been focused on that task. He excoriated "right wing" critics for faulting him on his terrorism policy, and the right-wing members of the media, essentially firing up the Liberal base of the Democratic Party.

Later in the week, the scathing findings of Bob Woodward's latest book on Iraq included an accusation that the Bush administration was concealing the level of violence there.

To make matters worse, further links between disgraced Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff and the White House surfaced, giving Democrats further fodder for their "culture of corruption" meme.

Finally, a brewing scandal in the Senate involving a Republican Senator and allegations of racism, in addition to an evolving scandal in the House of Representatives involving a Republican congressman and congressional pages (and the complicity of the Republican leadership), promised to place both chambers of Congress in greater jeopardy for Republicans.

A week ahead of the election, even a botched joke by Senator John Kerry could not shift the public's attention from all the issues at hand, nor could it change the ever-constant stream of bad news from Iraq, as analysts discussed that country's slide into civil war.

In these varied ways, the "Bush effect," in conjunction with a number of unfolding scandals -- both salacious and political -- in Washington D.C. threatened to derail the Republican leadership.

The Favorable Landscape for the Democrats

- The spirit of discontent
- Anti-Incumbency
- The "anti-Bush" effect
- Increased Democratic support
- Increased partisanship
- The "October surprises"
- The quest to win
- The "50-state" strategy

It appeared increasingly clear that the general climate of discontent sweeping the country caused many Americans to express both pessimism and a lack of support for the current track of the country.

As the party currently without controlling political power, Democrats were naturally benefiting from this terrain.

A number of surveys and polls showed that like 1994, when Republicans scored an overwhelming victory in the House of Representatives, a similar percentage of people did not want to see incumbents re-elected. As such, Republicans were fearful of a 1994 repeat -- this time with their party as the victims. Such fears translated into optimism among Democrats. As noted above, "anti-Bush" sentiment has been high. In fact, the degree of "anti-presidential" feeling in 2006 seems unprecedented. Thus, while Bush's name would not appear on a ballot in 2006, many voters appeared ready to express their disapproval of the president by voting against his party in the various races at stake.

At the same time, Democrats' ambitions did not simply rest on being the beneficiaries of the gloomy outlook for Republicans. Indeed, Democrat support has been strong in the last year, if polls and surveys were to be believed.

Of particular note was the increased number of people expressing their intent to vote for a Democrat rather than Republicans of both genders.

In the backdrop of these factors has been the rising level of partisanship in the United States. The rising partisan divide has been illustrated in other ways. For example, Democrats have been far more forthright in their criticism of Bush and the Republicans. In sharp contrast to their 2002 mid-term strategy, which many critics regarded as a portrayal of Democrats as "Republican-lite," Democrats appear to be buoyed by the favorable mood for change sweeping the country, and have seemingly found their opposition voice.

Regardless of the cause, Democrats, with no political control in the executive or legislative branches, appeared hungry for some kind of victory.

To this end, Howard Dean, the head of the Democratic National Committee, has advanced what he terms the "50-state strategy" in which competitive candidates are fielded in as many races as possible across the country. Among those candidates have been a significant number of "fighting Democrats," candidates with strong military credentials, intended to overcome the critique of the party being soft on security issues. The new approach cedes no ground automatically to the Republicans, while casting a much wider net.

Now, while these findings suggest favorable conditions for Democrats in November 2006, there were a number of factors mitigating their absolute advantage. First, there remained a high percentage of self-identified undecided voters. As such, it was difficult to draw solid conclusions about exactly how secure the Democrats' position might be at this time. Second, at the gubernatorial level, there were a number of popular Republican governors in left-leaning states who could withstand the mood of the country and retain their grip on power. Third, there were simply less seats at play in the Senate to easily benefit the Democrats.

Fourth, redistricting made it terribly difficult to oust incumbents from the House of Representatives. So, despite the favorable polling for Democrats at the generic level, there was simply no guarantee that anti-Bush and anti-incumbent sentiment spreading the nation would necessarily translate into gains numerous enough to generate a shift in control of either chamber of Congress or in the governors' offices across the country.

The aforementioned scandals, however, had enraged the public, likely pushed undecided and Independent voters towards the Democrats, placed Republicans squarely on the defense, and made Bush an additional anchor on a party that appeared to be sinking in the weeks ahead of the election. This was made clear by the series of polls taken in the month prior to the election showing not only that Democrats led Republicans by double digits on generic ballots, but more importantly, that Democrats led Republicans on all the issues, including the most pressing concern facing Americans: Iraq.

Conclusion

Whether or not the Republicans' national security/terrorism strategy prevailed -- essentially enabling them to maintain power -- was yet to be seen. Meanwhile, Democrats were eager to find out if November 2006 would render a similar outcome as November 1994 when voters opted for a sweeping change of direction. It was hardly a foregone conclusion that the Democrats would take control of one or both of the two chambers of Congress, and capture a majority of the gubernatorial victories. Nevertheless, a confluence of fortuitous events for the Democrats (read: unfortunate developments for the Republicans) from late September through November was expected to work to their benefit. In the end, the election outcome would rest upon the question of whether or not the Republicans' vaunted "get out the vote" strategy would be trumped by the Democrats' stronger spirit of opposition and competitiveness at a time of mass discontent.

Elections 2006: A Democratic Sweep

Democrats won a landslide victory in the United States House of Representatives. They held every single one of their existing seats, while winning a number of open and Republican-held seats, thus capturing an absolute majority

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in the lower chamber of Congress. Accordingly, Nancy Pelosi was poised to become the first female Speaker of the House in United States history. Meanwhile, Democrats held every one of their Senate seats and captured six Republican-held Senate seats -- the precise number needed to take control of the upper chamber of Congress. As such, Harry Reid was set to become the Senate Majority leader. In this way, Democrats were able to claim that they lost no Congressional seats in either chamber in the 2006 mid-term elections -- a feat of historic proportions. In the governors' races, Democrats won a clear plurality of state executive offices. Democrats now controlled most of the state legislatures across the country as well. Overall, Election 2006 appeared to be evidence of a "blue" Democratic wave across the United States, as well as a repudiation of Republican control and the Bush administration.

Voter turnout for the mid-term elections of 2006 was the highest since the mid-term election of 1982. The Republicans' micro-targeting effort to get voters to the polls was evidenced in their ability to win several congressional races by two or less percentage points. That said, the results of the election also suggested that Democrats may have been more successful in contacting their supporters, despite the Republicans' vaunted "get out the vote" strategy. According to the political resource, Hotline, a comparison of internal data from the Republicans and the Democrats suggested that in the week of the election, both parties made approximately the same number of telephone calls; however, Democrats made twice as many direct "in person" contacts as Republicans nationally.

Meanwhile, among voters, a number of significant shifts were noted. First, the evangelical vote, regarded as the base of movement conservatives (distinct from standpoint conservatives), took a 16 percentage point swing in the direction of Democrats, in comparison with the 2004 elections. To some extent, it could be argued that the scandals that wracked Washington in earlier months may have negatively affected the Republican base. Similarly, Catholic voters took a 16 percentage point shift toward the Democrats since the 2004 election -- presumably for similar reasons as evangelicals. On the other side of the spectrum, internal surveys by the AFL-CIO surveys revealed that Democrats had the support of union voters 74 percent of the time -- a six-point increase from 68 percent in 2002. As well, union organizers were credited for orchestrating the turnout of hundreds of thousands of their voters.

Election data suggested that independent voters broke disproportionately for Democrats in 2006.

The election also the highest youth vote in about 20 years, with at least 10 million young voters casting ballots in 2006. These voters -- under the age of 30 -- favored Democratic candidates by a 22 percent margin.

On the issues, exit polling data suggested that corruption, Iraq, terrorism, and the economy, were the main issues of concern for voters. As in 2004, there were a number of ballot initiatives to ban gay marriage, which were intended to consolidate the votes of social conservatives. This wedge issue yielded positive results for Republicans two years ago and resulted in gay marriage bans passing in all but one case. On the other side of the equation, however, the year 2006 saw amendments on state ballots to raise the minimum wage -- an issue that played well among Democratic and independent voters concerned about the economy.

Post-Election Developments

United States President George W. Bush announced on the day after the election that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld would resign from office and be replaced by former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, Robert Gates. Bush's announcement came days after asserting that both Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney had his confidence and would remain in his administration for the rest of his term.

Several days later, it was announced that Rumsfeld and other members of the Bush administration would be targets of war crimes charges by a German court, as a result of the human rights violations and abuse that took place at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

On Dec. 4, 2006, United States (U.S.) Ambassador to the United Nations (U.N.), John Bolton, tendered his resignation to President George W. Bush. Bolton became the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. on a temporary basis

following a recess appointment by Bush, effectively bypassing Senate approval. Bolton's communication antagonistic style, which was not the expected norm for a diplomat, as well as his derogatory characterization of the U.N. -- the very institution at which he was supposed to represent U.S. interests, tainted his prospects for Senate approval among Democrats and moderate Republicans when he was first named as Bush's nominee.

Now, more than a year later, Bolton was no closer to winning Senate approval than at the time his name was originally put forth as the president's nominee to the diplomatic post.

With Democrats taking control of both houses of Congress, Bolton's prospects for achieving Senate approval was even more remote. As such, Bush had hoped that the outgoing Republican-led Senate would be able to approve Bolton's nomination before the end of the session at the close of the year. But the likelihood of such an outcome waned even further when outgoing Republican Senator Lincoln Chaffee -- perhaps the most moderate Republican in the United States Congress -- promised to vote against Bolton within the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Despite losing re-election in the highly Democratic state of Rhode Island, Chaffee promised to continue to represent the liberal inclinations of his constituents until he left office. Meanwhile, with the new Democratic-led Senate set to take power in early 2007, the incoming chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democratic Senator Joe Biden, noted that there was "no point in considering Mr Bolton's nomination again." Earlier, Biden said that Bolton's nomination was "a non-starter." For his part, President Bush expressed disappointment about Bolton's resignation, blaming this outcome on the intransigence of selected legislators.

On Jan. 4, 2007, Democrats took control of both chambers of Congress -- the House of Representatives and the Senate -- for the first time in 12 years.

The event in the House of Representatives was characterized by symbolism and tradition, and was particularly marked by the moment in which the gavel was handed to Nancy Pelosi, who made history by becoming the first female Speaker. Pelosi won that position, which effectively placed her second in the line of succession to the presidency, following a vote in the House of Representatives in which Democrats unanimously voted in her favor.

Prior to her election as the first female Speaker of the House, Pelosi had said, "When my colleagues elect me as speaker on January 4, we will not just break through a glass ceiling, we will break through a marble ceiling. In more than 200 years of history, there was an established pecking order - and I cut in line." Once her position as "Madame Speaker" was secured, Pelosi oversaw the oath-taking ceremony for the full membership of the incoming House of Representatives, and opened the 110th Congress. In that Congress, a record number of women -- 71 in total including Pelosi -- were represented.

In the Senate, the new Majority Leader, Harry Reid, hailed the new period of Democratic control in that chamber while simultaneously pledging bipartisanship. To that end, he said, "Guided by the spirit of bipartisanship, Democrats are ready to take this country in a new direction."

Vice President Dick Cheney oversaw the swearing-in ceremony for incoming Senators, including 10 new members, only one of whom was a Republican -- Bob Corker of Tennessee. New Democratic Senators included James Webb of Virginia, who unexpectedly defeated George Allen, and Claire Mc Caskill of Missouri, who had campaigned in favor of embryonic stem cell research. Among the incumbent Senators re-elected to office were well-known figures, such as Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, both of whom were returned to power in landslide victories. In the gallery watching his wife take her second oath of office was former President Bill Clinton, daughter Chelsea Clinton, and the mother of the Senator, Dorothy Rodham.

In the Democratic-led House of Representatives, attention was first focused on ethics reform and reducing the influence of lobbyists. At issue was a newly-crafted measure, which would regulate the relationship between lobbyists and legislators in Congress by limiting gifts and restricting private airline trips. The bill was just one of several changes being championed by Democrats and aimed at changing the "culture of corruption" that plagued the last Congress, and ultimately resulted in several scandals, indictments and resignations.

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The measures being advanced by House Democrats was, itself, likely to place pressure on the Senate to follow suit.

Ethics issues aside, the Democratic leadership promised to work hard in a number of arenas in the first 100 working hours in office. Also on the table were the following objectives:

- raising the minimum wage
- cutting interest rates on student loans
- reversing subsidies for oil and gas producers
- allowing the government to negotiate more manageable drug prices with the pharmaceutical industry, which would ultimately benefit Medicare
- lifting federal restrictions on the financing of embryonic stem cell research,
- pressuring the Bush administration toward the redeployment of United States troops from Iraq

For his part, President George W. Bush said that he would work with the new Congress, saying that he wanted to see a balanced budget, spending cuts, and consensus on Iraq.

Leading members of the Democratic-led Congress responded cautiously. Incoming House Budget Committee Chairman John Spratt of South Carolina said, "We welcome the president's newfound commitment to a balanced budget, but his comments make us wary. They suggest that his budget will still embody the policies that led to the largest deficits in history." Likewise, Senator Charles Schumer of New York said, "We hope that when the president says compromise, it means more than 'Do it my way,' which is what he's meant in the past."

Nonetheless, signs of bipartisanship were quickly emerging, as evidenced by legislation to repeal the individual alternative minimum tax. The proposed bill was introduced jointly by Senators Max Baucus, Democrat of Montana, and Charles Grassley, Republican of Iowa.

Then, President George W. Bush on February 5, 2007 submitted a budget of \$2.9 trillion to the Democratic-controlled Congress in the United States. The lion's share of the funds was intended for war funding for Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, other governmental spending, such as governmental health programs, was strongly curtailed. Still, the president included a provision to make his first-term tax cuts permanent. The budget proposal was likely to be met with great opposition in the Congress where Democrats were unlikely to share the same spending priorities as Bush.

The United States' Policy in Iraq

In the aftermath of mid-term elections that delivered stunning blows to President George W. Bush's Republican Party, the United States President said that he was open to "any ideas" aimed at resolving the crisis in Iraq.

The Bush administration additionally indicated that it was interested in hearing the findings of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. The panel has been expected to recommend that Washington open contact with Tehran and Damascus, in order to deal with the chaos plaguing Iraq. It has been viewed as a controversial proposal that, until the Republicans' defeat in the elections, may not have been seriously considered. Now, however, the transformed political landscape might compel the Bush administration to take a more diplomatic path, which would include engagement with Iran and Syria.

At the same time, the Bush administration warned against setting a timetable for the withdrawal from Iraq. But victorious Democrats who had, at least partially, campaigned on the basis of opposition to the handling of the war, endorsed a plan that would involve a phased withdrawal of United States troops. In fact, key Democrats urged both quick action on Iraq as well as the expeditious return of troops. To this end, Carl Levin, the likely chairman of the Senate's Armed Services Committee, said: "We need to begin a phased redeployment of forces from Iraq in four to six months."

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December 2006 saw the release of the findings of the Iraqi Study Group (ISG) -- a blue bipartisan panel (referenced above) led by former United States (U.S.) Secretary of State James Baker and former United States Congressman Lee Hamilton -- which was intended to offer suggestions about United States policy regarding Iraq. Should the U.S. "stay the current course," as suggested by the Bush administration, or, should another path be considered, as touted by key Democrats including incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi? The much-anticipated report assailed the Bush administration's policies and handling of Iraq. It also warned that the situation on the ground in Iraq was rapidly devolving and that there was limited time left to reverse the dire situation. Key aspects of the ISG assessment included the following suggestions:

1. U.S. efforts in Iraq should be shifted from a primarily combat role to one of support and training of Iraqi forces
2. Withdrawal of all U.S. combat brigades not needed for force protection from Iraq by 2008
3. No open-ended commitments regarding the presence large numbers of U.S. forces in Iraq
4. Imposition of consequences if Iraq fails to strengthen its security situation
5. Dialogue with members of former regime, aimed at national reconciliation
6. Dialogue with regional powers, such as Iran and Syria, aimed at stemming the violence and preserving geopolitical stability in the Middle East

Although U.S. President George W. Bush said that he would "seriously consider" the findings of the ISG assessment, he quickly foreclosed the possibility of unconditional dialogue with Iran and Syria. As well, he seemed to reject the notion that the U.S. combat role in Iraq should be phased out. That said, following a meeting with congressional leaders in Washington D.C., Bush said that he would work with all parties to forge "a new way forward" in Iraq. To this end, Bush was expected to meet with senior State Department and military officials, and also to consult with the U.S. ambassador to Iraq as well as external experts.

Meanwhile, the leader of Iraq's Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani, criticized the ISG for being "unrealistic and inappropriate." He was particularly negative about the notion of involving regional powers and cautioned against weakening Kurdish autonomy. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani echoed Barzani's criticisms. At the same time, he specifically rejected the idea that the U.S. should withdraw its troops if Iraq failed to strengthen security. He also rejected the notion of reconciliation talks with former regime members.

Earlier, however, Talabani had expressed support for the idea of talks with Iran and Syria. Talabani also objected the tenor of the report, which he said treated Iraq as if it were a colony of the U.S., subject to the imposition of external will.

In the aftermath of the dissemination of the assessment by the Iraq Study Group (ISG), United States (U.S.) George W. Bush delayed making any major decisions on Iraq until early 2007. Bush made clear that he would not be rushed into making any key decisions regarding his Iraq policy. In this regard, he said, "I will not be rushed into making a difficult decision, a necessary decision." Bush said that one reason for the delay was that he wanted to give his incoming Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, some time in the position before being required to provide his insights.

There were some suggestions that Bush also wanted more time to consider the findings of three internal reviews that were still being carried out.

Earlier, as noted above, Bush had offered limited commentary about the ISG assessment, although he summarily foreclosed two of its key recommendations: dialogue with neighboring countries, including Iran and Syria, as well as the phasing out of the combat role for U.S. forces in Iraq. His Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, also rejected the notion of dialogue with Iran and Syria. As such, there was no comprehensive sense of what Bush's new strategy would be, and how radical a shift he was willing to make.

In interviews with the media, Bush said that he would not relinquish the objective of making Iraq into a stable democracy. Bush also made clear his intent to reject any "ideas that would lead to defeat," and reiterated his

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objection to "leaving before the job is done." As such, whatever policy he ultimately put forth was unlikely to include provisions for any substantial reduction in troop deployments. It was a stance unlikely to be met with resounding support by the incoming Congress, which would be dominated by Democrats, or with the American public who were becoming increasingly opposed to United States involvement in Iraq.

In another development, Republican Senator John Mc Cain of Arizona called for more United States troops to be deployed to Iraq to control the violent sectarian conflict raging in that country. Mc Cain's remarks came just as President Bush was warning that he would not be rushed into making new decisions about Iraq, and as he was indicating that troop reduction was unlikely to be part of his plan.

Mc Cain, a 2008 presidential hopeful, said that he agreed with the Iraq Study Group's (ISG) assessment that the situation in Iraq was dire. However, he broke with the suggestions outlined by the ISG in calling for the deployment of approximately 30,000 more United States troops to Iraq, for the purpose of helping with the stabilization of that country. To that end, Mc Cain, who was visiting Iraq to assess conditions personally, said, "The situation is very, very serious. It requires an injection of additional troops to control the situation and to allow the political process to proceed."

Bush subsequently said that he would issue statements about his policy on Iraq in early 2007. There were expectations that Bush's policy would be in line with the Mc Cain doctrine of escalation. Such a move would be at odds with some of the key suggestions put forth by the ISG assessment.

In a related development, polling data from the Military Times showed that only 38 percent of active duty troops agreed with the notion of escalation in Iraq. The polling data also found that only 35 percent of military personnel approved of Bush's handling of the war in Iraq -- a distinct shift from previous assessments showing strong military support for Bush's approach to Iraq. As well, the polling data showed that only 41 percent of military forces now believed that the United States should have gone into Iraq in the first place -- a significant reduction from 65 percent in 2004.

Meanwhile, the notion of bipartisanship (touted above) was a more difficult proposition on the issue of Iraq. In her first address as House Speaker, Pelosi pledged her intent to work with Republicans, while also issuing a strong challenge to Bush on Iraq. She said, "It is the responsibility of the president to articulate a new plan for Iraq that makes it clear to the Iraqis that they must defend their own streets and their own security, a plan that promotes stability in the region and a plan that allows us to responsibly redeploy our troops." Her words augured clear opposition against a plan that would include an increase of American troops in Iraq.

A day after Democrats took control of Congress, news emerged about a number of changes in the diplomatic and military teams of the Bush administration.

First, President Bush nominated John Negroponte to be Deputy Secretary of State. A former envoy to Iraq, Negroponte had most recently functioned as the Director of National Intelligence. Mike McConnell was nominated to replace Negroponte in that role.

Next, changes at the Pentagon were in the offing. It was revealed that Bush was set to nominate Admiral William Fallon to replace General John Abizaid as the head of United States Central Command. Fallon would be positioned at the helm of military operations ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As well, Bush was reportedly also set to replace General George Casey, the top United States commander in Iraq. His replacement was said to be Lieutenant General David Petraeus --a commander during the 2003 invasion of Iraq who had been instrumental in the composition of a military manual on fighting insurgencies.

News of this prospective change emerged at a time when speculation about increased United States troops in Iraq was at an apex. It was particularly noteworthy that Casey had recently expressed his misgivings about the deployment of further troops to Iraq.

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Responding to the possibility of increased United States troops in Iraq, the joint congressional leadership quickly dispatched a letter to the Bush administration, particularly urging the president to reject such a move.

In the letter, Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wrote, "Adding more combat troops will only endanger more Americans and stretch our military to the breaking point for no strategic gain." They instead called for the commencement of "phased redeployment of our forces in the next four to six months, while shifting the principal mission of our forces there from combat to training, logistics, force protection and counter-terror."

On Jan. 10, 2007, President George W. Bush addressed the country, delineating the details of his new plan for Iraq. As expected, Bush said that there would be an escalation of United States forces in Iraq. Bush said that his government was committing an additional 21,500 troops to Iraq, most of whom would be deployed to Baghdad, for the purpose of working with Iraqi troops to secure the volatile capital. About 4,000 marines, however, were to be sent to the restive al-Anbar province, which Bush said functioned as a de facto base for al-Qaida operatives.

Bush called on Congress to provide an extra \$6.8 billion to cover the cost of the plan -- most of which would be used to pay for the new deployment, but some of which would be used to fund reconstruction and development in Iraq. Bush additionally addressed the relationship between the United States and the Iraq government of Prime Minister al-Maliki. To this end, Bush said that he had warned the Iraqi government that United States involvement was not open-ended, but he stopped short of discussing a possible timetable for redeployment. Absent from his speech was any suggestion that he would negotiate with Iran and Syria, whom he instead blamed for firing the fuel of discord in Iraq.

The United States president then directed his speech to the citizenry of his country. Bush said that, much like the vast majority of Americans, he believed the situation in Iraq to be unacceptable. For the first time, Bush also acknowledged that mistakes had been made in Iraq, and he claimed responsibility for those failings. Furthermore, he warned Americans that "trying" times were in the offing, and he suggested that victory would not be claimed in the fashion of previous generations at war.

Bush's decision to increase the United States' military presence in Iraq was met with strong opposition in the Democratic-led Congress, among key members of the military, and within the American public at large. The result of the November mid-term elections, along with a long line of polling data showing little support for the notion of escalation in Iraq, and even lower poll numbers (now in the range of 26 percent) for Bush's handling of Iraq, clearly demonstrated a widely-held desire for a significant shift in policy, and movement toward redeployment. This new plan, however, appeared to strongly contravene against such desires, and certainly contradicted the crux of the advice and suggestions supplied by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group as well as Bush's own generals.

Some critics of the plan, such as leading Democratic Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, said that the infusion of 21,500 troops was not enough to improve the situation in Iraq, while simultaneously being too big a price to pay in American blood, especially since Americans had already given so much. Still others noted that the plan outright rejected the notion of dialogue with Iran and Syria, which many experts -- including those participating in the Iraq Study Group -- had considered crucial for establishing stability in Iraq and the broader region. Indeed, the general consensus was the Bush plan, which appeared to follow in the McCain doctrine of escalation, was a military strategy with limited diplomatic elements and no political dimension.

For his part, Bush appeared to be staking his remaining two years in office on the prospects in Iraq. As such, perhaps he was hoping that if he could salvage the war in Iraq, so too could he salvage his presidential legacy. But the new plan for Iraq promised to provoke an acrimonious conflict on Capitol Hill, where the majority Democrats and a rising chorus of Republicans appeared to reject the notion of military escalation, and expressed strong skepticism that such a policy would have actually work.

Bush made a point of saying that in addition to consulting with advisors, experts and generals, he had also consulted with members of Congress. But Democrats eschewed such claims, saying that any discussions had been mere formality, as evidenced by the content of the Bush plan.

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The antagonism to the notion of escalation was so great that leading Democrats, such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Majority Senate Leader Harry Reid, promised to force a vote on the matter. In both chambers of Congress, the vote would likely demonstrate bipartisan opposition to Bush's policy. Indeed, even in the Senate where Democrats held only a small majority, a notable number of Republicans, expressed strong opposition to the plan. The intent behind the non-binding vote was to depict quite clearly that the White House stood alone and isolated in its policy of intensifying United States involvement in a terribly unpopular war.

In the long run, however, such gestures would be largely symbolic since it was unlikely that the Congress would exercise its "power of the purse" by denying funds for troops fighting abroad. Before such a time, however, the Democratic-led Congress was expected to hold hearings on the Iraq war.

Indeed, only a day after Bush's speech, Secretary Rice faced hostile lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

Democratic Senator Joe Biden of Delaware, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, bluntly characterized the Bush administration's new plan for Iraq as "a tragic mistake." He also warned Rice that any attempt to act militarily against Iran without approval from Congress would provoke a constitutional crisis. Rice was not helped by the fact that few members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee -- Republicans included -- expressed support for the Bush plan. Indeed, Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska issued a scathing rebuke saying, "This speech given last night by this president represents the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam if it's carried out." On the other side of the equation, Republican Senator John McCain said that he could not guarantee that the new strategy would yield success, but he believed that failure would reap regional chaos.

In Iraq, the Bush plan was met with skepticism as many Iraqis did not think it would substantially improve their situation. While the proposal for economic development was met with a bit more positive feedback, it was mitigated by strong levels of either ambivalence or antagonism about the increased presence of United States troops in Iraq. The reception to the plan was no better in other regions of the world, with many editorial boards of newspapers and politicians from various countries expressing strong reservations about the positive effects of a singularly military strategy, bereft of diplomatic measures and political solutions.

Days after officially declaring his new plan for Iraq, President Bush was interviewed on the American television network, CBS.

The president expressed his enduring belief that going to war in Iraq was the right course of action. He said, "I am proud of the efforts we did. We liberated that country from a tyrant. I think the Iraqi people owe the American people a huge debt of gratitude, and I believe most Iraqis express that. I mean, the people understand that we've endured great sacrifice to help them." Bush was resolute in his view that more troops needed to be deployed to Iraq. He said, "There's not enough troops on the ground right now to provide security for Iraq, and that's why I made the decision I made." The president also noted that congressional opposition would not stop him from following through with his decision to increase the United States military presence in Iraq.

Vice President Dick Cheney, who had a rather low profile in recent months, returned to the public purview to express support for President Bush's new strategy on Iraq. In an interview on Fox News, Cheney praised Bush's decision to send in more troops to Iraq, in defiance of public opinion. Characterizing Bush's resolute stance, Cheney said, "He's the one who has to make these tough decisions. He's the guy who's got to decide how to use the force and where to deploy the force." The Vice President also dismissed congressional opposition to Bush's plan, saying, that the Congress would not succeed in running the war "by committee." Indeed, Cheney further laid out his view that the role of the legislative branch of government was to "support" the efforts of the executive branch of government. In this regard, he said, "And the Congress, obviously, has to support the effort through the power of the purse. So they've got a role to play, and we certainly recognize that."

In his State of the Union address on Jan. 23, 2007, Bush spoke of his decision to increase troop strength in Iraq and claimed that he and his military commanders had carefully weighed all the options and now he was asking

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Congress to give his policy a chance to work. He said, "In the end, I chose this course of action because it provides the best chance of success. Many in this chamber understand that America must not fail in Iraq - because you understand that the consequences of failure would be grievous and far reaching."

Days after his State of the Union address, Bush continued to aggressively assert his rationale for increasing the troop presence in Iraq, regardless of the strong chorus of Congressional opposition. Indeed, he made clear that such opposition would not stop him from going forward. To this end, he said, "I'm the decision-maker." He was somewhat helped by the fact that the Senate unanimously backed his selection of Lieutenant General David Petraeus as the new United States Commander in Iraq.

During his media appearances, Bush also expressly described Iran as being a threat to world peace, saying, "Failure in Iraq will embolden the enemy. And the enemy is al-Qaeda and extremists. Failure in Iraq would empower Iran, which poses a significant threat to world peace." For his part, Cheney admonished Iran for allegedly meddling in Iraq's affairs.

The United States expressed the view that there was evidence pointing toward Iran's support for militants inside Iraq, even providing bombs and weaponry. United States President George W. Bush warned that his country's forces would "respond firmly" in response to Iran's alleged activities in Iraq. Bush also said, "It makes sense that if somebody is trying to harm our troops or stop us from achieving our goal, or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them," His words appeared to be evidence of the growing and very public standoff between Washington and Tehran. Bush additionally responded to the Iranian ambassador's plan to expand ties with Iraq with skepticism.

Iraq's government reacted with caution to the growing tensions between its ally and its neighbor. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said that his country valued its close ties with the United States, Iraq has its own national interests to satisfy. To this end, he said, "We fully respect the views, policies and strategy of the United States, which is the strongest ally to Iraq, but the Iraqi government has national interests of its own. We can't change the geographical reality that Iran is our neighbor."

Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki called on both parties to deal with their hostilities outside of Iraq. To this end, he said, "We have told the Iranians and the Americans, 'We know that you have a problem with each other, but we are asking you, please solve your problems outside Iraq.' "

Back at home in the United States, leading Republicans and Democrats in Congress began to bring forth non-binding resolutions condemning the president's policy of escalation in Iraq. While Congress was not expected to curtail funding for the troops in Iraq, such measures were regarded as the first of several initiatives intended to register strenuous opposition within the legislative branch to the Iraq policy of the Bush administration.

By early February, a conflict was brewing within the Senate, where Democrats held a slim majority, over the notion of a resolution opposing Bush's Iraq strategy. Democrats and Republicans opposed to the strategy were able to forge bipartisan support for a bill by Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan and Republican Senator John Warner of Virginia. That legislation repudiated Bush's plan, while at the same time, protected funding for troops in combat. Although some Democrats were not entirely pleased about the compromise bill, which they believed weakened their right to expend their constitutionally-enshrined "power of the purse," there was little outright opposition from their ranks.

On the other side of the equation, Republican Senators who backed the concept of increasing troop levels in Iraq, such as John Mc Cain of Arizona, blasted the proposed bill. Indeed, Mc Cain characterized it as a "vote of no confidence." He further accused backers of the legislation of being intellectually dishonest. "I don't think it's appropriate to say that you disapprove of a mission and you don't want to fund it and you don't want it to go, but yet you don't take the action necessary to prevent it," said McCain. But an opponent in his own party, Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, countered that perspective explaining that the legislation was intended to make clear the Senate's stance on the president's plan for Iraq.

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Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein warned that the matter, which was set to be voted on in the first part of February 2007, would not end if this particular bill did not pass. To this end, she said, "If we can't get this done, you can be sure a month or so down the pike, there's going to be much stronger legislation."

Indeed, Republicans in the Senate closed ranks to cut off debate on the competing pieces of legislation. At the same time, however, the House of Representatives was set to commence debate on their own version of such legislation.

On Feb. 16, 2007, following several days of heated debate, the United States House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution rebuking President George W. Bush's decision to send more troops to Iraq. Republicans joined Democrats to pass the non-binding motion with 246 votes in its favor and 182 votes against it. The resolution was simple in content, expressing both support for United States soldiers in Iraq and disapproval for the escalation of troop strength in Iraq.

While the vote was non-binding and, therefore, seen as mostly a symbolic gesture, leading Democrats promised that the resolution was only the first step toward curtailing Bush's war policy in Iraq. Indeed, during the debate in the lower chamber of Congress, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi warned that Bush would no longer have a "blank check" to do whatever he wanted in Iraq. As well, she responded to the Bush administration's escalating rhetoric regarding Iran by warning that the president did not have the authority to go to war with that country without the backing of Congress.

Meanwhile, fellow Democrat and war critic, John Murtha, said in his address to House, "This country needs a dramatic change of course in Iraq and it is the responsibility of this Congress to consummate that change." Murtha, a military veteran and head of the panel overseeing military spending, was reportedly crafting legislation that would set conditions on troops operations, such as enforcing requisite rest periods, thus making it difficult for Bush to deploy his desired number of troops in Iraq.

House Minority Leader, John Boehner, decried the legislation, accusing Democrats of trying to undercut the president's war plans. As well, House Republicans warned that Democrats could cut war funding by exercising their constitutional "power of the purse." To that end, the president certainly was in need of congressional support in order to advance \$93 billion in emergency funding for the military.

For his part, Bush cautioned against cutting off funds for the troops saying, "Our men and women in uniform are counting on their elected leaders to provide them with the support they need to accomplish their mission. Republicans and Democrats have a responsibility to give our troops the resources they need."

The Senate was expected to meet in a rare Saturday session on Feb. 17, 2007, to vote on Bush's plan to increase the United States military presence in Iraq. A previous attempt to debate the president's Iraq policy was met with procedural obstacles from Republicans, despite Democrats' attempts to craft a Senate resolution that could garner bipartisan support. As such, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said that he would bring forward a simple resolution, mirroring the House version, thus forcing all Senators to take a stand on Iraq.

Reid addressed the Senate saying, "The Senate's responsibility must be to vote on escalation, whether the so-called surge is supported or opposed. This is the choice. More war, or less war."

Democrats were able to garner a majority of support -- 56 votes -- in favor of the simple version of the resolution, thanks to support from seven Republicans. However, they were still four short of the 60 votes needed to advance the motion for debate in the Senate.

A day after their efforts were foiled, Senate Democrats promised to continue to oppose the president's strategy in Iraq by seeking to limit the 2002 resolution that authorized the use of force against Iraq in the first place. Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, the chairman of the Armed Service Committee, expressed the view that such a measure would have a greater likelihood of passage in the Senate, rather than attempting to limit funding for troops in Iraq.

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On March 8, 2007, the United States (U.S.) commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, said that there was no military solution to ending the rampant violence plaguing Iraq. Petraeus warned that military force bereft of political action could not quell the violent insurgency in Iraq. To that end, he suggested that the prospect of peace rested on political engagement with militant and insurgent groups. He also noted that there was no immediate need for further U.S. troops in Iraq.

Still, he said that those troops already committed to the ongoing effort would remain in place for several months.

A day before General Petraeus' assertion that there was no immediate need for further U.S. troops in Iraq, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced plans to send almost 5,000 additional troops to Iraq. The additional troops were expected to serve in various capacities, including that of military police.

Soon thereafter, President Bush requested \$3.2 billion to pay for 8,200 more U.S. troops to fight wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This request was made in addition to the troops and funding requested for the escalation in Iraq announced at the start of 2007. In conjunction with the buildup of 21,500 troops in Iraq, which was announced by the Bush administration in January 2007 as part of the escalation strategy, the total number of additional troops deployed to Iraq would top 26,000.

Democrats in both house of the United States (U.S.) Congress advanced legislation to force a deadline on the redeployment of troops operating in Iraq. Democrats set a deadline of August 2008, or even sooner, if key benchmarks measuring progress were not met. The White House threatened to veto such legislation, if it were to pass.

On March 23, 2007, the United States House of Representative voted in favor of legislation compelling President George W. Bush to withdraw all combat troops from Iraq by a deadline of Aug. 31, 2008. The vote passed by 218 to 212 votes in the lower chamber of Congress, which has been dominated by Democrats since the November 2006 mid-term elections.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was successful in garnering enough support to pass the measure, despite strong opposition to the bill within her own Democratic caucus, where calls for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq have been forceful. The White House and Congressional Republicans were opposed to the bill, and said that more time and patience should be expended to see if the president's escalation initiative would produce progress in the security situation of Iraq.

As noted earlier, President Bush said he would veto the bill should it arrive on his desk for signature. The president and Republicans anticipated that Democrats would not be able to garner the three-quarters majority in the Senate needed to override a veto.

That said, the bill included in it a provision for \$124 billion in funding for the war effort. Thus, a veto by Bush would essentially require him to take action against the funding of United States troops overseas.

By late April 2007, both houses of the Democratic-led Congress of the United States (U.S.) passed legislation containing war funds as well as a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, starting later in 2007. While the legislation mandated the start of the redeployment of U.S. troops -- pending certification of progress on disarmament of militias -- in 2007, the bill did not call for a complete withdrawal. It advised such an end should take place in April 2008, but it allowed that troops could remain in Iraq subsequently to work on counter-terror missions and to train Iraqi security forces.

U.S. President George W. Bush responded by reiterating his threat to veto the legislation because of the inclusion of both the timetable for withdrawal, as well as a litany of spending initiatives. Bush called on Congress to send him

a "clean" bill instead and invited legislators to the White House to discuss proposals for new legislation, which would not include the provisions he deemed to be problematic.

With the Democratic-led Congress unlikely to sustain enough votes to override the presidential veto, such an end appeared imminent. Nevertheless, congressional leaders pushed forward with the legislation, with key members of the Senate saying that they hoped that the bill would arrive on Bush's desk by early May 2007. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, called on Bush to "carefully" peruse the bill that would come before him, and suggesting that a presidential veto would deny U.S. troops the resources they needed.

On May 2, 2007, United States President George W. Bush vetoed legislation by Congress linking funding for the war in Iraq with a timetable for the withdrawal of troops operating in that country. It was only the second time Bush had exercised his veto during his tenure in office. Bush said that the withdrawal timetable was kin to "setting a date for failure." Bush also said that he would veto further legislation from Congress of the same type and said that his surge strategy should be given an opportunity to succeed in Iraq.

Days later, eleven Republican legislators visited Bush at the White House and warned the president that he had lost credibility on the matter of Iraq. As well, several leading Republicans, including House Minority Leader John Boehner, warned that there was limited patience regarding United States military efforts in Iraq.

Late May 2007 saw United States President George W. Bush sign a new compromise bill containing war funding. This bill did not include a timetable for a United States troop withdrawal, as was the case for the legislation the president vetoed. Instead, it contained key benchmarks intended to measure progress by Iraqi leaders.

By mid-2007, amidst the ongoing escalation of United States troops in Iraq, which was intended to curb the prevailing climate of violence and bloodshed, the landscape took an ominous turn for the worse in mid-2007. On the first weekend in July 2007, more than 200 people died in various attacks across the country. In the background of these developments was the renewed clamor by Democrats in Congress for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq. This new push came as General Petraeus in Iraq said that the fight against insurgents could take years, and after key Republicans, such as Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana and Senator Domenici of New Mexico, expressed doubts about the sustainability of the war effort in Iraq.

The Democratic-dominated United States (U.S.) House of Representatives voted in favor of the withdrawal of troops from Iraq on July 12, 2007. The legislation at stake included provisions for the start of troop redeployment within four months and the withdrawal of most combat troops from Iraq by an April 2008 deadline. The vote in the lower chamber of Congress was expected to compel the more closely divided Senate to approve similar legislation.

The vote in the House of Representatives went forward despite threats by President George W. Bush to, once again, veto legislation involving a timetable for U.S. troops to leave Iraq.

Around the same time, a new report on Iraq was released depicting limited progress in improving the security situation in that country. The report portrayed Iraq as continuing to be plagued by ethno-sectarian violence and with local security forces unable to conduct operations without significant assistance from U.S. forces. Even more disturbing was the fact that the report noted that there had been a "slight reduction" from earlier months in the number of Iraqi security units deemed operating independently. This finding was a particular blow since a central aspect of the U.S. strategy in Iraq has focused on recruitment and training of Iraqi security forces. The report additionally made clear that the benchmarks issued by the U.S. Congress had not been met, thus evoking questions about the success of the troop escalation plan touted by the Bush administration in the U.S.

In response to the report's findings, which appeared to issue "not satisfactory" grades for the majority of benchmarks and progress criteria, President George W. Bush characterized the report as a "mixed bag" and maintained the view that the fight in Iraq would continue as before with no change in sight. His steadfast stance came in the face of rising discontent among the Republican ranks in Congress, where various politicians on the political right were starting to call for a change of direction. As was expected, Democratic politicians issued

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criticisms of Bush's Iraq strategy. Top Democratic Senator, Dick Durbin of Illinois, criticized Bush for being out of touch with the reality of both Iraq and public sentiment at home.

Among the greater U.S. population base, public discontent with the war was at an all-time high of approximately 70 percent, with the majority of Americans saying that the war had been a mistake and a timetable for withdrawal was needed.

A week after the vote in the House of Representatives, Democrats in the Senate pushed for a vote on the withdrawal of troops from Iraq by April 2008, with redeployment beginning within 120 days of the passage of this legislation. With most of the Republicans in the closely-divided Senate still supportive of President George W. Bush's war in Iraq (despite the expressed misgivings of some), it was unlikely that sufficient votes would be garnered to override a presidential veto. Since Republicans were actively attempting to stymie the vote, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said that they would debate the matter all night long if necessary. The debate indeed extended through the night, but with most Democrats and a handful of Republicans holding 52 votes in their favor (47 against), they were short of the 60 needed to move the proposal forward to a final vote.

The scenario was regarded as somewhat controversial on two fronts. First, Republicans accused Democrats of political theatre as a result of the marathon debate session. Second, Democrats accused Republicans of creating new standards (i.e. clearing the procedural hurdle of veto-proof 60 votes) as opposed to a basic majority within the upper chamber. Perhaps in response to this latter move by the Republicans, Reid has made it impossible for Republicans to vote on legislation they favored as regards the situation in Iraq.

The United States (U.S.) Congress was set to hear status reports on Iraq in a series of hearings commencing on Sept. 10, 2007. Top military and political advisors to the Bush administration, including the chief U.S. commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, were scheduled to offer testimony to four congressional committees regarding the progress of U.S. efforts in Iraq. At issue was the future course of American involvement in Iraq, and particularly the level and presence of U.S. troops in that country.

Of significant interest as well was the assessment of the ongoing escalation or "surge" strategy in Iraq, which was intended to increase security and stability, thereby providing the Iraqi government with a more hospitable environment to achieve political success. Following the start of the surge in February 2007, and continuing until June 2007, 30,000 additional troops had been deployed to Iraq.

The status reports had been anticipated for some time by various political factions. Bush was hoping that testimony by Petraeus would bolster his argument to continue the U.S. military mission in Iraq, despite rising antagonism toward his Iraq policy by Americans at home and Democrats in Congress.

Meanwhile, many Republicans in Congress had been unwilling to commit to changing course on Iraq until they heard testimony by Petraeus and Crocker. In this way, Bush and the Republicans were looking anxiously toward the assessment by Petraeus to provide a positive report that would support continuing the present course in Iraq.

On the other hand, Democrats were expecting Petraeus to report positively on the surge by bringing attention to evidence of decreased levels of ethno-sectarian violence. Eager to push for a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, they were preparing to argue against Bush's position, by pointing to the lack of political progress in Iraq -- the very objective of the surge strategy. But Bush dismissed this position as mere Washington politics and said that he would follow the advice of military commanders on the ground in Iraq. As well, even before Petraeus arrived on Capitol Hill, Bush appeared to eschew the notion of troop reduction as well as the idea of a timetable for withdrawal.

Prior to his actual testimony, there was some hint of Petraeus' stance from the man himself in an open letter he wrote to U.S. forces on Sept. 8, 2007. In that letter, he said that U.S. troops had enjoyed tactical success against insurgents and extremists in key areas of the Iraqi landscape. To that end, he wrote, "We have achieved tactical momentum and wrested the initiative from our enemies in a number of areas of Iraq." However, he also appeared to acknowledge that such successes were "uneven." As well, he noted that the military movement was not

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matched with political progress. Indeed, he admitted that the surge had not achieved political reconciliation in Iraq as intended, saying that the strategy had not "worked out as we had hoped."

Ultimately, though, Petraeus was optimistic about the prospects of "a stable and secure Iraq" in the future. Petraeus also expressed gratitude to the sacrifices made by U.S. troops serving in Iraq, and for achieving military gains in that country.

Petraeus' testimony on Sept. 10, 2007, was somewhat more sanguine from his views expressed in the open letter to troops. Armed with a plethora of graphs and charts, he said that the casualty levels in Iraq had decreased as a result of the surge and that the military objectives had been met "in large measure." Petraeus also made mention of the success in fighting both al-Qaida in Iraq and the Shi'a militias. Meanwhile, he made limited mention of the ongoing political problems in Iraq, saying, "Lack of adequate governmental capacity, lingering sectarian mistrust and various forms of corruption add to Iraq's challenges."

Petraeus also suggested that a small reduction of troops could begin soon and would result in the withdrawal of as many as 30,000 troops by the summer of 2008. Media outlets reacted to this statement by noting that the top commander in Iraq was calling for the start of a withdrawal. Critics observed that the Pentagon had intended to chart this route all along, even specifying a drawdown by March 2008. That is to say, at the commencement of the surge strategy, there had been clear understanding that the escalation could not continue for an indeterminate amount of time, simply because it was an impossible drain on the military, which was already stretched to the limits. Hence, this supposed drawdown was no marker of success but a foregone decision compelled by logistical realities.

While Petraeus argued that the plan was not insignificant, the Democratic Chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, Tom Lantos, acerbically noted that the proposed reduction in troop strength was nothing more than a "token withdrawal." Certainly, this was not the kind of troop reduction recommended by a U.S. security commission report that was released only days prior.

As for the actual pace of withdrawal, Petraeus said it would be "premature" to make recommendations on the matter. Instead, he advocated that Bush wait until March 2008 for further decisions to be made. Such a position was not well received by critics who argued that the proverbial "goal posts" of the Iraq mission were being continually moved.

For his part, Ambassador Crocker observed that 2006 was a "bad year for Iraq" in which the country was on the verge of complete breakdown; he argued that 2007 had seen improvements in Iraq.

The assessments by Petraeus and Crocker came on the heels of two key reports that reached markedly less positive conclusions. One report by the congressional agency, the General Accountability Office (GAO), noted that only four of 18 political and military benchmarks for measuring success had been achieved in Iraq. As well, an official National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) warned that Iraq's government was being bogged down by the combination of ongoing violence and unrelenting ethno-sectarian conflict.

On Sept. 13, 2007, United States President George W. Bush offered an address to the nation in which he formally stated that he would act on General David Petraeus' recommendation to withdraw 30,000 troops over the course of forthcoming months. He said that his decision was based on the success of the surge. Left unstated was the fact that this course of action had been intended from the onset by the Pentagon. Bush also drew attention to success in Iraq in reducing ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq, particularly in the restive Anbar province. His reference to Anbar came on the same day that the head of the Sunni tribe in that province was assassinated. Abdul Sattar Abu Risha gained attention when he changed sides from supporting al-Qaida to supporting the U.S.-led efforts to stabilize the province. Bush acknowledged the assassination but did not reconcile that development with other successes in Anbar. Finally, Bush announced that in talks with the government of Iraq, there had been agreement about forging a long term alliance with that country, which would involve a long-term American commitment in Iraq.

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While Bush had previously hinted of an arrangement that might be similar to the one the United States has in South Korea, this was the first time he made clear his intent to establish a significant and enduring American presence in Iraq. It was a position that would surely evoke serious criticism from Democrats and war critics who were trying to get the United States troops out of Iraq. However, Democrats continued to be hindered by the lack of a veto-proof majority in the Senate, as well as fears of political consequences if they cut off funding for the war.

In October 2007, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tightened the reins of control over private security contractors in Iraq. The new measures were enacted following an investigation into the shooting deaths of about a dozen Iraqi civilians at the hands of a private American security company, Blackwater USA, a month prior.

While Blackwater insisted that its contractors were acting in self defense, the Iraqi Interior Ministry issued a report in which it found Blackwater entirely culpable for the incident in which the civilians were killed. The issue resulted in the temporary suspension of Blackwater's ability to function in Iraq, as well as an apology from the United States government to Iraq. It also sparked the aforementioned State Department investigation as well as questions about the accountability of such firms operating in Iraq, while immune from prosecution for questionable practices.

The measures ordered by Secretary Rice included attaching video cameras and other recording devices to vehicles used by security contractors, the deployment of diplomatic security agents to oversee security operations, and improved coordination with the United States military.

In a related development, following congressional testimony by Blackwater CEO Erik Prince into its practices, the United States House of Representatives passed legislation placing private contractors working on behalf of the United States government under the auspices of United States jurisprudence.

Note: Since 2001, Blackwater has earned more than one billion USD in government contracts.

Also in October 2007, a former United States (U.S.) military chief in Iraq, Retired Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, characterized the American mission in Iraq as "a nightmare with no end in sight." Sanchez also blasted the current "surge" strategy in resolving the conflict in Iraq, saying that it was a "flawed approach" and "staving off defeat" was the best the U.S. could anticipate. Furthermore, he condemned the U.S. political leadership as "incompetent" and "corrupted," going so far as to state that had these leaders been in the military, they would have been faced with court martial for dereliction of duty. He noted that a number of errors in judgment since the fall of Saddam Hussein had set the foundation for the current chaos plaguing Iraq. Specifically, he pointed to the decision to disband the Iraqi military, the failure to quickly establish a civilian Iraqi government, and the inability to forge strong ties with tribal leaders.

In response to Sanchez' scathing rebuke, the Bush administration said that reports by the current military chief in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and the U.S. Ambassador in Iraq, Ryan Crocker, showed that while the situation in Iraq continued to be difficult, there were clear signs of improvement. Trey Bohn, a spokesperson for the White House, said: "We appreciate his (Gen Sanchez's) service to the country... As General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have said, there is more work to be done, but progress is being made in Iraq."

Note: Sanchez retired in 2006 after being cleared of wrongdoing in the notorious case of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

In the background of these developments was the high level of disenchantment by Americans who were war weary and frustrated by both the president and the Democratic-led Congress for failing to offer an Iraq exit strategy. Both the executive and legislative branches of government were suffering from historic low approval ratings, largely as a result of the Iraq issue. Despite claims of measured success in Iraq, polls by AP-Ipsos and CNN noted that the majority of Americans surveyed did not believe that the surge was stabilizing Iraq. On the other side of the world, the views of Iraqis appeared quite similar to those of their American cohorts. A survey by the BBC, ABC and NHK showed that the vast majority of Iraqis believed that the security situation had deteriorated despite the surge. One particularly disturbing finding showed that close to 60 percent of Iraqis surveyed believed that attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq were justified. Thus, both among Americans and Iraqis, there was a pervasive mood of negativity regarding the situation in Iraq and the presence of U.S. troops in that country.

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Political Developments in 2007

On March 6, 2007, White House official, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was found guilty on four felony counts including perjury, obstruction of justice and making false statements.

Libby, who has been a close friend and the chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was found guilty of the charges in the case of the illegal disclosure of the identity of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative, Valerie Plame Wilson, after her husband wrote an article revealing the White House's shaky case for war in Iraq. It has been alleged that the White House sought to discredit Ambassador Joseph Wilson, and in so doing, disclosed Valerie Plame Wilson's covert identity, as well as her work on weapons of mass destruction.

Libby was faced with a prison term of up to 25 years and was expected to be sentenced in June 2007. Libby's attorney, Ted Wells, said that he would ask for a new trial or file an appeal.

After the trial and the rendering of the verdict, members of the jury said that although they did not believe the premise of Libby's defense -- that he heard about Plame Wilson's identity through the media -- they, nonetheless, felt some sympathy for him. Many jurors said that they believed Libby was a "fall guy" who had been sacrificed to protect other Bush administration members, such as Bush confidante, Karl Rove. Meanwhile, leading Republicans urged President George W. Bush to quickly pardon Libby, for whom he expressed sadness just after the verdict was read.

For his part, Vice President Cheney expressed disappointment with the verdict. He also said that he was saddened by what Libby and his family had to endure, and he further extolled Libby's service to the country. Joseph Wilson responded to this statement saying, "I wish that he would express his sorrow for what has happened to my wife, whose career was destroyed as a result of this, and to the [military] service people for a war that was justified by lies and disinformation."

Libby, and several other Bush administration members -- Vice President Cheney, Bush confidante Karl Rove and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage -- were yet to face a civil lawsuit by Joseph and Valerie Wilson.

Days after Libby's guilty verdict, leading Democrats were urging United States (U.S.) Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to resign. The call by Democrats for Gonzales to step down came on the heels of disclosures pertaining to a slate of firings of federal prosecutors.

With regard to this issue, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales was scheduled to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee on April 17, 2007. The Senate Judiciary Committee, headed by Chairman Patrick Leahy, a Democrat from Vermont, was expected to look into the potential role played by the Attorney General in the controversial dismissals of eight United States (U.S.) attorneys. They were also expected to seek clarification regarding remarks and positions taken by the Attorney General, which appeared to contradict testimony by other officials in the Justice Department.

The Bush administration maintained that there were no improper or overly-political reasons for the firings, and that there was no involvement from key White House officials. However, email exchanges between the Justice Department and the White House suggested the possibility of a different story, and prompted calls for an investigation into potential wrong-doing. Gonzales' Chief of Staff, Kyle Sampson, who was featured prominently in these email exchanges, resigned when the issue first broke in the mainstream media.

When Gonzales testified about this issue in January 2007, he claimed that although he signed off on the decisions to fire the U.S. Attorneys, he did not play an integral role in the decision-making. At a press conference in March 2007, he also said, "I never saw documents. We never had any discussion about where things stood."

However, when his former Chief of Staff [Sampson] testified before the Senate committee, he claimed that the Attorney General had been involved in several discussions involving the dismissals.

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Also at issue was the fact that two of the former U.S. Attorneys said they were fired after they had received improper calls from Republican legislators or staffers regarding ongoing investigations. One federal prosecutor was, in fact, replaced by a former White House aide. For its part, the Justice Department said that there was no wrongdoing and that the firings were for reasons relating to job performance. However, Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty admitted to Congress that most of the prosecutors had received positive job evaluations. Moreover, documents released later showed that politics factored heavily into the decisions to fire the eight U.S. Attorneys.

Yet another dimension to the evolving scandal was the revelation that a large number of officials hired by the White House to work in the Justice Department did not possess particularly stellar qualifications for their jobs. Many of the officials hired by the White House had received their law degrees from Regent College -- a fourth tier law school founded by Christian evangelical personality, Pat Robertson. Included in these officials was Monica Goodling, herself a graduate of this institution, who at the age of 33 years old had been tasked with planning the dismissal of the U.S. Attorneys, and who announced that she intended to exercise her fifth amendment right, rather than testify before Congress on the matter.

In the backdrop of these revelations was the discovery that a little-known revision of the Patriot Act had been used to advance the appointments of interim U.S. Attorneys, while simultaneously bypassing Senate confirmation. It was a provision that had been strongly advocated by Sampson, as reflected in a memorandum to Bush legal counsel, Harriet Miers. This element of the Patriot Act was subsequently reversed due to the broader unfolding scandal.

Collectively, these disclosures served to cast the Justice Department in particularly negative light, and resulted in a growing -- and increasingly bipartisan -- chorus for the Attorney General's resignation. Nevertheless, President George W. Bush expressed continued confidence in Gonzales.

If, however, the Senate Judiciary Committee decides that Gonzales intentionally deceived them, he might be faced with not only the question of whether or not he can hold on to his job, but also the prospect of criminal penalties for lying to Congress.

In written testimony released before his in-person presentation, Gonzales held fast to the Bush administration's position that there was no impropriety involved in the firings. To this end, he said "It is unfair and unfounded for anyone to conclude that any U.S. attorney was removed for an improper reason." Gonzales later survived a congressional "no confidence" vote thanks to support from Republicans.

The Libby case returned to the public purview a month later. On June 5, 2007, Libby was sentenced to 30 months in prison. He was also fined \$250,000. This sentence and fine came months after guilty verdicts were rendered on the charges of obstruction of justice and perjury in the aforementioned case of the disclosure of the name of Valerie Plame Wilson -- a covert intelligence operative. At issue was the matter of whether Libby would be allowed to post bail while his legal counsel exhausted the appeals process, or, if he would be remanded to jail. In the latter case, conservatives were making it clear that President Bush should use his executive power to pardon Libby. For his part, Bush expressed sadness for Libby's family, while Cheney characterized the sentence as "a tragedy."

On June 14, 2007, a United **States** district judge ruled that I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby would have to go immediately to jail to serve out his sentence of 30 months. Libby's lawyer had been hoping that his client would be allowed to delay jail time while the case was under appeal. However, Judge Reggie Walton's ruling foreclosed that possibility, thus evoking calls from Republican partisans that Libby be pardoned by President George W. Bush.

White House spokeswoman Dana Perino indicated that the president was unlikely to take any action until the appeals process had been exhausted. To this end, she said, "Scooter Libby still has the right to appeal, and therefore the president will continue not to intervene in the judicial process."

On July 2, 2007, a federal appeals court ruled that I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, who had been found guilty of multiple counts of perjury and obstruction of justice in the case, could not delay his prison term. Hours after the court handed down that ruling, President George W. Bush moved quickly to ensure that the **top** White House aide would not spend a day in jail by commuting his sentence of 30 months.

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Although Bush commuted the sentence, he allowed the conviction and the \$250,000 fine to stand, suggesting that it was sufficiently "harsh punishment" for Libby. In a statement, Bush also said that the sentence rendered by the judge was "excessive," despite the fact that legal experts noted that the 2 1/2-year prison term was consistent with federal sentencing guidelines. Vice President Cheney also released a statement expressing full support for the man who had served as his chief of staff and support for the "tragedy" endured by Libby's family.

On the other side of the equation, neither Bush nor Cheney mentioned the effects on the family of Ambassador Joseph Wilson and Valerie Plame Wilson, whose story resided at the heart of the case prosecuted by United States Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald. After Bush's decision was disseminated in the media, Wilson reacted by saying that the commutation of Libby's sentence amounted to the administration's "participation in obstruction of justice."

The controversial issue of wiretapping without warrants returned to the public purview in the United States in the first week of August 2007. At that time, Congress passed legislation authorizing the wiretapping of foreigners suspected of terrorism or links to terrorism. The bill, which passed through both houses of Congress, authorized surveillance of communications (both via phone or Internet) of foreigners routed through United States equipment without warrants or prior court approval, thus updating the existing Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

The legislation came after a recent court ruling in which the government was barred from such clandestine surveillance on foreign suspects, thus resulting in the call by President George W. Bush for new legislation on the matter. Bush argued that such changes were needed in order to fight against terrorism.

However, despite its passage in Congress, some Democrats warned that the measure could erode provisions set forth in the fourth amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits unreasonable search and seizure.

On Aug. 27, 2007, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales resigned from office. Gonzales' resignation came on the heels of the resignation of Bush confidante, Karl Rove, weeks before, and also in the wake of loud calls from Democrats that he step down from office.

An issue has been Gonzales' possible involvement in the controversial firings of eight United States attorneys. That matter resulted in Gonzales' dubious and contradictory Congressional testimony, which itself evoked questions about possible perjury. In addition, there were accusations that Gonzales had attempted to strong-arm then-Attorney General Ashcroft into approving the controversial clandestine spying program at a time when Ashcroft was hospitalized and in serious condition.

In the background was simmering resentment by critics of the Bush administration that Gonzales had opined the inapplicable nature of the Geneva Conventions in certain cases. It was a position that soon came to be known as the infamous "torture memos."

For his part, Gonzales expressed gratitude for his opportunity to serve the president in his resignation speech. As the son of migrant workers, he poignantly noted that his worst days at the Justice Department – an oblique reference to the aforementioned scandals – were still better than his parents' best days. Gonzales also noted that he would officially step down from office on Sept. 17, 2007. Subsequently, President Bush addressed the resignation of his long-time friend, noting that it was a sad development. Bush then accused Democrats of carrying out a partisan vendetta against Gonzales.

Attention was expected to soon shift to possible successors to Gonzales at the Justice Department. By Sept. 16, 2007, reports emerged suggesting that United States President George W. Bush had chosen a retired federal judge, Michael Mukasey, to replace outgoing Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Viewed as a conservative, and with a record that involved his presiding over key terror trials, some observers indicated that Mukasey should be able to withstand scrutiny during a Senate confirmation process.

By October 2007, the upcoming confirmation hearings of Mukasey loomed on the proverbial horizon and promised to include some attention to the matter of detainee interrogation techniques. At issue was a report by the New York

Times alleging that the United States Justice Department secretly authorized the use of harsh interrogation measures against terrorism suspects in 2005. The article cited alleged memoranda endorsing techniques, such as simulated drowning and exposure to freezing temperatures, which could possibly fall into the domain of torture. The documents, which were issued under the leadership of then-Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, expressed the view that such techniques would not violate anti-torture legislation crafted by Congress, which prohibited "cruel, inhuman and degrading" treatment of detainees.

Responding to this report in the New York Times, United States President George W. Bush said, "This government does not torture people. We stick to U.S. law and our international obligations." He also said that interrogations were carried out by "highly-trained professionals." Both Bush and his White House Press Secretary Dana Perrino maintained that appropriate members of Congress had been "fully briefed" about the techniques that were authorized. However, several key Democrats, such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, former Intelligence Committee member Jane Harman and Intelligence Committee Chairman, Senator Jay Rockefeller, all disputed this claim, saying that no details were ever provided to them. As well, Senate and House Democrats demanded to view the secret documents.

By November 2007, several Democrats were saying they intended to oppose Mukasey's confirmation as a result of his refusal to characterize "water boarding" as torture. On the other side of the equation, Bush said it was not fair to have Mukasey comment on interrogation techniques for which he had not yet been briefed. However, critics argued that in order to judge his suitability to head the country's Justice Department, Mukasey's opinion and knowledge of such matters should be considered.

While the increased opposition to Mukasey's nomination had been something of a roadblock, he was nonetheless confirmed as the successor to Alberto Gonzales.

In December 2007, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Michael Hayden revealed that videotaped interrogations of two suspected terrorists currently held at Guantanamo Bay -- Abu Zubaydah and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri -- had been destroyed. The two suspects reportedly provided information that led to the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the apparent mastermind of the 2001 terror attacks in the United States.

Hayden explained that the action had been taken in order to protect the identities of interrogators, who had been using tough measures, which were authorized by President George W. Bush, and were aimed at compelling the cooperation of difficult prisoners. At issue has been the claim that the videotapes depicted torture techniques, including waterboarding. Until recently, waterboarding had been widely regarded as a practice of torture, however, the Bush administration argued that simulated drowning does not fall into that category.

White House spokesperson Dana Perino said that Bush had "no recollection" about either the existence of the videotapes or their destruction. At the same time, the White House would not comment on some media reports that former Bush administration counsel, Harriet Miers, was aware of the plan to destroy the videotapes in 2005.

Newly-confirmed Attorney General Michael Mukasey, as well as the CIA itself, announced a joint inquiry into the matter, aimed at determining whether or not a full investigation was necessitated. Democratic Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said there would be separate Congressional investigations.

Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska said that a central goal of the hearings would be to determine if justice was obstructed and if anyone in White House knew what happened to the videotapes.

Hagel -- who has often been at odds with the Bush administration and his own party -- suggested that it was difficult to believe that no one in the White House knew what happened to the videotapes. He said, "Maybe they're so incompetent they didn't.... I don't know how deep this goes. Could there be obstruction of justice? Yes. How far does this go up in the White House, who knew it? I don't know."

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Meanwhile, Democratic Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a Democratic presidential candidate, went further and called for the appointment of a special counsel to investigate the situation. To that end, he said, "It appears as though there may be an obstruction of justice charge here, tampering with evidence, and destroying evidence. And this is — I think this is one case where it really does call for a special counsel. I think this leads right into the White House." Arguing the need for separate and independent review, Biden referenced Michael Mukasey's refusal during confirmation hearings to even describe waterboarding as torture.

Biden also said, "I just think it's clearer and crisper and everyone will know what the truth is ... if he appoints a special counsel, steps back from it." Biden further argued that Hayden -- the CIA director -- should not be the one deciding whether his own decision to destroy the videotapes was lawful.

Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Republican presidential candidate, warned that the destruction of the videotapes harmed "the credibility and the moral standing of America in the world again. There will be skepticism and cynicism all over the world about how we treat prisoners and whether we practice torture or not."

Meanwhile, on Oct. 12, 2007, former United States (U.S.) Vice President Albert Gore was awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize jointly with the United Nations (U.N.) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Gore and the U.N. panel were awarded for the efforts to draw attention to the current climate crisis. To this end, the Norwegian Nobel Prize Committee cited their efforts "to build up and disseminate knowledge about man-made climate change." The committee also said it wanted to emphasize the "increased danger of violent conflicts and wars, within and between states" posed by climate change. The Nobel Prize Committee noted that Gore was "the single individual who has done most to create greater worldwide understanding of the measures that need to be adopted," through his efforts to educate the general public about the looming climate crisis. Gore expressed his gratitude for the award saying he was "deeply honored." Gore also said, "We face a true planetary emergency. It is a moral and spiritual challenge to all of humanity." The former Vice President also announced that he would donate his half of the \$1.5 million award to the Alliance for Climate Protection.

In December 2007, Gore was formally awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at a ceremony in Oslo, Norway. In his acceptance speech, Gore said, "It is time to make peace with the planet. We must quickly mobilize our civilization with the urgency and resolve that has previously been seen only when nations mobilized for war." His address also included quotes from the bible, Winston Churchill, and Mahatma Gandhi. Gore used the opportunity to warn about the consequences of inaction in dealing with the climate crisis. To this end, he said, "We, the human species, are confronting a planetary emergency — a threat to the survival of our civilization that is gathering ominous and destructive potential even as we gather here."

Gore called for a carbon tax, a moratorium on the construction of old style coal plants (those without the ability to trap carbon), and urged both the United States and China -- the world's most significant contributors of carbon emissions -- to take particular action against the climate crisis.

Following the ceremony, both Gore and IPCC head, Ravendra Pachauri (who was also in Oslo to receive the award on behalf of the group he represented) were expected to travel to Bali in Indonesia to attend a summit aimed at crafting a new international treaty aimed at dealing with global warming. That new agreement would act as the successor to Kyoto, which was advocated by Gore during the Clinton administration, but which the Bush administration refused to support.

A Significant Political Development in 2008

On June 12, 2008, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled 5-4 in favor of the right of terror suspects detained at Guantanamo Bay to seek a writ of habeas corpus. The case, Boumediene v. Bush, essentially struck a third blow against the Bush administration's position on the matter. In the first ruling, SCOTUS ruled that United States law extended to Guantanamo Bay; in the second ruling, SCOTUS ruled that the president did not have the authority to establish either military trials or commissions. The Bush administration responded by

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working with the then-Republican led Congress to write legislation that would authorize commissions and establish combatant tribunals that were intended to be function in lieu of a civilian court hearing. This third decision found that when someone is taken into United **States** custody, he/she must be offered them the basic legal provisions.

This ruling in the case of Boumediene v. Bush was split along liberal-conservative lines, with the deciding vote being issued by center-right Justice Anthony Kennedy. Crafting the opinion for the majority, Kennedy wrote: "The laws and constitution are designed to survive, and remain in force, in extraordinary times."

Kennedy argued that even during times when fighting terrorism might be at stake, accordance with the legal fulcrum must prevail. To this end, he **stated**: "Security subsists, too, in fidelity to freedom's first principles. Chief among these are freedom from arbitrary and unlawful restraint and the personal liberty that is secured by adherence to the separation of powers. It is from these principles that the judicial authority to consider petitions for habeas corpus relief derives."

Writing for the dissenting minority, Justice Antonin Scalia said, "America is at war with radical Islamists." As such, he argued that the court's ruling would "make the war harder on us. It will almost certainly cause more Americans to be killed." He also scathingly said that "disastrous consequences of what the court has done" were in the offing.

He said: "Today, for the first time in our **nation**'s history, the court confers a constitutional right to habeas corpus on alien enemies detained abroad by our military forces in the course of an ongoing war."

United **States** Attorney General Michael Mukasey said that military trials would go forward since the court ruling did not include the trial process. However, opponents of that view insisted that the ruling also cast doubts upon military tribunals and was predicted that the matter would emerge in future cases.

The right of habeas corpus has existed within English common law since the 14th century and is intended to prevent arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of the citizen. Its provisions were transposed from English common law into the United **States** Constitution when the United **States** became an independent and sovereign **nation state**.

Election 2008: The Republican and Democratic Primary Elections

Introduction --

The year 2008 began with the presidential primaries and caucuses of the two main political parties -- Republican and Democratic -- as they charted the course of choosing their respective nominees, in anticipation of the 2008 presidential election. The 2008 presidential election promised to be one of the most significant in recent times.

Of predominant importance was the fact that there was no incumbent contesting the race. President George W. Bush could not run for another term and Vice President Dick Cheney said that he would not seek the presidency. Neither of the Democratic contenders in 2000 and 2004 appeared interested in pursuing the presidency again either. Coming off his victories – an Emmy award, an Academy award, and now his status as Nobel Laureate, former Vice President Al Gore said that he would not contest the 2008 race, and prefers to spend his time advancing his environmental mission. Senator John Kerry returned to the Senate as an active and vocal member of that body, and wanted to continue on that path.

Second, the pool of major candidates has evoked interest, likely because many of these candidates did not fit the typical mold of American politicians to date. In many senses, the identities of most of the main candidates sparked interest (whether positive or negative) among the public and certainly, within their respective political parties.

Among Republicans, socially-liberal Rudolf (Rudy) Giuliani, as well as the moderate and Mormon Mitt Romney, did not appear to be reflective of the values of conservative and evangelical base of the Republican Party. Nevertheless, Republicans appeared willing to consider both of these candidates, thus indicating a likely 'civil war' brewing within the party. Indeed, Mike Huckabee's folksy style gained traction among the grassroots conservative

and evangelical base, particularly among those who eschewed the policy stances in the past of Giuliani and Romney. While Fred Thompson's record was more in keeping with standpoint Republican policy, his personal background as an actor brought another dimension to the race.

John McCain, the war hero, returned to the presidential front in the hopes of finally accomplishing his objective of 2000, which resulted in Bush's nomination. Ron Paul's anti-war and libertarian platform commanded a cult following among some fringe GOP factions. Both anti-immigrant Tom Tancredo and Duncan Hunter were regarded as likely to win the nomination, but they have been known for their strong positions on issues important to the party.

Among Democrats, Hillary Rodham Clinton has the distinction of being the most well-known female politician on the American landscape in contemporary times, and she was the first woman with a real chance of not only winning the nomination, but the White House ultimately. But Clinton also had to deal with strong negative feelings from the conservative end of the electorate who strongly eschewed the notion of another President Clinton. Senator Barack Obama brought a similar sensibility to the race. Fresh and youthful, Obama attracts crowds like a rock star and was the first African-American to have a genuine chance of winning not only the nomination, but also the White House. John Edwards returned to the fore after being Kerry's running mate in 2004. Media-friendly, Edwards' populist message made him a star of the left-leaning blogosphere. Bill Richardson was the first candidate of Latino heritage; his resume was perhaps the most impressive of the entire field having extensive legislative, executive, domestic and foreign policy experience. Strong credentials also characterized the campaigns of Joseph (Joe) Biden and Christopher Dodd. The biting criticisms of Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel often made Democratic debates edgy although both had very long odds of winning the nomination.

The current issues of the day -- (health care and the economy), the national mood (marked by gloom and the quest for change), as well as the global geopolitical landscape (anxiety-ridden due to the war in Iraq, United States relations with Iran, the continuing threat of terrorism, and impaired global alliances) -- presented a complicated picture. The public's awareness of these factors was expected to inform not only their decisions in whom they voted for, but also the priority they placed on this election season itself. In many senses, apathy was a thing of the past. As illustrated by a recent study by the Pew Research Center, 34 percent of respondents said that they had given "a lot of thought" to the presidential candidates, while 39 percent said they have give "some thought" to the matter. Together, it would seem that the presidential options captured at least some attention of a full 73 percent of people. In this way, it would be fair to conclude that the public -- regardless of political persuasion -- appeared to understand the significance of the choice before them.

The Primaries --

On the Republican side of the partisan divide, Giuliani, had been the favorite to win the nomination based on his performance in national polls in 2007. However, Giuliani's plan involved withstanding initial losses in Iowa and New Hampshire (not to mention Michigan), and then coming back to win or place in South Carolina, before "running the table" with victories in Florida and Super Tuesday. This expectation, however, assumed that momentum for other candidates in the early primaries and caucuses would not be a factor. Giuliani's strategy failed and a disappointing finish in Florida prompted him to withdraw and endorse McCain.

In early 2008, Huckabee had won the Iowa caucuses, showed third in the New Hampshire primary, secured a second place finish in South Carolina and was polling well in Florida, much to the dismay of the Giuliani camp, no doubt.

Indeed, Huckabee's increasing cachet, thanks to increasing national and state-based poll numbers, indicated that he had usurped Giuliani as the favorite by the start of 2008. But Huckabee's apex was temporary as McCain soon took that top spot from him with his own victory in New Hampshire. His strong performance in southern states on Super Tuesday kept him in the GOP contest.

Meanwhile, Romney, who spent the most money in the early states garnered his first win in Michigan by holding off resurging McCain, who had won in New Hampshire and was now at the top of the national polls. Romney then secured a second victory in Nevada. These back to back victories, a subsequent victory at the Maine caucus, as well as his high delegate count, and his financial advantage, suggested that he would be regarded as a top contender in the Republican race. But a disappointing finish on Super Tuesday resulted in his withdrawal from the GOP contest.

For his part, McCain, managed to hold off Huckabee and win South Carolina -- a victory of great cachet in the Republican nominating process. He also won a victory over Romney in Florida. Moreover, he was surging nationally. In fact, polling data at the national level shown a strong preference for McCain since the start of 2008. Giuliani was slipping from the top spot in national polls in late 2007 and was replaced temporarily by Huckabee, who was then displaced by McCain. Romney vaulted past Huckabee into the second place position nationally but was not able to break past McCain.

But Super Tuesday brought a reversal of fortune for Romney, resurgence for Huckabee and consolidation for McCain.

After his slate of victories in February 2008, and despite Huckabee's post-Super Tuesday wins in Kansas and Louisiana, McCain was the frontrunner in the Republican race. Indeed, as of March, 2008, McCain was the presumptive nominee of the GOP.

On the Democratic side of the partisan divide, Clinton had been the favorite to win the nomination until late 2007. Since then, her poll numbers slipped in Iowa, which she eventually lost in early 2008, while her "firewall" eroded in the state of New Hampshire, followed by a diminishing advantage in South Carolina as well. Meanwhile, Obama was surging in those very states, even winning Iowa as of early 2008. Given her loss in Iowa and Obama's rising cachet, it was difficult to continue to classify Clinton as the favorite. But her surprise win in New Hampshire in defiance of the polls, followed by her victory in Nevada, made clear that she was still the one to beat on the Democratic side.

Still, with Obama taking the first victory of the primary season in Iowa, followed by his solid lead in the polls in South Carolina, as well as the fact that he actually won more delegates than Clinton in Nevada (despite her percentage advantage), he was still very much a top contender. His landslide victory over Clinton in South Carolina only bolstered this view. As such, it was not inconceivable that he could go on to Super Tuesday fortified and competitive against Clinton in many Super Tuesday states. Obama was additionally helped by a number of key endorsements from leading Democrats and the fact that his national polling numbers were on the rise.

With Edwards dropping out of the race in late January 2008, it was difficult to tell if Obama or Clinton would be the beneficiary at the polls on Super Tuesday. Clinton's big wins on both coasts and Obama's victories in more than a dozen states changed the dynamic so that both ended Super Tuesday in a virtual tie.

But in the races after Super Tuesday, including the Potomac primaries (also known as Chesapeake primaries) in Virginia, Maryland and Washington D.C., Obama won sweeping and overwhelming victories. Because Obama had momentum, more than 10 consecutive victories and a lead in the delegate count, he was the effective Democratic frontrunner.

Clinton took back momentum with wins in important states, such as Texas, Ohio and Pennsylvania in the period from March 2008 to April 2008. However, Obama had already built a large cache of delegates, which continued to mount despite these losses. As well, even as Clinton won landslide victories in blue collar enclaves like West Virginia and Kentucky, Obama was racking up his own victories in North Carolina and Oregon.

On the night of the South Dakota and Montana primaries -- May 20, 2008 -- Barack Obama achieved the requisite number of delegates needed to claim victory as the Democratic presidential nominee. As such, Barack Obama was able to claim victory as the Democratic presidential nominee. Obama thusly made history in becoming the United States' first ever African-American presidential nominee of either of the two main political parties.

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Clinton, meanwhile, was not keen on offering her immediate concession. But a backlash from many -- including her own stalwarts -- to her hard line position, appeared to trigger a different approach. A day after Obama won the nomination, Clinton's campaign announced her exit from the race and her forthcoming endorsement of Obama.

On June 7, 2008, at a speech in Washington D.C., Clinton suspended her campaign, conceded her defeat, and pledged to support Obama's efforts to win the White House in November. Clinton thanked the almost 18 million voters who cast ballots in support of her candidacy. Clinton rallied her supporters -- many of whom were women seeking to transform the gender imbalances still prevalent in contemporary society. She noted that although she had not succeeded in her mission, there were now "18 million cracks in the glass ceiling" preventing a woman from winning the White House. Clinton then put forth a fervent call for her supporters to join her in helping to elect Obama to the presidency, saying that they shared the same goals for the future of the country. She also adopted his campaign slogan of "Yes, we can."

Conclusion: The presidential race was thusly set to go forward between Democrat Obama and Republican McCain.

For information about the election process and election-related developments, see the CountryWatch Special Elections Report: USA Election 2008 available on the CountryWatch.com website.

Special Report: Indications of Post-Bush Era Foreign Policy

Despite assertions that there be no timeline, United States and Iraq agree to set up "time horizon"

Despite frequent assertions by the Bush administration in the United States that there be no fixed timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the United States and Iraq agreed in July 2008 to establish a "time horizon" for the reduction of United States troops in Iraq. The agreement was part the formal Status of Forces Agreement forged between

President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which would allow a continued presence of United States forces in Iraq after the expiration of the existing United Nations mandate at the close of 2008. The agreement came a week after the Iraqi leader said he wanted a timetable for the United States troop withdrawal -- something the Bush administration has not endorsed.

For its part, the United States had been reluctant to advance such a timetable out of fear that security gains could be erased. President Bush has said that a fixed timetable would embolden violent insurgents. That said, the current "time horizon" offering appeared to be a compromise in the security deal being negotiated. While the actual distinction between a timetable and a time horizon would inevitably provide fodder for debate, the Bush administration was nonchalant about the idea that it was reversing its previous hard line position on the matter. Instead, the White House said that troop reductions in the future would be "based on continued improving conditions on the ground and not an arbitrary date for withdrawal."

Maliki appears to "endorse" Obama's timeline for withdrawal from Iraq; effect on McCain's Iraq policy to be seen

Soon after the news broke about a "time horizon" for the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq, Prime Minister al-Maliki expressed support for the troop withdrawal plans proposed by presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, during an interview with Der Spiegel.

In reference to Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable (barring complications), Maliki said, "That, we think, would be the right timeframe for a withdrawal, with the possibility of changes." The Iraqi prime minister did not expressly endorse presumptive Democratic presidential nominee's candidacy, saying instead, "who they [Americans] choose as their president is the Americans' business." He then continued, "But it's the business of Iraqis to say what they want." Nevertheless, Maliki's views on the notion of a timeline appeared to be in line with Obama's stance on the issue.

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A spokesperson for the Iraq government somewhat backtracked from these remarks, suggesting that Der Spiegel had "misunderstood and mistranslated" the Iraqi prime minister. The spokesperson did not, however, specify how precisely this misunderstanding or mistranslation might have occurred. Regardless, the German publication, Der Spiegel, issued a strong assertion stating it "stands by its version of the conversation."

Soon thereafter, Der Spiegel provided an audio recording of the Maliki interview to the New York Times, which appeared to bear out the fact that Maliki found Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable to be illustrative of the Democratic contender's understanding of the situation on the ground in Iraq.

In the direct translation from Arabic, as published by the New York Times, Maliki said: "Obama's remarks that — if he takes office — in 16 months he would withdraw the forces, we think that this period could increase or decrease a little, but that it could be suitable to end the presence of the forces in Iraq." He continued: "Who wants to exit in a quicker way has a better assessment of the situation in Iraq."

This synergy could well help shore up support for Obama's foreign policy credentials, particularly in regard to the difficult question of how to (if possible) disengage from Iraq.

Obama has consistently said he would end the war in Iraq and withdraw United States troops from that country in a careful manner. He has called for a 16-month phased withdrawal timetable pending given conditions on the ground. (Note: Obama was also helped by the fact that British Prime Minister Gordon Brown also expressed concurrence for the notion of a 16-month timetable.)

By contrast, Maliki's suggestion that Obama had "a better assessment of the situation in Iraq" was not expected to help the presumptive Republican nominee, John McCain. For his part, McCain has opposed a withdrawal timeline and has said that he expects United States troops to be in Iraq for a long time, assuming that the Iraqi government sanctions the American presence in that country. McCain's presidential hopes have largely rested on his own heroic military experience and perceived understanding of foreign policy, both of which have strong resonance at home in the United States.

With apparent support from the Iraqi PM for a withdrawal timetable, Obama urges focus on Afghanistan

Benefiting from apparent support from Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for Barack Obama's 16-month phased withdrawal timetable from Iraq, the Democratic contender for the American presidency urged greater focus on Afghanistan.

The Obama campaign quickly responded to Maliki's favorable stance on their proposed withdrawal timetable by directing attention to Afghanistan. Obama's top foreign policy adviser, Dr. Susan Rice, said: "Senator Obama welcomes Prime Minister Maliki's support for a 16-month timeline for the redeployment of U.S. combat brigades. This presents an important opportunity to transition to Iraqi responsibility, while restoring our military and increasing our commitment to finish the fight in Afghanistan."

These developments came at a time when Obama was launching an international tour, intended to shore up his foreign policy credentials. Not surprisingly, the Democratic contender commenced his trip in the country he has consistently said requires priority attention: Afghanistan.

During a visit to Kabul, Obama characterized the increasingly volatile landscape in Afghanistan as "precarious and urgent." As such, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee said that Afghanistan should be the main focus of the "war on terror."

In his meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, he promised to continue the fight against terrorism "with vigor." Additionally, Obama discussed the illicit narcotics trade and bilateral ties with Karzai.

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Speaking from across Afghanistan, Obama was interviewed for the CBS program "Face the Nation." In that interview he noted that the Bush administration had been distracted by a "war of choice" in Iraq rather than fighting those who were responsible for the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 in the United States. He asserted that the time had come to correct the mistakes made by the Bush administration. Obama also called for more troops to be deployed to Afghanistan to fight the resurgent Taliban, al-Qaida, and other extremist Islamic elements.

Obama's priority on Afghanistan was backed by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who expressed concurrence with the Democratic presidential contender on this matter. Brown has also expressed support for Obama's proposed withdrawal timetable from Iraq. As noted above, Obama's Republican rival, McCain, holds a different view and anticipates a lengthier presence of United States troops in Iraq, arguing that it is necessary if the war in Iraq is to be won.

Obama warmly received in Jordan, Israel, and Europe

Barack Obama's international tour began in Afghanistan and continued in Iraq, as aforementioned. Obama then went on to Jordan and Israel in the Middle East before leaving for Europe.

Obama was accompanied on this international trip by his Senate colleagues -- Republican Senator Chuck Hagel and Democrat Senator Jack Reed.

In Jordan, Obama appeared to enjoy a positive visit with moderate King Abdullah. That visit was capped off by the king's decision to personally drive the Democratic presidential contender to the airport -- a move that appeared to be evidence of the growing comfort forged between the two men.

In Israel, Obama had a difficult balancing act to maintain. He had to make clear that his administration would not deter from the existing United States policy of strong support for Israel, while also showing that a potential Obama administration would work hard to advance the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. He appeared to achieve this balance, even meeting with politicians of all stripes -- liberal and conservative Israeli leaders, as well as the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank -- to generally good reviews. In a challenging press conference, Obama reiterated his commitment to the peace process, expressed solidarity with Israeli families attacked by rocket attacks from militants in Gaza, and clarified his position on Jerusalem as Israel's capital. To that latter issue, he noted that his preference was for Jerusalem -- undivided by barbed wire -- as the capital, but said that the historic city's fate would be a "final status" issue.

Obama commenced the European leg of his tour with a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. A spokesperson for the German leader said that the talks were "very open" and included wide-ranging topics such as Iran, Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process, economic partnership, climate change, energy issues, and the state of the global economy. Obama also enjoyed a receptive audience of 200,000 in Germany, where he gave a broad speech about the historic nature of trans-Atlantic relations and the future of that relationship going forward. He made a point of noting that his words were offered not as a politician but as "an American citizen" and "a fellow citizen of the world." While the speech was not a major foreign policy address, it did manage to indicate some aspects of a potential foreign policy by articulating a vision for a nuclear-free world, Western cooperation in fighting terrorism, championing democratic values and human rights, poverty alleviation on global scale, as well as international efforts to combat global warming.

From Germany, Obama then traveled to France where he met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy. As Obama noted in his visit to Germany, his focus was on the significance of trans-Atlantic alliances, particularly in the realm of fighting terrorism, advancing security and stability, alleviating poverty and moving forward in addressing climate change. Viewed as one who championed the thaw of French-American relations, which notably cooled during the run up to the Iraq war, Sarkozy was seen as more of a Bush ally than one aligned with a potential Democratic administration. However, a joint press conference between Obama and Sarkozy illuminated a "simpatico" element, which was confirmed by the French president's assertion that Obama was his "buddy." Asked about a potential endorsement of Obama, Sarkozy said the American people would decide who would be president but appeared to implicitly express support for Obama by saying that France would be "delighted" with the idea of an Obama

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presidency, since it looked to the future rather than the past. Sarkozy appeared to hedge his stance by noting that his country would work in friendship with any American administration.

After leaving France, Obama headed to the United Kingdom for the last stop on his international tour. There, he met with for breakfast with former Prime Minister Tony Blair as well as current Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Obama characterized his Downing Street meeting with Brown as "terrific" and called for strong trans-Atlantic cooperation in dealing with climate change, terrorism as well as global economic challenges.

Obama also spent an hour with British Tory leader David Cameron.

Obama's rival for the American presidency, John McCain, criticized him for espousing policies before traveling overseas -- particularly to the Middle East -- to assess the situation.

Nevertheless, Obama's policies received unexpected sanction from key global players, as noted above.

Whither McCain?

With Obama commanding the global stage for more than a week, McCain struggled to capture some media attention. The Republican contender was ensconced on a small town tour in swing states, such as Pennsylvania and Ohio, where he was hoping to explicate his economic message in a country gravely anxious about its economic fortune. McCain was also scheduled to visit an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico --a venue where he was to draw attention to energy policy. However, that trip was cancelled due to Hurricane Dolly, which battered the south Texas coast.

Still, despite the intended attention to economic and energy concerns during a week in which Obama was abroad, McCain tended to refocus his attention in interviews onto the foreign policy arena. To that end, he vociferously argued that the situation in Iraq had improved because of the escalation or "surge" of United States troops in that country, and even suggested that Obama's position against the military strategy showed that his Democratic rival was more interested in winning the election than winning the war.

He also derided Obama for not visiting wounded troops in Germany while in that country, even going so far as to run television advertising in the United States on the matter. However, Obama's campaign responded by noting that the Pentagon had made such a visit difficult and noted that Obama had spent time with injured troops in Kuwait. It was unknown if these hard lines of attack by McCain would gain traction with voters at home in the United States.

Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq

In October 2008, top political leaders in Iraq were considering the draft of the aforementioned security pact with the United States. With discussions continuing in the Political Council for National Security, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki delayed a scheduled trip to Australia. As noted above, the Status of Forces Agreement would provide for continued presence of United States troops in Iraq until 2011.

Also included in the concord was limited jurisdiction for Iraq over the prosecution of troops.

For its part, the dominant alliance of Shi'a and Kurdish parties in the Iraqi government indicated that it would table adjustments to the draft agreement.

Indeed, they suggested that their prevailing reservations prevented them from approving the deal wholesale. A statement by the United Iraqi Alliance noted, "Besides the positive points that were included in this pact, there are other points that need more time, more discussion, more dialogue and amendments to some articles."

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At issue in particular was the matter of limited Iraqi jurisdiction over the prosecution of troops. Iraqis have not been keen on the notion of immunity from prosecution of United States troops. Also at issue was the schedule, including the 2009 date set provisionally for the withdrawal of some United States troops from some cities, as well as the 2011 date set for the final withdrawal from Iraq.

This development augured potential challenges in the process of ultimately approving the agreement, specifically because officials from Iraq and the United States had previously asserted that the draft was final and not subject to changes. But without approval from the Political Council for National Security, the agreement was unlikely to gain parliamentary approval.

Meanwhile, outside the governing arena, some Iraqis took to the streets of Baghdad to protest the agreement and to demand the exit of United States troops from Iraq. Among the demonstrators were about 50,000 supporters of the radical Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, chanting anti-American slogans, such as "Get out occupier!"

Note: The existing United Nations mandate for the United States-led coalition in Iraq was set to expire at the end of 2008.

Credit Crisis in 2008

In September 2008, the realized and mark-to-market losses in mortgage backed securities (MBSs) among investment banks resulted in insufficient operating capital and, more importantly, led to a loss of confidence of creditors in extending credit to those companies known to be heavily exposed to MBSs. This dynamic claimed a total of three victims in recent months (Bear Stearns in March 2008, followed later by Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, with the latter pursuing a buyout from Bank of America in order to stave off insolvency).

The credit crunch gathered force when this refusal to extend credit to counterparties expanded to one of the world's largest insurers, AIG, as the market was fearful of default, given the exposure to credit-related financial derivatives, which AIG had on its books (in light of the aforementioned credit crunch). This situation prompted fears of a credit rating downgrade of AIG, which effectively would have made the company insolvent. The Federal Reserve and the Treasury Dept injected \$85 billion into AIG to prevent a collapse, taking an 80 percent ownership interest and effectively nationalizing the company (as it did with Fannie Mae & Freddie Mac, the world's largest mortgage guarantors).

Despite these actions, the aggregate loss of confidence in counterparty solvency led to an acute escalation in the credit crisis, as both traders and investors reacted, and as witnessed by intense volatility in global stock markets. In response, there was coordinated central bank action in the United States, the European Union, Japan, China and Russia, manifested by short-term liquidity to the banking system to provide credit to needy parties.

Still, with financial markets ensconced in what could well become a systemic crisis, the United States was poised to take strong measures to deal with the situation.

United States Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson argued that the "toxic debts," which were reverberating throughout the financial system, required strong measures to deal with the situation. Paulson asserted that the credit crisis was compromising the larger economic situation with jobs, pensions, companies, leaving the entire financial regime at risk.

In response to the chaos raging in the financial markets, the Bush administration said it would have to spend billions in taxpayers' money to purchase bad debts. Other measures would involve a temporary ban by the Securities and Exchange Commission on short-selling and the establishment of guarantees on money market deposits in order to restore confidence.

The central focus, however, was the proposal to purchase and manage the orderly liquidation of these toxic mortgage backed securities. With this plan in the offing, there was some restoration of confidence that the private

sector's credit crisis was going to be absorbed by the government, ultimately leading to a massive two-day rally in global equity markets.

President George W. Bush said that quick bipartisan support would be needed to pass necessary legislation on the proposal.

But such action was not immediate as Republicans and Democrats in Congress reacted with dismay to the \$787 billion price tag attached to the three-page financial rescue or "bailout" plan proposed by Treasury Secretary Paulson.

While Treasury Secretary Paulson emphasized the imperative to act quickly, Democrats in Congress said they would not easily comply by spending taxpayers' money to bail out the excesses of Wall Street. They indicated that several changes would have to be made to the existing proposal, including greater oversight, assistance for people at risk of losing their homes to foreclosure, assurances that taxpayer money not be used for extravagant executive packages, and also some equity upside for the taxpayers. Meanwhile, Congressional Republicans, particularly in the House of Representatives, appeared to rail at the idea of both the original proposal, as well as the new amendments. Urging from Vice President Cheney that the House Republicans fall into line with the Bush administration did not appear to exact positive results. Nevertheless, the Democratic-led Congress was attempting to work in a bipartisan fashion to forge an agreement.

Meanwhile, the proposals were met with differing feedback from the two presidential contenders looking to succeed Bush.

Republican presidential nominee John McCain was on the record saying repeatedly that the "fundamentals of the economy" were solid. He eventually said that the Federal Reserve should concentrate on managing the money supply and inflation.

Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama appeared to acknowledge the potential global financial implications. He, like Congressional Democrats, placed the blame for the credit crisis squarely on Republicans, the Bush administration and the lack of regulation, but he also issued cautious support for the crafting of a compromise solution. Obama demanded that any rescue package would have to contain specific amendments, ensuring transparency, accountability, greater oversight, taxpayer equity upside, as well as relief for homeowners in trouble.

The political situation took a turn toward the bizarre when on Sept. 24, 2008, McCain expressed alarm that the country could plunge into a depression within days without immediate action. To that end, he announced he was "suspending" his campaign and going to Washington D.C., to try to help resolve the situation.

McCain also said he would not attend the scheduled presidential debate unless there was an agreement on the rescue package. The situation resulted in sharp criticism from leading Democrats, such as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who noted that all the relevant players on finance and banking committees in both congressional chambers were already working long hours to reach an agreement. Obama echoed a similar note, expressing reticence about injecting presidential politics into what was becoming a national -- even international -- crisis.

Still, President Bush, who issued a sobering address to the nation on the financial crisis, invited both presidential contenders, along with the leaders of both parties, to the White House to discuss the crisis and the rescue package proposals. Media reports suggested that the meeting reversed much of the progress that had been forged all week long, and resulted in an angry revolt from House Republicans, who did not believe that their grievances or counter-proposals were being heard. At issue for House Republicans was their insistence of the establishment of an insurance program to protect against the losses of mortgage-backed securities. Media reports noted that with the negotiations process breaking down, Treasury Secretary Paulson implored the congressional leadership not to allow their efforts to end in failure.

The situation took a grim turn when Washington Mutual gained notoriety as the largest bank failure in United States history. It was thusly taken over by regulators and sold to J.P. Morgan Chase.

Despite these obstacles and negative developments, by Sept. 28, 2008, after a week of intense negotiations, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced concurrence on the rescue package.* Pelosi was quick to point out that the package was not a Democratic proposal, but simply a good faith effort to work cooperatively to solve the crisis in a way that was fair to American taxpayers. Pelosi touted the fact that her party's demands (described above) had been met. She emphasized that the agreement was not a "bailout" for Wall Street so much as it was a bipartisan agreement to ensure that Americans' pensions, savings and jobs would be safe. Senate Majority Leader Reid acknowledged that Americans' concerns and furor over the "greed on Wall Street" and "un-enforced regulations" were well-justified. But he also said, "Every American has an interest in fixing this crisis - inaction would paralyze the economy."

Both houses of Congress were, therefore, set to vote on the compromise plan, which essentially constitutes the largest government intervention into the markets since the depression of the 1930s. Factions of both parties were quickly shoring up support to block its passage.

For his part, President Bush expressed support for the draft of the compromise legislation saying, "This bill provides the necessary tools and funding to help protect our economy against a system-wide breakdown," he said in a statement.

The deal* addresses several of the key concerns raised by both Democrat and Republican critics of the original plan proposed by the Bush administration.

*Elements of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008: --

- Treasury will get the money in phases - \$250 billion immediately, \$100 billion at the request of the White House; the remaining \$350 billion subject to possible veto by Congress
- Banks accepting rescue funds would have to hand over equity in return, paving the way for taxpayers to benefit from the banks' recovery
- If funds cannot be recovered, then the banking industry would have to finance the rescue plan expenses
- Limited payment or "golden parachutes" for banking executives
- Oversight in the form of monitoring agencies, an independent Inspector General, and a bipartisan oversight board
- Banks would be expected to join insurance programs to protect against the losses of mortgage-backed securities

On Sept. 29, 2008, the bill went down to defeat in the lower chamber of the United States Congress. Indeed, the United States House of Representatives rejected the bailout plan for the United States financial institutions, sending the stock market into a state of shock. The Dow Jones dropped seven percent -- 770 points -- marking a record one-day fall.

Attention focused on Republicans in the lower chamber, since only a small number of legislators from that political party voted in favor of the plan. While some Democrats joined Republicans in rejecting the bill, two-thirds of House Democrats voted in its favor. The repercussions included not only the aforementioned stock market volatility, but also questions about how banks would deal with their exposure to bad loans and how credit markets could regain their footing. Moreover, the situation evoked grave anxieties about a potential second Depression if no plan was agreed upon to deal the credit crisis.

By Oct. 1, 2008, the upper Chamber of the United States Congress -- the Senate -- had overwhelmingly passed an amended version of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. Indeed, about three-quarters of the Senate voted in its favor. The amended bill, quite controversially, included a number of tax cut incentives for pet projects, as well as additional protections for people with savings in the bank. The latter addition involved an increase in the amount insured by the United States government in bank accounts from \$100,000 to \$250,000.

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Passage of Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 in the Senate, along with recriminations for causing the drop in the stock market by rejecting the bill in the first vote, placed pressure on the House of Representatives to successfully pass the amended legislation.

To that end, on Oct. 3, 2008, the United **States** House of Representatives voted in favor of the bailout package. As before, significantly more Democrats voted to pass the bill than Republicans in the lower chamber.

President George W. Bush quickly signed the bill into law.

A week later, the Dow Jones industrial average in the United **States** had suffered its worse week ever, plunging more than 18 percent. With further losses and increasing lack of confidence looming, there was growing support for a plan that would allow the government to directly purchase bank stock using part of the \$700 billion from the bailout package just passed into law. It was hoped that this measure, which was akin to partial nationalization, would spur banks to recommence lending.

Also gaining steam was a congressional plan, led by House Speaker Pelosi, to advance an economic relief package aimed at the middle class. This package would include unemployment benefits, funding for food stamps, tax rebates and financing for infrastructure and public works projects. Republicans expressed some lukewarm support for the proposal but the second-ranking House Republican, Representative Blunt of Missouri, rejected the idea of big public works projects.

For his part, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson warned that isolationism and protectionism could exacerbate the financial crisis, and said that the flow of goods, services and capital should not be limited. His statements came at a time when the International Monetary Fund and World Bank were convening their annual meetings and appeared to be aimed at staving off "inward-looking policies." by these institutions. World Bank President Robert Zoellick said that institution would work to protect impoverished countries as well as vulnerable and developing economies.

By Oct. 14, 2008, the United **States** made the historic decision to take equity stakes of about \$250 billion in financial institutions. This measure followed a similar decision in the United Kingdom and was intended to recapitalize banks and revitalize the economy.

Treasury Secretary Paulson characterized the government ownership of large banking institutions "objectionable," but conceded that there was no other option. These radical moves, however, appeared to be garnering positive results with interest rates for interbank loans falling for two days in a row. Meanwhile, Wall Street opened with some degree of volatility -- first soaring upward and then moving downwards, but ultimately closing its session with moderate losses.

General Election 2008:

As noted above, the year 2008 began with the presidential primaries and caucuses of the two main political parties - Republican and Democratic -- as they charted the course of choosing their respective nominees, in anticipation of the 2008 presidential election.

Ultimately, Barack Obama defeated Hillary Rodham Clinton to become the Democratic nominee and the first African American elected by either of the two major parties as presidential nominee. John McCain succeeded in achieving what George W. Bush denied him in 2000 by becoming the Republican presidential nominee. As well, Democrats were hoping to hold on or even extend their majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives.

Vice Presidential Options

With the primary election process completed in the United **States** and the presumptive presidential nominees of the two main parties chosen, attention turned to their possible running mates.

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Republicans --

For Republican presumptive nominee John McCain, two former rivals were expected to factor highly on his list of possible picks for the position of vice president -- former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Huckabee could shore up the conservative evangelical base, which has had a thorny relationship with McCain, and he could also consolidate the southern states. Romney, with his Michigan roots, could help make that state competitive; his ties with western states could also assist in that region. Perhaps more importantly, Romney's business background could balance McCain's military credentials and admitted lack of expertise on economic matters.

Other options for McCain included four governors: Sanford of South Carolina would be a safe choice likely to shore up the same base as Huckabee; Pawlenty of Minnesota could help turn that blue state red; Jindal of Louisiana would be the first Asian-American vice presidential candidate; Crist of Florida could ensure 27 very important electoral votes.

Other wild card options included several women: Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, former CEO Carly Fiorina, eBay head Meg Whitman and Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. It should be noted, though, that Palin was embroiled in a political scandal in Alaska and so was regarded as a long shot possibility. It was believed that any of these women could attract disgruntled female Hillary Clinton supporters to the McCain fold. As well, there was the newly emerging prospect of United States trade representative Rob Portman of Ohio.

Democrats --

For Democratic presumptive nominee Barack Obama, the biggest question was: "Will he pick Hillary?" That is to say, would Obama pick his former rival, Hillary Rodham Clinton, as his vice presidential selection? Some observers believed that this proposed "dream ticket" could advance party unity, which had been somewhat strained during the protracted and sometimes acrimonious primary battle. Others, however, suggested that Clinton's presence on the ticket would negate Obama's central theme of change. Nevertheless, Clinton indicated her openness to taking the slot of Vice President in the interests of winning the White House in November 2008 in the days after Obama won the Democratic nomination; she later amended her position noting that she was not specifically seeking that position. Clinton has enjoyed a strong base of support among women and working class voters; she also shows remarkable strength in key states such as Ohio and Florida.

Other than Clinton, two of Obama's close friends and female supporters -- Governor Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas and Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri -- may well be on Obama's list, especially if there is a need to secure the female vote or make the heartland states competitive. One of Clinton's stalwarts, centrist Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana, was also said to be considered and could well put his red state's electoral votes in play.

Individuals with strong military and foreign policy experience are expected to factor highly on Obama's list of considerations. Among these are former Supreme Allied NATO Commander Wesley Clark, former Senator Sam Nunn and former rival Senator Joseph Biden whose position as the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has resulted in unquestionable expertise on these matters. Clark and Nunn would make Arkansas and Georgia competitive respectively.

Another former rival that might have been on Obama's short list was former Senator John Edwards.

While he has been down the vice presidential path before (unsuccessfully in 2004), he enjoyed high favorability ratings and polled remarkably well in 2008. The unfortunate revelations about his personal life in mid-2008 undoubtedly ended any possibility of Edwards pursuing a political career in the foreseeable future.

When it comes to putting key states into play, three popular Virginians have been mentioned frequently: Governor Tim Kaine, former Governor (now running for Senate) Mark Warner, and current Senator Jim Webb. Any one of the Virginia triad could help turn Virginia blue. Finally, in the wild card category, Republican Senator Chuck Hagel -- a harsh critic of the Iraq war -- has signaled his interest in teaming up with Obama.

Amplify or fill the gap?

In the weeks prior to Obama's announcement that Biden was chosen as his vice presidential selection, there was much speculation about the contenders on his hypothetical "short list." In fact, Obama's campaign had managed to remain tight-lipped about the selection process, thus suggesting that almost all media reports on the subject were reliant on questionable sources. That said, there was some sense that Obama had narrowed his choices down to simpatico associates, such as Kaine and Sebelius, Clinton stalwart Bayh, as well as credentials-laden Biden. Clinton, by contrast, did not appear to be a viable option, while a fairly unknown Democratic Congressman Chet Edwards, who has represented President Bush's Crawford district, was said to have been vetted. Journalists were camping out at the houses of these prospects, searching for any clue as to who might be selected. A visit to Kaine's office and a joint campaign appearance with Bayh led to wild speculation that either of these two men might be the eventual choice. As conflict between Georgia and Russia broke out and the Georgian President requested Biden's influence, media pundits indicated that current events might boost the senator from Delaware's prospects.

Meanwhile, Obama's supporters waited with baited breath for their text messages and emails notifying them of his selection. Would he select someone fresh and new on the Washington scene, such as Kaine or Sebelius, to amplify his "change" theme? Or would he choose someone, such as Biden, whose gravitas and experience, could fill a perceived gap and ease the minds of some Democratic voters?

Obama picks Biden as running mate

In the days before announcing his selection Obama noted that he was looking for a vice president who was an independent thinker, who would challenge him on key issues, and act as a key advisor. That description seemed to indicate that Obama would seek someone outside his comfort circle.

On Aug. 23, 2008, it was announced that presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, had chosen Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware as his running mate.

News of Obama's selection was to be transmitted to the Democrat's supporters via text message and email before being released to the media, however, in the hours leading up to the official announcements, media reports indicated that Biden was Obama's likely choice.

The electronic messages went out a few hours later, the campaign website was updated, and the news became official.

Biden's selection ended hopes of the Obama-Clinton "dream team," however, his "blue collar" and Catholic background was expected to help Obama in these key constituencies. Additionally, the Obama campaign may have been hoping that Biden's expertise on foreign policy, as well as his overall gravitas, would augment voters' attraction to Obama by assuaging any naysayers' doubts over his perceived lack of experience. But Biden's unique personal history, as the senator with the least net personal wealth, and as a man who never actually moved to Washington D.C., preferring to take the train home each night to Delaware, also played into Obama's increasing concentration on the economic problems facing everyday working Americans.

Fellow Democrats, including Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Evan Bayh and Governor Kaine, as well as Republican cohorts Senator Lugar and Senator Hagel, responded enthusiastically to the news of Biden's selection. But the McCain camp was quick to pounce on the selection of Biden by running an advertisement showing the Delaware senator's criticism of Obama during the contested primary when the two men were rivals. McCain also released another advertisement actively courting angry Clinton supporters.

Obama and Biden appeared for the first time together later on Aug. 23, 2008 at a massive rally in Springfield, Ill.. Obama characterized Biden as a "man with a distinguished record and a fundamental decency" and pointed out that while Biden was a six-term senator, Washington had not changed the core of the man.

Meanwhile, Biden immediately assumed the role of attack dog by condemning McCain's shift in policy stances and negative campaign tactics.

Going Forward

Obama's selection of Biden came only days before the start of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) convention in Denver, Colorado, which was set to last from Aug. 25-28, 2008. At the DNC convention, Obama and Biden were officially nominated as their party's presidential team. In this way, Obama entered the history books as the first African American to ever win a major party's leadership nomination in the Western world.

Obama's acceptance address in front of a crowd of 85,000 at Invesco Field (locally known as "Mile High Stadium") was the most viewed political events in recent history and came on the anniversary of Martin Luther King's historic "I have Dream" speech.

The Dark Horse Selection

On Aug. 29, 2008 -- McCain's 72nd birthday and the notorious anniversary of Hurricane Katrina -- the presumptive Republican presidential nominee was expected to make his own announcement for the vice presidency.

Two of the McCain's aides anonymously leaked to the media that their boss was moving toward Romney as his final pick. Other insiders noted that Obama's selection of Biden meant that someone as inexperienced as Pawlenty could no longer be considered, while still others suggested that McCain might want to attract disgruntled Clinton supporters by selecting one of the female prospects. McCain and his new running mate were expected to travel to Minneapolis-St.Paul in Minnesota to commence the Republican National Committee (RNC) Convention there.

In the wee hours of Aug. 29, 2008, media speculation arose that both of the two Republican front runners for the vice presidency -- Romney and Pawlenty -- were no longer being considered. Suggestions of moderate selections, such as Independent Joe Lieberman and Governor Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania, had already been squashed since their pro-choice positions were deemed unacceptable to the religious and social conservatives. Presumably, a female selection, such as Kay Bailey Hutchison, who was also pro-choice in stance, would also be unlikely. Finally, it was announced that the Republican presumptive nominee, John McCain, had chosen a relative unknown, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, as his selection for vice president ahead of the RNC convention.

The selection of Palin appeared to leave most circles - political and media included -- in a state of shock. However, the conservative and religious base of the Republican Party quickly applauded the selection of Palin, whose hard-line views appeared to be harmonious with their own. Indeed, religious and social conservatives had little to quibble with Palin's stances against abortion in any circumstances, including rape and incest, her views against birth control, and strong evangelical beliefs. Palin's choice to have her fifth child, who suffered from Down's Syndrome, has been, in fact, been viewed as heroic by those on the religious right. Meanwhile, economic conservatives embraced her support for more drilling, including in the Alaska Wildlife Reserve. Republican surrogates quickly pointed to Palin's folksy appeal as a former beauty contestant, a mother of five who had served as the president of the Parent Teachers' Association, and as a woman who hunted, fished, and regularly made moose burgers. Perhaps most importantly, she sported the distinction of being the most popular governor in the United States, according to surveys.

During his formal announcement at a rally in Ohio, McCain said that he had selected Palin because of her reform agenda, saying "She's exactly who I need, who this country needs, to help me fight to turn the same old Washington politics on its head." McCain also described Palin as "his soulmate." But Democrats and other critics characterized the selection as a "desperate Hail Mary pass" by a man who knew that he was unlikely to win by continuing along the current path. They also railed at her relative lack of credentials as a mayor of a tiny Alaskan town that she had guided into \$20 million in debt, and her short two year tenure as a governor of a sparsely-populated state who was facing an abuse of power investigation. The drama surrounding McCain's selection was not likely to end quickly, what with Palin acknowledging that her 17 years old daughter was pregnant.

At first, analysts suggested that McCain's selection of Palin was intended to peel off disgruntled Hillary Clinton supporters. But Palin's opposition to reproductive rights, her stance against equal pay for equal work, as well as her position against universal health care, were not likely to attract voters of Hillary Clinton who had not yet committed to Obama. Then, the rationale shifted to McCain's attempt to shore up the conservative and religious base of the party -- a tactic that had helped Bush win the 2004 presidential election in key swing states like Ohio.

While McCain's choice was deemed a "high risk/high reward" maneuver, on the eve of his own party's convention, he managed to invigorate his campaign, revitalize the Republican base, and change the narrative from one centering on Obama's historic acceptance speech and successful convention. At the same time, the RNC convention's schedule was expected to be somewhat compromised by the public's attention on Hurricane Gustav, which was headed to the state of Louisiana three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. That said, the Palin's strong speech at the convention appeared to boost the Republicans' prospects in September 2008.

Presidential Election Developments

Soon after the Republican National Convention, the Republican presidential ticket had essentially erased any gains made by their Democratic counterparts and were even advancing a small lead in some polls. In this way, two months before the election, the presidential race was a dead heat.

However, just weeks later, with bad publicity for the Republican vice presidential nominee due to the "Troopergate" scandal and an embarrassing interview on CBS, a collapsing economy, and strong debate performances by Obama and Biden, the Democratic ticket was returning to a position of strength in the polls.

Of particular significance was the looming credit crisis, which threatened to financial regime of the country and precipitated a government bail-out package valued at more than \$700 billion. The situation caused public outrage and heightened already-high anxieties about the economy. The situation had political implications and was met with differing feedback from the two presidential contenders looking to succeed President Bush.

Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama appeared to acknowledge the potential global financial implications. He, like Congressional Democrats, placed the blame for the credit crisis squarely on Republicans, the Bush administration and the lack of regulation, but he also issued cautious support for the crafting of a compromise solution. Obama demanded that any rescue package would have to contain specific amendments, ensuring transparency, accountability, greater oversight, taxpayer equity upside, as well as relief for homeowners in trouble.

Republican presidential nominee John McCain was on the record saying repeatedly that the "fundamentals of the economy" were solid. But by Sept. 24, 2008, McCain was expressing alarm that the country could plunge into a depression within days without immediate action. To that end, he announced he was "suspending" his campaign and going to Washington D.C., to try to help resolve the situation.

McCain also said he would not attend the scheduled presidential debate unless there was an agreement on the rescue package. The situation resulted in sharp criticism from leading Democrats, such as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who noted that all the relevant players on finance and banking committees in both congressional chambers were already working long hours to reach an agreement. Obama echoed a similar note, expressing reticence about injecting presidential politics into the crisis. For his part, McCain later announced that he would debate since he could monitor the financial situation remotely.

The Presidential Debates

The first presidential debate between Republican nominee John McCain and Democratic nominee Barack Obama, took place at the close of September 2008. According to polling data taken after the debate, the Democrat appeared to have won against his Republican rival. Analysts said that Obama held his own against McCain in the area of foreign relations, where the Republican was supposed to have held a much-vaunted advantage. As well, Obama was viewed as more conversant on economic issues at a time when economic anxieties are high, perhaps aiding the perception that he won the debate.

A week later, the vice presidential debate between Republican nominee Sarah Palin and Democratic nominee Joseph Biden ensued. Palin exceeded expectations in her debate against Biden, which followed on the heels of a series of interviews on CBS News in which she fared poorly on a vast variety of issues ranging from dealing with the credit crisis to foreign policy credentials. In the debate, she was able to showcase greater facility for the subject matter although not sufficiently to beat credentials-laden Biden in public opinion. Nevertheless, post-debate polling showed that Biden had scored a decisive victory against Palin.

A third debate, in the town hall style, was set for Oct. 7, 2008 between McCain and Obama and promised to be far more contentious. At issue were accusations by the McCain-Palin team that Obama had associations with shady characters, such as William Ayers, who was involved in an act of domestic terrorism when Obama was a child. This claim was countered by the Obama-Biden camp in a video showcasing McCain's spurious dealings involving the infamous Keating 5 scandal that occurred during the savings and loans crisis. The promise of fireworks was not realized and a discussion of foreign and domestic issues ensued instead, peppered with occasional frostiness by McCain toward Obama. The townhall format, which was supposed to favor McCain, did little to inhibit Obama. Post-debate polls showed that the Democrat was viewed as having won the debate handily.

The final debate between the two presidential contenders was set for Oct. 15, 2008. In the days leading up to that debate, the Ayers controversy continued to dominate the air waves, albeit with little effect in the polls that showed the Democrat leading the Republican. In this debate, McCain aggressively argued against Obama in area ranging from policy, to character and, of course, experience. As before, Obama stoically made his case and was rewarded, as before, with positive feedback in post-debate polls. In this way, the debates did little to break Obama's momentum and left McCain trying to make up ground less than a month before election day.

Toward Election Day

Following the debates, there was increasing rancor over the tone of Republican rallies, in which Republican supporters were heard screaming incendiary attacks against Obama. Media outlets recorded supporters of McCain and Palin accusing Obama of being a terrorist and, in at least one case, the words "Kill Him" were registered. As well, leading Republicans, such as Representative LaHood of Illinois, sought to distance themselves and called for more civil discourse.

Christopher Buckley -- the son of conservative icon William Buckley, said that he was endorsing Obama. Perhaps most importantly, McCain himself countered his own supporters at rallies, sometimes even earning negative feedback as a result.

Meanwhile, an abuse of power investigation in Alaska on Palin came to a close on Oct. 10, 2008 and found that the Alaska governor had abused her power in a case that had come to be known as "Troopergate." Palin, however, gained more attention as the target of spoofs and jokes on late night talk shows. With an eye on easing her controversial image, she was the guest on the comedy show Saturday Night Live on Oct. 18, 2008.

With two weeks to go before election day in the United States, the two presidential rivals were trading barbs over their respective tax plans. McCain characterized Obama's tax cut plan for the middle class as a "government giveaway" and hinted at socialism during a radio address.

McCain was also looking to exploit a statement made by Obama in a conversation with a voter, later referred to as "Joe the Plumber," that he would "spread the wealth around" in reference to the Democrat's progressive taxation scheme. McCain suggested that the statement was proof of Obama's socialistic tendencies. However, this argument was somewhat undercut by the revelation that the Republican Party had spent \$150,000 on clothing for Palin, thus contradicting the campaign's advocacy on behalf of "everyday people such as "Joe the Plumber."

For his part, Obama addressed a crowd of more than 100,000 in St. Louis and criticized McCain for wanting to ease the tax burden of already-wealthy corporations. He continued to press his argument in favor of middle class economic relief, which was resonating with people anxious about the poor health of the economy. He also continued to link McCain with the highly unpopular Bush administration, relentlessly drawing attention to McCain's

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voting record that was supportive of the president's agenda 90 percent of the time. He also warned that in a time of economic crisis, all of his proposals could not be achieved immediately.

Obama's prospects were likely boosted by the endorsement of former Secretary of State Colin Powell -- a well-respected Republican who served in several administrations. Powell said he was endorsing Obama on the NBC television news show Meet the Press, drawing attention to the Democrat's steadiness at the time when the global financial crisis emerged, his internationalist outlook, as well as the impact on the United States' global image, should Obama win the presidency. Powell indicated that despite his long standing friendship with McCain, the choice of Palin as vice president had contributed to his decision to back Obama. Powell also delivered a scathing rebuke of the current Republican Party, which he said had strayed too far to the right, and he condemned the McCain campaign's tactics as being divisive.

Obama said he was "deeply humbled" by Powell's support. McCain reacted by pointing out that he had the support of other former secretaries of state.

Nine days before election day, McCain was a guest on the renowned NBC television show, Meet the Press, hosted by Tom Brokaw. There, McCain asserted that he was closing the gap with Obama despite much polling data showing the Democrat with a clear advantage. McCain said, "Those polls have consistently shown me much farther behind than we actually are. We're doing fine." Indeed, he suggested that he could well end up the victor saying, "We've closed in the last week and if we continue this close in the next week you're going to be up very late on election night."

Speaking at rallies later in the day in Iowa and Ohio, McCain echoed a similar theme and said that he would fight to win the presidency.

As the election of 2008 in the United States entered its final stretch, the Democratic presidential ticket of Barack Obama and Joseph Biden was leading in the national polls against the Republican presidential ticket of John McCain and Sarah Palin.

Obama's campaign, which posted a record monthly haul of \$150 million, was enjoying a financial advantage, which translated into the Democrat massively outspending the Republican in television advertising. In order to be competitive on the airwaves, McCain's campaign decided to cut back on their ground efforts in the last days of the election campaign.

That said, Obama was winning the endorsement war by bagging the majority of newspaper endorsements -- including publications in Alaska and Arizona.

Meanwhile, Obama continued to attract large crowds at rallies. On the same day that McCain was interviewed on Meet the Press, Obama matched his Missouri record in Denver where he attracted another 100,000 in the audience.

Only days before election day, Obama had another massive rally in Ohio where rock star Bruce Springsteen -- a staunch Obama-Biden supporter -- played to a crowd numbering around 100,000. McCain was not to be outdone with the start power. He held his own Ohio rally with actor and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and also appeared on the NBC show Saturday Night Live.

State of the Presidential Race

With two days to go until election day, polls showed Obama-Biden consistently leading McCain-Palin in the popular vote. Fox News and Battleground showed the tightest win for the Democratic ticket of about three to four percentage points over the Republican ticket. The lead for the Democratic ticket was around a five-point race according to several daily trackers including Rasmussen and Diago/Hotline. Zogby, the Pew Institute, Research 2000, Marist, CNN/Time and NBC/Wall Street Journal showed the Democratic ticket with a lead of about six to eight

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percent. At the same time, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times and the final Gallup poll all showed double-digit leads for the Democratic ticket over the Republican counterparts.

The race was more variable in the electoral college with several states up for grabs. Nevertheless, Obama-Biden appeared to be holding a modest advantage in the effort to secure 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency.

Stated differently, Obama-Biden securely held the 252 electoral votes won by Kerry in 2004 and was leading in several key battleground states. The Democrats' path to 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency could thusly be regarded as a far easier task than McCain-Palin, who were together playing defense in many states won by Bush in 2004. Indeed, McCain-Palin had less than 200 electoral votes securely in the Republican column and, thusly, were faced with a tough road ahead of them to capture 270 electoral votes needed for victory.

New Hampshire was won by Bush in 2000 and turned blue for Kerry in 2004. In 2008, it was thought to be competitive for both McCain-Palin and Obama-Biden. On the verge of the election, though, it appeared that the Granite state would likely remain with the Democrats.

Michigan, a traditional battleground state,

voted Democratic in 2000 and 2004. Early in the race, the McCain-Palin ticket was hoping to contest Michigan and shift it to the Republican column. But economic woes have pushed Michigan in an increasingly Democratic direction and by October 2008, this state was likely to go even more strongly for the Democratic nominees than the last two elections. Two days before the election, it was apparent that Obama-Biden would hold Michigan in the Democratic column.

Other battlegrounds, Wisconsin and Minnesota, which narrowly voted Democratic in 2000 and 2004, were on McCain-Palin's radar early in the race. However, these two states have solidified for Obama-Biden and were expected to reside in the Democratic column.

Normally, Pennsylvania, which voted Democratic in the last two elections, sits in the toss-up column as election day draws near, with the Democrats pulling out a close victory at the end. But 2008 was no normal year and in October 2008, the Obama-Biden ticket was sporting a healthy lead against McCain in Pennsylvania. With their pathway to the magic number of 270 severely compromised, the McCain-Palin camp said that Pennsylvania was at the top of its target list and launched a fierce offensive there in the weeks ahead of the election. Two days before the election, McCain-Palin had cut into Obama-Biden's lead, narrowing the Democrats' advantage to single digits. That said, barring some massive shift in the 24 hours before voters went to the polls, it was expected that Obama-Biden, like Gore in 2000 and Kerry in 2004, would carry this swing state for the Democrats in 2008.

The traditional battleground states – Florida and Ohio -- remained in that category. Although both states went Republican in 2000 and 2004, the Obama-Biden ticket was carrying out strong and competitive fights to the finish in both states. Composite scores of recent polls showed the Democrats with leads in both battleground states. That said, as election day drew near, some polls showed their advantage within the margin of error. Another battleground, Missouri, was leaning Republican until October 2008. New polling data suggested Obama-Biden was launching a strong offense in this state as well. Two days ahead of the election, all three states remained in toss-up territory, with McCain-Palin especially anxious to hold them in the Republican fold.

Iowa has had a more tumultuous voting record in recent times. This state was won by Gore in 2000 and turned red for Bush in 2004; in 2008, the state that gave Obama his first primary victory was leaning clearly towards him in the general election as well.

Western terrain has been emerging as the new battleground - New Mexico, Nevada, and Colorado. All three were Republican states in 2004 but presented ripe opportunities for Obama-Biden in 2008.

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The Democrats were advancing a healthy lead in New Mexico, a consistent advantage in Colorado, and a slight lead in Nevada. McCain's own Western roots in Arizona were not helping him in this region where the Obama-Biden ticket was putting up a strong fight. In fact, polls taken within a week of election day showed McCain holding a shrinking lead over Obama in his own home state. This resulted in the Obama-Biden campaign's last minute decision to purchase advertising in Arizona.

Virginia has become another new battleground state in recent years. Reliably red for Republicans for decades in presidential elections, the Obama-Biden ticket had been polling strongly against McCain-Palin here and advancing a modest but consistent lead in the polls. The Democrats were keen to turn this Republican stronghold blue. On the verge of election day, this state leaned slightly toward Obama-Biden.

Another new battleground state was ruby red North Carolina, where Obama-Biden went from a small deficit in the polls a month before the election, to pulling even with only weeks to go. The Democrats then moved into a small lead at a time when early voting had already begun.

Just before Nov. 4, 2008, the McCain-Palin was fighting back and the race was a dead heat to the finish. As such, North Carolina was, perhaps, the most surprising battleground development.

Until recently, Indiana was in the McCain column, but by October 2008, Obama was launching a strong fight to the finish in this traditionally Republican state. Based on historic trends, it was assumed that McCain would ultimately carry this state, however, Obama's strong performance in the state that neighbors his home state of Illinois, augmented by favorable polling data, meant that Indiana was another surprising battleground state along the lines of North Carolina. On the verge of election day, this state was a dead heat, albeit with a slight Republican slant.

Blue collar West Virginia went for Bush in 2000 and 2004, and based on historic and demographic trends, the McCain-Palin ticket was expected to carry the state in 2008. However, Obama and Biden were running far more competitively than expected in Appalachian country.

North Dakota appeared to buck the trend and embrace Obama-Biden earlier in 2008. But by the summer, it resorted to expectations and McCain-Palin had a steady lead here. A month before the election and the Democrats were surging again and making this state competitive. There was insufficient polling data to call it a trend, but the Obama-Biden campaign decided to spend some advertising money in North Dakota in the hopes of snatching this state from the Republicans. Montana appeared to be moving in a similar direction and the Obama-Biden campaign decided to contest this mountain west red state as well. Ultimately, both states were expected to end up in the Republican column but with tighter results that could have been anticipated months ago.

Earlier in the campaign, Obama-Biden's camp said it would be competitive in Georgia. But, as the general election campaign transpired, not even Barr's presence on the ballot, which would take some votes away from McCain-Palin, was moving this state from red to blue. Fast-forward to late October 2008 and things had changed.

The Democrats were trailing the Republicans only slightly in Georgia where early voting turnout was massive. The Obama-Biden ticket was hoping for an upset while McCain and Palin were hoping to hold this state.

CountryWatch Outlook on Presidential Race --

Ahead of the election, CountryWatch forecast that Barack Obama and Joseph Biden would win the presidential election in the United States decisively with no less than 291 electoral votes thanks to the Kerry coalition of states plus the following Bush states: Virginia, Colorado, Iowa, New Mexico, Nevada. Obama-Biden could extend that lead further beyond the 300 electoral vote threshold, if they hold on to their polling advantages in Florida and Ohio. Obama-Biden could approach landslide territory should they additionally secure victories in any of these states: North Carolina, Missouri and Indiana. Further encroachment deep into Republican territory could signal a political realignment unseen in recent times.

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For their parts, John McCain and Sarah Palin could yet secure the presidency if turnout in battleground states is lower than anticipated. Low voter turnout could prevent Obama-Biden from winning some of the aforementioned battleground states where they are expected to perform well. A surprise victory for the Republicans in Pennsylvania would augur an unanticipated political "comeback" for the McCain-Palin ticket. Also possible was the so-called "Bradley" effect in which polling data overestimates support of a black candidate due to inaccurate reporting of preferences to pollsters.

Shifts in key demographic groups on election day could plausibly change the outcome of the election, however, a McCain-Palin victory was regarded as a "long -shot" proposition.

Thus, assuming polling data was credible and turnout was high for this historic election, CountryWatch expected Barack Obama to become the 44th president of the United States.

Election Day in the United States

Heavy voter turnout marked Election Day -- Nov. 4, 2008 -- as Americans cast their ballots for a new president. As polls closed on the west coast of the United States, it was clear that Barack Obama would carry enough states to cross the 270 electoral vote threshold needed to win the presidency of the United States. In this way, he made history by becoming the first African American to win that post. As the votes continued to be counted from state to state, it was clear that he was on track for a landslide victory.

Indeed, the Democratic ticket of Obama-Biden decisively carried the Kerry coalition of states, including the highly coveted state of Pennsylvania, as well as the following Bush states: Ohio, Florida, Virginia, Iowa, Indiana, North Carolina, Colorado and New Mexico, Nevada, and one congressional district in Nebraska, for a landslide victory of 365 electoral votes.

McCain-Palin carried only 173 electoral votes.

In terms of the popular vote, President-elect Barack Obama and Vice President-elect Joseph Biden on the Democratic ticket won a decisive victory over their Republican counterparts John McCain and Sarah Palin on Nov. 4, 2008, with 52.7 percent of the vote share to 45.9 percent. Obama-Biden also garnered a record popular vote count of close to 67 million with McCain-Palin acquiring 58 million.

Victory –

Obama-Biden's stunning slate of victories in most of the key battleground states was proof that the country was in the mood for change; it also presented evidence that the American political landscape was in a state of transformation.

With the outcome uncontestable, John McCain conceded defeat graciously from the Biltmore Hotel grounds in his home state of Arizona. In his speech, he acknowledged the historic candidacy of Obama and expressed congratulations and goodwill to his rival.

Soon after, President-Elect Obama delivered a short but moving victory speech at Grant Park in Chicago amidst an audience of more than 100,000. President-Elect Obama emphasized the people-powered campaign that had propelled him toward his historic victory and acknowledged that a tough road lay ahead. He also paid homage to McCain's service to the country, and he struck a conciliatory note as he called for Democrats and Republicans to come together for the good of the nation. Tacitly acknowledging that his speech was addressing a transnational audience, President-Elect Obama indicated that his presidency would deal strongly with enemies, but that it would foreground diplomacy and goodwill in the international arena.

Key excerpt of President-Elect Obama's victory speech –

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The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America – I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you – we as a people will get there.

There will be setbacks and false starts. There are many who won't agree with every decision or policy I make as President, and we know that government can't solve every problem. But I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face. I will listen to you, especially when we disagree. And above all, I will ask you join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it's been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years – block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand.

Other Election 2008 Developments

Senate --

CountryWatch projected that the Democrats would have a net pick-up of at least four seats and as many of eight seats. Since Democrats and two Independents controlled 51 seats, even victory in eight seats would place them just short of the ninth seat needed to secure a filibuster-proof super-majority.

Final Result:

Democrats held their only vulnerable seat in Louisiana (Landrieu) while winning the following five seats -- Virginia (Warner), New Hampshire (Shaheen), New Mexico (Udall), Colorado (Udall), North Carolina (Hagen), Oregon (Merkeley), and Alaska (Begich) -- for a total of 58 seats in the Senate. At the time of writing, one seats was unofficially won by the Democrats in Minnesota (Franken), although the Republican rival (Coleman) was contesting that outcome legally. Assuming the legal process, once exhausted, did not change the outcome of that race, then the Democrats would hold control of 59 seats. Because Republicans held on to the Georgia seat (Chambliss) in the run-off, the Democrats were denied a filibuster-proof super-majority. Nevertheless, the Democrats strongly consolidated their control over the upper chamber.

House of Representatives --

CountryWatch projected that Democrats would easily hold the House of Representatives and pick up around 15-20 seats.

Final Result:

Republicans lost 21 seats while Democrats made gains for a net result of Republicans holding 178 seats in the lower house of Congress and Democrats extending their majority to 257.

Editor's Note:

For the full slate of election coverage, including developments throughout 2008 from the primaries to election day, as well as analysis and results, see the CountryWatch Special Elections Report available from the home page of the CountryWatch.com website.

Special Entry:

As his time in office draws to a close, Bush reflects on United States' efforts in Iraq

In December 2008, United States President George W. Bush arrived on Air Force One at the Baghdad International Airport on a surprise visit to Iraq. For his first order of business, Bush met with Iraqi head of state, President Jalal Talabani, at the presidential palace in the Green Zone. Describing United States' efforts in Iraq, which would no doubt shape his political legacy for generations to come, Bush said, "The work hasn't been easy but it's been necessary for American security, Iraqi hope and world peace."

But the political legacy of the 43rd president of the United States was likely to be mired by criticisms about the rationale for war, such as the non-existent weapons of mass destruction, the Bush Doctrine of pre-emption, the steep death toll among Iraqis and American troops, the financial costs of what some have called "an optional war," as well as a lack of planning and progress on the reconstruction front. To that latter end, a United States government report cast a scathing depiction of the power struggles and lack of cultural knowledge among the American planners of the war of the Iraqi landscape. According to the New York Times, the report also pegged the astronomical cost of the reconstruction effort alone at more than \$100 billion.

Nevertheless, with United States troops now in Iraq, attention was on their future role and their potential withdrawal.

As such, Bush's primary rationale for his trip to Iraq was to formalize a new security agreement with that country. Bush, along with the Iraqi head of government, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, signed the Status of Forces Agreement between their respective countries. That agreement provides for the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq in 2011. The Status of Forces Agreement notes that an absolute final date would be dependent on the security situation. The objective of the concord is to ultimately hand over responsibility for security to Iraqi forces.

Bush, who was in Iraq five weeks before the handover of power to his successor, President-Elect Barack Obama, said that the war in Iraq was not at an end and that there was further work to be done.

This statement, however, was somewhat at odds with a statement by United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates who said that the Iraq mission was in its "endgame."

The surprise visit by Bush, as well as the formalization of Status of Forces Agreement, were both overshadowed by an incident involving a journalist who threw shoes at the American president during a news conference. As shown in media broadcasts of the incident, an Iraqi journalist shouted, "This is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, dog" and then threw two of his shoes at the American president. Security guards subsequently escorted the journalist out of the news conference.

Referring to a person as a "dog" is considered derogatory in Islamic circles while the soles of shoes are regarded as a sign of insult in Arab culture. Indeed, Iraqis threw shoes at Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad after the Iraqi leader was ousted from power. Thus, it could be said that the journalist was passionately -- and symbolically -- registering his discontent with the presence of Bush in Iraq for the signing ceremony.

For his part, Bush demonstrated quick reflexes and was able to dodge the incoming footwear. Bush also expressed good humor about the incident saying to the Associated Press, "All I can report is a size 10."

Editor's Note:

President George W. Bush's successor, President-Elect Barack Obama has said that United States combat troops will come home from Iraq in approximately one year after he takes office. Barack Obama was to be inaugurated into office as the 44th president of the United States on Jan. 20, 2009.

President-Elect Obama on Future Policy

Meanwhile, in his first television interview since Nov. 4, 2008, President-Elect Barack Obama painted a portrait of his incoming administration on the CBS show, 60 Minutes. Signaling a sharp change on the foreign policy front, President-Elect Obama said that he intended to withdraw United States troops from Iraq and strengthen the military effort against al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

On the first matter, President-Elect Obama said that upon taking office, he would call in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national security apparatus to execute a phased troop withdrawal plan from Iraq. On the second matter, he noted that with a worsening security situation in Afghanistan, there was a need to "shore up those efforts." The

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incoming United States president also asserted that a top priority for his administration would be "to stamp out al-Qaida once and for all," including the capture or killing of Osama Bin Laden.

President-Elect Obama also said that he intended to repair the United States' moral standing on the world stage. In a move both symbolically and concretely focused on such an end, the incoming president of the United States said that he would close Guantanamo Bay -- the prison camp that has been at the center of controversy and legal debate. Moreover, President-Elect Obama made clear that his administration would act in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. He said, "I'm going to make sure that we don't torture."

Those two measures, said President-Elect Obama, "are part and parcel of an effort to regain America's moral stature in the world."

In regard to the most pressing issue of the day, President-Elect Obama said that he would do "whatever it takes" to stabilize his country's struggling economy. To that end, he emphasized the need to work with the automobile industry, which was in dire need of both assistance and reform. He also indicated the importance of helping homeowners who were having trouble in paying their mortgages.

Acknowledging that the United States was faced with one of the greatest economic challenges in recent times, as evidenced by the sharp rise in unemployment in recent months, President-Elect Obama also called on Congress to work on a rescue plan that would create jobs. He noted that economists on the right and left sides of the political divide agreed that economic stimulus was needed immediately. President-Elect Obama said, "We're going to have to spend money now." He added, "And that we shouldn't worry about the deficit next year or even the year after; that short term, the most important thing is that we avoid a deepening recession."

The incoming American president was asked why Treasury Secretary Paulson's initiatives, including the \$757 billion bailout package to alleviate the credit crisis, had not yielded optimal results. In answering that question, Obama suggested that without such strong action, it was possible that the financial scenario could have been far worse.

Key Cabinet Appointments in the incoming Obama administration--

Obama completes his selection of Cabinet appointments; choices indicate diversity and area expertise

The Economic Team --

As the United States' economy continued to falter, marked by a record number of individuals joining the ranks of the unemployed, the Obama team decided to accelerate its announcement of President-Elect Obama's economic team. To that end, President-Elect Obama was expected to unveil the key economic players on Nov. 24, 2008.

Days before, on Nov. 21, 2008, it was revealed that two well-renowned veterans of the Clinton administration would figure highly in the incoming Obama administration. Specifically, Timothy Geithner, the head of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, was reported to have been selected as the new treasury secretary.

As well, Lawrence "Larry" Summers, the treasury secretary who succeeded Robert Rubin in the Clinton administration, was expected to be named as the director of the National Economic Council.

On Nov. 24, 2008, the nominations of Geithner and Summers were officially announced along with two other nominations: (1) respected economic theorist Christine Romer as the head of the Council of Economic Advisors; and (2) Melanie Brown, who served as chief counsel to Senator Edward Kennedy, as the head of the Domestic Policy Council.

Key Players on Foreign Policy and National Security --

President-Elect Barack Obama was set to formally announce key nominations to his foreign policy and national security team by the start of December 2008.

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Among these, the marquee appointment was expected to be Hillary Rodham Clinton as Secretary of State. Earlier, as speculation increased about the prospect of Hillary Clinton becoming the United States' top diplomat, media sources, including the New York Times and NBC News, reported that Clinton would indeed resign from her Senate position to become the new Secretary of State in an incoming Obama administration.

For its part, Clinton's office declined to confirm the news but noted that discussions were "very much on track."

News sources indicated that a formal announcement could come after the national Thanksgiving holiday.

In addition, outgoing President Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates was expected to remain in that post, at least temporarily. Gates was appointed by Bush following the resignation of the much-criticized Rumsfeld from that role.

Two non-cabinet level positions, which were nonetheless expected to carry much influence in the current global climate of instability, included the following: Retired Marine General James L. Jones for National Security Advisor and Obama's campaign advisor on foreign policy, Susan Rice, as the United Nations Ambassador.

In January 2009, President-Elect Barack Obama named Leon Panetta -- a veteran congressman and President Clinton's former chief of staff -- as his choice to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Obama appeared to respond to skepticism about Panetta's lack of intelligence experience by describing his choice to head the CIA as an adviser who would have his "complete trust and substantial clout." Indeed, Obama appeared to indicate that one part of Panetta's appeal was the very fact that he came from outside the intelligence community, since he was seeking to reform certain aspects of the CIA. Indeed, Obama noted that he wanted the new CIA director to establish clear guidelines against abusive interrogations and nonpolitical analysis of intelligence data. Panetta's strenuous condemnation of torture, his stellar record as an advocate of civil rights, as well as his strong credentials as a reformist-minded bureaucrat, may well have cast him as a suitable candidate for the job, in the view of the president-elect.

There were two other intelligence team members named with professional experience. Dennis Blair, a retired admiral was named director of national intelligence, and was tasked with supervising all 16 intelligence agencies, including the CIA. As well, John Brennan, a specialist in counterterrorism, was named as a special adviser on homeland security to the president.

The Energy and Environment Experts --

In early December 2008, President-Elect Barack Obama followed through with his campaign promise to focus on renewable energy with an Energy Secretary nominee who boasts both scientific expertise and stellar credentials in the realm of green technology.

Obama's selection was Nobel physics laureate, Steven Chu, who has been at the helm of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory since August 2004. Under Chu's leadership, the laboratory has concentrated on the development of new alternative energy technologies. Moreover, Chu gained a reputation as an advocate for energy efficiency as a way of countering global warming and climate change.

In addition to Chu, Obama selected veteran regulators from diverse backgrounds to fill three key positions on his team with a focus on the environment and climate-change.

To that end, Lisa P. Jackson, the former head of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the former chief of staff to New Jersey Governor Corzine, was to be named as the new head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

As well, Carol M. Browner, who worked as an Environmental Protection Agency administrator under President Bill Clinton, was expected to be named to a new White House post overseeing energy, environmental and climate policies.

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Nancy Sutley, the deputy mayor of Los Angeles for energy and environment, was to be named as the chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

With an emphasis on the importance of science, Obama selected another four scientists for key posts in a bid to aggressively confront global warming.

John Holdren, a Harvard physicist, was named as Obama's science adviser as director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Holdren was also set to direct the president's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology. Holdren's co-chairs were to be a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, Harold Varmus, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Eric Lander, who specialized in human genome research.

As well, Jane Lubchenco, a Oregon State University professor specializing in over-fishing and climate change, as well as a forceful advocate of government action on climate change, was named to lead the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which is responsible for the lion's share of government's research on global warming.

In a radio address, Obama said, "It's time we once again put science at the top of our agenda and worked to restore America's place as the world leader in science and technology."

Obama noted that it was vital that facts and evidence are never manipulated or undermined by politics or ideology.

Other Important Cabinet Selections --

Eric Holder for Attorney General (Holder was the Deputy Attorney General under the Clinton administration)

Janet Napolitano for Homeland Security Secretary (Napolitano enjoys high approval ratings as the Governor of the border state of Arizona)

Shaun Donovan for Housing and Urban Development (Donovan was the New York housing commissioner)

Ken Salazar (Democratic Senator from Colorado) for Interior Secretary

Tim Vilsack (Democratic Governor of Iowa) for Agriculture Secretary

Arne Duncan (CEO of Chicago Public School) for Education Secretary

Eric Shinseki (former Chief of Staff of the Army) as Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Hilda Solis (Democratic congresswoman from California) for Labor Secretary

Ray LaHood (Republican congressman from Illinois) for Transportation Secretary

Ron Kirk (former Democratic Dallas mayor) as United States Trade Representative

Note also --

With the economy at stake, attention was on the Senate Finance Committee, which approved the nomination of Timothy Geithner as Treasury Secretary. Geithner's nomination hit a snag when some tax issues (now resolved) were revealed. Nevertheless, with the country suffering from a grave downturn, Geithner was confirmed when the full Senate voted on his candidacy. See below for a discussion of the economic stimulus package advanced in Congress.

In other developments, the president's selection for Health and Human Services Secretary, former Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschle, withdrew his candidacy due to tax liabilities that were paid late. Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius was named as a replacement for that role.

Earlier, Obama's nominee for Commerce Secretary, Bill Richardson, withdrew his nomination due to a pending investigation involving a company that did business with New Mexico -- the state where Richardson serves as governor -- but which also contributed to the governor's political campaign. Richardson has said he is certain the investigation will make it clear that he was involved in no wrong-doing, however, the inquiry could take time to

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complete and the public attention could hinder the Commerce Department's work. The Obama campaign accepted Richardson's withdrawal "with deep regret." Former Washington Governor Gary Locke was ultimately named as to head the Commerce Department.

Other Team Obama Appointments --

Chief of staff : Rahm Emanuel

Senior advisers : David Axelrod, Valerie Jarrett, Peter Rouse and John Podesta

Press secretary : Robert Gibbs

Director of Speechwriting: Jonathan Favreau

White House counsel : Greg Craig

Vice-President's Chief of Staff : Ron Klain

Note --

Obama's cabinet was a picture of diversity, with women, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Asian-Americans very much included in the mix. Meanwhile, many of his cabinet selections appeared to be of the technocratic variety, with clear expertise and/or experience in the areas to which they have been appointed. The exception was the choice of Panetta to head the CIA and in that case, Obama appeared to have purposefully sought out an intelligence outsider as discussed above.

Special Report:

BARACK OBAMA MAKES HISTORY: Obama inaugurated as 44th president of the United States; shatters barriers as first African-American president of the United States

Summary

On Jan. 20, 2009, Barack Obama was inaugurated into office as the 44th president of the United States. Obama made history by becoming the first African-American president of the United States. Joe Biden was also sworn into office as the nation's vice president.

Obama pays homage to Lincoln on historic train trip from Philadelphia to Washington D.C.

On Jan. 17, 2009, United States President-Elect Barack Obama paid homage to Abraham Lincoln. Like the great president who presided over the United States at a time of great peril -- the Civil War -- Obama has also called the state of Illinois home. Obama is said to have been greatly influenced by Lincoln and has endeavored to approach governing with the help of "a team of rivals," much like Lincoln.

Retracing the steps of Lincoln, Obama traveled by train from the birthplace of the republic in Philadelphia to the nation's capital in Washington, D.C. The train stopped in Wilmington, Delaware -- the home state of the vice president -- to pick up Vice President-Elect Joe Biden. The journey, which took the better part of the day, was met by cheering crowds as the train came to a slow roll at various towns along the way.

Just before he boarded the 80-year old train in Philadelphia, Obama said, "Let's make sure this election is not the end of what we do to change America, but just the beginning." He continued, "Let's seek a better world in our time."

At a brief stop in Baltimore, Obama, Biden and their spouses waved to jubilant supporters. Obama also called for national unity at a time when the nation was facing serious challenges.

Late in the day, the train came to a stop at Union Station in Washington, D.C., only a short distance from the venue where Obama would take the oath of office as the 44th president of the United States.

Obama talks of hope for the future at a pre-inauguration rally at the Lincoln Memorial

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Various renowned musical artists, including U2, James Taylor, Beyonce and John Legend, participated in a concert at a pre-inauguration rally in Washington D.C. on Jan. 18, 2009. The concert, which was titled "We are One," took place in a celebratory atmosphere.

Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, President-Elect Obama noted the severity of the challenges facing the country, including two wars and an economic crisis. But he also expressed optimism for the future and assured the crowds of ecstatic supporters that "anything is possible in America."

Recalling the aspirations of the founding fathers, Obama said, "Despite the enormity of the task that lies ahead - I stand here today as hopeful as ever that the United States of America will endure - that the dream of our founders will live on in our time."

Obama's victory an effect of Martin Luther King's dream

Jan. 19, 2009, was celebrated as a national holiday in the United States as Martin Luther King Day. Obama, Biden and their families called on fellow Americans to use the day that commemorates the civil rights leader in service to others.

The timing of the Martin Luther King celebration just ahead of Obama's inauguration has been regarded as significant. For many Americans, Obama's presidential victory symbolizes a consummation of Dr. King's vision of an inclusive America where all Americans have equal opportunity.

Obama himself has acknowledged the unprecedented nature of his presidency by saying that he hoped future generations would not view the notion of an African American president as a rarity.

Obama and Biden inaugurated into office

The inauguration ceremony commenced on a cold January morning in Washington, D.C., with Joe Biden being sworn into office with his wife Dr. Jill Biden by his side. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens issued the oath of office to the new vice president.

Then, Barack Obama was inaugurated into office, with his wife Michelle Obama by his side. Chief Justice John Roberts issued the oath of office to the new president.

President Obama then offered his inauguration address.

Included in that address was a sobering assessment of the country's vast array of challenges, along with confident reassurance that the American people would prevail, just as they have throughout the history of the American nation state. Indeed, President Obama called on Americans to choose "hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord."

President Obama forthrightly declared that his administration would adhere to the rule of law and constitutionality -- a likely rebuke of the controversial measures taken by the outgoing Bush administration. In a similarly critical tone, Obama decried the culture of greed, which he said had led to the current economic crisis; he called instead for "a new era of responsibility."

President Obama also addressed the international community, declaring that the community of nations would have a friend in America, but that the United States would not hesitate to deal decisively with enemies who would do harm.

The speech additionally included a nod to science, a call for compassion for the rest of the world's inhabitants, and an acknowledgment of the American ideals "that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."

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President Obama's inauguration was witnessed by between one and two million people in Washington D.C., as well as a national and international audience. Following the inauguration, the Obamas and the Bidens traveled partially in a motorcade and occasionally on foot to the viewing station for the inaugural parade. Along the way, they waved to throngs of jubilant supporters eager to witness history.

Editor's Note:

Barack Obama was inaugurated into office as the 44th president of the United States on the morning of Jan. 20, 2009. He placed his hand on the same bible used by Abraham Lincoln in 1861. Justice John Roberts administered the oath of office.

Ironically, the bible has constitutional symbolism in United States history. In 1857, Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney wrote, in the Dred Scott versus Sanford case, that African Americans could never become full citizens of the United States. Indeed, using intemperate language, Taney asserted that African Americans were "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." It was a polemical court decision for which Abraham Lincoln expressed vociferous opposition. Taney himself would administer the oath of office to Lincoln just a few short years later.

In this way, the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009, less than 150 years later, is in some ways, a watershed moment in United States constitutional history, emanating as it does from Lincoln's legacy.

The Start of the Obama Presidency:

The start of the Obama presidency: Guantanamo to be closed and torture banned; rule of law and diplomacy to be paramount; economic stimulus plan at stake

National Security

In the first days of his presidency, Obama fulfilled a campaign promise by ordering the closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison camp within one year. The deadline appeared to be an acknowledgement of the fact that it would take time to finalize arrangements for suspects currently being held at Guantanamo. The president also ordered the closure of overseas detention centers, sometimes referred to as "black sites," where terror suspects were taken using a controversial practice known as "extraordinary rendition." In addition, President Obama ordered a review of military trials for terror suspects and expressly prohibited the use of torture.

As before, these executive orders signified a clear break -- and indeed, a rebuke -- of the policies of George W. Bush. Repeating the stance uttered in his inauguration address, President Obama said the United States would continue its fight against terrorism, but without relinquishing constitutionally-enshrined precepts and core American ethics.

"The United States intends to prosecute the ongoing struggle against violence and terrorism," said President Obama. "We are going to do so vigilantly, we are going to do so effectively, and we are going to do so in a manner that is consistent with our values and our ideals."

President Obama and Vice President Biden were also set to meet with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Advisor James Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen, Central Command head in Iraq, David Petraeus, Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, and the head of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, to discuss the redeployment of United States troops from Iraq. In this way, Obama was making good on a campaign promise to quickly convene such a meeting, aimed at bringing the official Iraq war to an end.

Foreign Policy

Meanwhile, in a clear indication of his geopolitical priorities, it was reported that upon becoming the official head of states, President Obama's first calls to foreign leaders included Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah. This particular cast of characters indicated that an Obama administration intended to be quickly engaged and intensely committed to the Middle East peace process.

To that end, President Obama named a high profile envoy to the Middle East. George Mitchell, who chaired the Good Friday Agreement talks in Ireland during the Clinton administration, was asked to revitalize the Middle East peace process. President Obama, at the same time, named another high profile envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke was asked to forge "a sustainable approach" to dealing with the volatile Afghan-Pak region.

This new diplomatic front was on full display when President Obama, Vice-President Biden, and newly-confirmed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed the State Department and emphasized the dual emphasis on vigorous diplomacy and global development.

Clinton arrived earlier at the State Department and was greeted like a celebrity with resounding cheers and non-stop applause from State Department staffers. Making it clear that an Obama administration augured a new era for American foreign policy, she said, "President Obama set the tone with his inaugural address, and the work of the Obama-Biden administration is committed to advancing America's national security, furthering America's interests, and respecting and exemplifying America's values around the world."

Special Report: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

With the country suffering from a grave economic downturn, Democrats in Congress were trying to push through a hefty economic stimulus bill, known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

In the hopes of bipartisan support for the economic stimulus bill, President Obama went to great lengths to garner Republican support. Indeed, he even went personally to Capitol Hill to meet with members of Congress on the matter and added tax cuts to the package in order to attract conservative support. Such support was not to be gained in the lower house in Congress. The economic stimulus bill passed easily through the House of Representatives although not one Republican member of the House of Representatives voted in its favor.

Yet to be determined was the matter of how the package would fare in the upper house in Congress. There, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said the Senate version of the bill could well go down to defeat. In fact, with Democrats dominating the Senate (albeit with a significantly smaller margin than in the House), the bill was likely to garner at least 50 votes in its favor. However, without 60 votes in favor, it was at risk of being filibustered.

An issue for Senate Republicans has been the same objections issued by their colleagues in the House. Republicans wanted to see some spending stripped from the bill, as well as greater focus on tax cuts for the private sector. They also have cast the stimulus package as a "spending spree" for Democrats' pet projects.

However, Democrats have said that some spending proposals would ease financial burdens for some Americans even if they did not fall directly into the category of stimulus. In fact, the vast majority of the funds would be allocated toward easing state budgets, road and infrastructure projects, "green jobs" in the energy sector, as well as tax cuts for individuals and couples.

Political Conditions United-States

While no Republican House Representative voted in its favor, and with the Senate vote count at stake, President Obama said he was confident that Republicans would be ready to give their support when the final (post-conference committee) version came up for a vote.

The president said, "I am confident that by the time we have the final package on the floor that we are going to see substantial support, and people are going to see this is a serious effort. It has no earmarks. We are going to be trimming out things that are not relevant to putting people back to work right now."

That said, there were signs of clear Republican intransigence on the matter. On "Fox News Sunday" (Feb. 1, 2009),

Arizona Senator John Kyl found no room in the proposed bill for compromise saying, "What I mean is that the basic approach of this bill, we believe, is wrong." Kyl objected to the tax cuts for individuals and couples as well as cash infusions for the state governments. On the other side of the aisle, Democratic Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois noted the bill was intended to ease the financial burden on working people; he also emphasized the need to fund public works projects that have been generally viewed as likely to produce jobs.

The ideological divide was manifested in an exchange on ABC's "This Week" between Republican Senator Jim De Mint of South Carolina and Democratic Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts.

De Mint characterized the economic stimulus package as "a spending plan." He also said, "It's not a stimulus plan. It's temporary, and it's wasteful." But Frank countered the Republicans' reliance on business tax cuts as the elixir for the manifold economic challenges facing the country. He said, "I never mix."

President Obama himself entered the mix days later in an address to the Energy Department. Striking a far sharper tone than the earlier conciliatory note, President Obama said, "The time for talk is over." He added, "The time for action is now, because we know that if we do not act, a bad situation will become dramatically worse. Crisis could turn into catastrophe for families and businesses across the country."

In an address to fellow Democrats, President Obama continued a more heated brand of rhetoric as he excoriated obstructionists in the legislative branch. The president said that intractable Republicans were trying to peddle the same kind of failed policies that the voters rejected in November 2008 and that helped put the country into a recession. In fact, he emphasized the fact the recession was in full force when he came to office. President Obama also took on his critics who have characterized the spending ensconced in the stimulus package saying, "That's the point. Seriously, that's the point."

On Feb. 6, 2009, President Obama's urgent call for action was augmented by the reality of another dismal report by the Labor Department showing further erosion of jobs -- almost 600,000 -- in January 2009. Indeed, new jobless claims were at the highest level since October 1982, when the economy was in a steep recession. Moreover, the unemployment data showed that unlike previous cases of jobs losses felt most acutely by factory workers, this recession involved a greater number of job losses in the private-sector and service industries.

By Feb. 7, 2009, moderate Republicans and Democrats in the Senate had joined together to craft compromises to the economic stimulus package, with an eye on achieving support of at least 60 Senators. Senate Majority Leader indicated that he believed the Senate version of the bill, which increased tax cuts and decreased funding for education, health care and the states, would pass with a narrow filibuster-proof majority. That vote in the Senate was expected to take place on Jan. 9, 2009.

While such a result was welcomed by the Obama administration, further obstacles loomed ahead. In broad terms, the House and Senate versions of the bill-- now widely different-- would have to be reconciled in conference. The conference process would have to be complete in record time with the president wanting the new reconciled version ready for the president's signature by Feb. 16, 2009.

But timing aside, the actual specific difference in the two versions of the bills promised to be problematic. To that end, President Obama's top economic adviser, Lawrence Summers, said in several interviews on Feb. 8, 2009, that removing education funding from the Senate version of the bill would not jibe with the president's priorities. Meanwhile, Democratic Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts warned that the cuts in state spending would adversely affect local communities, even resulting in policemen and firemen being laid off. Republican Senator John Ensign of Nevada countered by characterizing Frank's claims as "fear-mongering."

With an eye on advancing the urgency of the economic recovery effort, President Obama was scheduled to give a prime time national address on Feb. 9, 2009. He was also expected to conduct town hall meetings in regions of the country hardest hit by the economic crisis. The president's frontline position advocating on behalf of the stimulus package appeared to pay dividends with the public support rising not only for the stimulus plan itself but for the president himself, who was sporting already-sky high approval ratings.

Only days later, various issues associated with the stimulus bill were reconciled in the conference committee meetings between the House and Senate, with a final \$787 billion stimulus package agreed upon by both houses of Congress. As before, the final version of the legislation passed overwhelming in the House of Representatives but without a single cross-over Republican vote, and with the anticipated three Republican votes in the Senate. Despite concerted Republican opposition to the stimulus package, the development signaled a clear win for President Obama, who had hoped for greater bipartisan support.

Ahead of the signing ceremony, which would enshrine the stimulus package into landmark legislation, President Barack Obama welcomed the passage of the reconciled stimulus package in Congress as an "historic step," as well as a "major milestone on our road to recovery." The president also said that the overall economic stimulus plan was "ambitious" but that it was needed to "save or create more than 3.5 million jobs." To that end, he said, "I will sign this legislation into law shortly, and we'll begin making the immediate investments necessary to put people back to work doing the work America needs done."

Special Report: Bold moves by President Obama

President Obama advances plan to cut federal deficit in half by end of first term --

On the heels of the passage of the massive stimulus bill, intended to revive the United States' struggling economy, United States President Barack Obama was working on a plan to reduce the federal deficit in half by the end of his first term in office. Obama inherited a \$1.3 trillion deficit from his predecessor, George W. Bush. Obama also took the reins as president of a country in recession, while facing a banking and financial crisis.

The president discussed his proposal to restore fiscal discipline at a fiscal policy summit on Feb. 23, 2009. He was scheduled to officially advance the plan during an address to a joint session of Congress on Feb. 24, 2009. In a preview of what was to come, Obama said during his weekly radio address, "We can't generate sustained growth without getting our deficits under control." He also said that his budget would be "sober in its assessments, honest in its accounting, and lays out in detail my strategy for investing in what we need, cutting what we don't, and restoring fiscal discipline."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a White House official said that the Obama administration intended to cut the deficit by reducing spending on the Iraq war, ending tax breaks for those making in excess of \$250,000 a year, and improving government efficiency.

In addition to these measures oriented toward fiscal discipline, the new budget would include provisions for reducing reliance on foreign oil and moving toward universal healthcare.

Republicans, who have been railing against excessive government spending since Obama took office, did not respond positively to the plan despite its stated objectives. Indeed, some Republicans argued that the tax cuts would have a detrimental effect on small businesses since some business owners file taxes as individuals.

President Obama makes appointment to oversee \$787 billion stimulus plan --

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On Feb. 23, 2009, President Barack Obama was expected to appoint someone to oversee the newly-passed \$787 billion economic stimulus package. Obama's selection for the position of Chairman of the new Recovery Act Transparency and Accountability Board was Earl Devaney --a former Secret Service agent who was helped to reveal corruption by lobbyists at the Department of Interior. Vice President Joe Biden was also to be accorded a key role in stimulus spending oversight.

President Obama warns of hard economic times but the ability of Americans to prevail --

On Feb. 24, 2009, President Obama addressed a rare joint session of Congress. He began by condemning the short term approach to economic and financial matters that brought about the economic crisis, and warned Americans that a "day of reckoning" was at hand.

The president said that in addition to the lack of attention to long-term prosperity, there was also little concern about the pressing issues facing the country. He said, "And all the while, critical debates and difficult decisions were put off for some other time on some other day. Well, that day of reckoning has arrived, and the time to take charge of our future is here."

But even as he emphasized the severity of the economic crisis, President Obama said that the United States would prevail and, indeed, emerge stronger from these difficult times. He said, "We will rebuild, we will recover."

The president was not resting purely on the notion that spending on infrastructure, or assistance to state budgets, as ensconced in the recently passed \$787 billion stimulus package, would be enough to move the economy forward. President Obama also noted that the \$787 billion stimulus plan would go a long way to saving or creating 3.5 million jobs.

Making clear that strong and immediate action by the government was needed to revitalize the devolving economy, the president said, "Now is the time to act boldly and wisely." One bold action advanced by President Obama during the election campaign was the need for healthcare reform. Even in the midst of the economic downturn, President Obama signaled he intended to keep his promise in that arena. In fact, he drew upon the vast deficit and the "crushing cost" of healthcare to argue that the need for reform was of vital importance. The president also recapitulated his commitment to advancing alternative sources of energy and a green economy.

Meanwhile, even as Republican critics criticized his initiatives as being "socialist" and expressing anxieties about tax increases, President Obama noted that most Americans-- 95 percent -- would receive a tax cut beginning on April 1, 2009. The president expressed cognizance of the fiscal risks facing the nation, as he reiterated his promise to cut the deficit in half by the end of his first term and reduce wasteful spending.

Acknowledging that this bold agenda would be a challenge to accomplish, President Obama made it clear that an aggressive approach to solving the country's problems was an eminently American manner of operating. He said, "This is America. We don't do what's easy. We do what is necessary and move this country forward "

President Obama won several standing ovations during his address to the joint session of Congress, including one for his declaration that any assistance given to the banking sector would come with a high level of accountability. He explained that such assistance would be needed in the interests of the American public. The president said, "It's not about helping banks, it's about helping people."

President Obama drew warm applause for his pledge to reform and ameliorate the country's educational system. Indeed, he garnered the highest praise both from lawmakers in the chamber and Americans at home for his strong advocacy of higher education. Indeed, he suggested that the pursuit of academic excellence was a measure of patriotism to one's country.

Following on Obama's heels, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal offered his party's rebuttal, which eschewed governmental intervention and advocated tax cuts as a means to solve the manifold economic challenges facing the country.

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Republicans, on the whole, have responded negatively to the stimulus package, characterizing it as wasteful. However, some moderate Republican governors, such as Schwarzenegger in California, Crist in Florida and Huntsman in Utah, have backed Obama's economic stimulus plan, which would see the much-needed transfer of funds to states.

Note: Polling data has shown that the American public strongly approves of the president and a wide majority back his initiatives. Congressional Democrats appear to be receiving a boost with healthier approval ratings than they have seen in recent years. By contrast, approval levels for congressional Republicans are low.

Obama announces withdrawal from Iraq by August 2010; more troops in Afghanistan --

Just days after his address to the joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama announced the withdrawal of most United States troops from Iraq by August 2010. President Obama's exit schedule from Iraq was somewhat later than the 16-month timeline he had called for during the election campaign.

Addressing the Marine corps at Camp Lajeune in North Carolina, the president said that the United States combat mission in Iraq would officially come to a close at that time. He noted that between 35,000 and 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq in a non-combat role to advise security Iraqi forces and protect United States interests. Ultimately, the United States government aimed to have no troops in Iraq by 2011, in keeping with the existing Status of Forces Agreement. The president said that under his new strategy, there was a recognition that the long term solution for Iraq had to be political rather than military, and that decisions for the future of that country must be made by Iraqis.

As the president announced a timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the United States military effort in Afghanistan was not likely to see a rapid end. Instead, with violence flaring in Afghanistan, and with the Afghan-Pak border increasingly becoming a flashpoint, President Obama ordered the deployment of 17,000 troops to Afghanistan. Those soldiers, according to the president, had been slated to go said the soldiers had to Iraq but were being redirected to Afghanistan in order to "meet urgent security needs" in that country.

Explaining his broader objective for the region stretching from the Middle East through South Asia, President Obama said, "We have also taken into account the simple reality that America can no longer afford to see Iraq in isolation from other priorities: we face the challenge of refocusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan; of relieving the burden on our military; and of rebuilding our struggling economy - and these are challenges that we will meet."

Obama reverses Bush's ban on stem cell funding --

On March 9, 2009, United States President Barack Obama reversed his predecessor's George Bush's restrictions on federal funding for research on new stem cell lines. President Obama said he was authorizing the reversal "so many scientists and researchers and doctors and innovators, patients and loved ones have hoped for and fought for these past eight years."

President Obama signed the executive order while surrounded by key scientists and a bipartisan cadre of legislators who supported the move. In a speech delivered to an excited crowd, President Obama pledged not only to "vigorously support" scientific research, but but also to return science from the realm of "ideology" to the sphere of "facts."

To that end, President Obama called for scientific research to be free from political interference.

On the issue of stem cells, scientists have indicated that research in this arena could lead to medical discoveries and even cures for diseases. To that end, President Obama said, "At this moment the full promise of stem cell research remains unknown and it should not be overstated." He continued, "But scientists believe these tiny cells may have the potential to help us understand and possibly cure some of our most devastating diseases and conditions." On the other side of the equation, stem cell research -- and particularly embryonic stem cell research -- has been the source of controversy. Religious entities and conservative political voices have strongly voiced moral

objections to stem cell research, believing that it destroys life. That view is not widely held, though, as polling data shows that most Americans support stem cell research.

Regardless, President Obama's move to reverse the Bush era ban on stem cell funding effectively paved the way for Congress to overturn the 1996 Dickey-Wicker amendment, which has prevented tax dollars from being spent on the creation of embryos. Creating embryos can ensure provide an unlimited supply of cell lines for research. While the practice of creating embryos has been ongoing in private enterprises, the Dickey-Wicker amendment restricted the practice at the public level, even before Bush era executive order compelled only the limited use of embryos from fertility clinics.

With an eye on further action to open up stem cell science, President Obama said that he hoped Congress would act "to further support this research."

Focus: Economy in Crisis

U.S. reassures China on investment; Fed Chair strikes optimistic tone

In mid-March 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao expressed concern about its United States bond holdings and other assets valued at about \$1 trillion. The Chinese leader said, "I'd like to take this opportunity here to implore the United States... to honor its words, stay a credible nation and ensure the safety of Chinese assets." Premier Wen Jiabao also noted that his country was ready to go forward with its new stimulus efforts, if the need arises.

In response, the White House assured Beijing that Chinese investments in the United States were secure despite the economic crisis. White House spokesperson, Robert Gibbs, said, "There is no safer investment in the world than in the United States." As well, President Barack Obama's chief economic adviser, Lawrence Summers promised that the administration would be a steady steward of the economy and pointed to encouraging signs of economic health, such as improved consumer spending.

Meanwhile, in an interview on the CBS show, 60 Minutes, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke expressed cautious optimism that the recession in the United States could end in 2009 if the financial regime regained its footing. He said, "We've seen some progress in the financial markets, absolutely. But until we get that stabilized and working normally, we're not going to see recovery." Bernanke continued, "But we do have a plan. We're working on it. And, I do think that we will get it stabilized, and we'll see the recession coming to an end probably this year."

Highlights of Ongoing Economic Initiatives

By the third week of March 2009, the Congressional Budget Office in the United States forecast that President Barack Obama's budget in the United States would generate unsustainable deficits of close to \$1 trillion a year from 2010 to 2019. This estimate exceeded the Obama administration's budgetary projections although the White House budget chief, Peter Orszag, said the CBO's estimates were anomalous when compared with those offered by economists and the Federal Reserve. Orszag expressed confidence that Obama's budget would produce smaller deficits. Nevertheless, Republicans railed against the proposed budget while analysts wondered if tax increases would be an inevitable course of action, especially if there were no adjustments to Obama's agenda.

The United States Senate and House of Representatives commenced drafting budget bills in the third week of March 2009. Speaking of the budget, President Obama said in his weekly radio address, "It's an economic blueprint for our future, a vision of America where growth is not based on real-estate bubbles or over-leveraged banks, but on a firm foundation of investments in energy, education and healthcare that will lead to a real and lasting prosperity."

Meanwhile, ahead of the unveiling of a new bank rescue plan, Christina Romer, the head of the White House Economic Advisors, expressed confidence that the United States economy would recover within a year. Romer predicted that the recession in the United States would "bottom out" in 2009, with potential growth occurring late in 2009.

United States Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner then moved forward with a plan to purchase "toxic assets" from struggling banks, with an eye on restoring confidence in the beleaguered financial sector.

The Treasury Secretary also delineated a new proposal aimed at reforming the financial regulatory system. The proposal, which called for strict scrutiny of hedge funds and increased restraints on investors, was immediately opposed by Republicans and those targeted by the new reforms who charged that the new rules were too harsh. There was also skepticism from some critics, such as Vincent Reinhart, the former director of monetary affairs at the Federal Reserve, who suggested that Wall Street would simply come up with new ways to circumvent the new rules. Speaking on Capitol Hill before the House Financial Services Committee, he said, "We need much stronger standards for openness, transparency and plain commonsense language throughout the financial system."

On March 25, 2009, only hours after President Obama visited Capitol Hill, the House of Representatives panel endorses his budget blueprint. A day later on March 26, 2009, a Senate panel followed suit. Success in both chambers provided a symbolic victory for the president's agenda to increase domestic programs, paving the way for legislation later in the year on energy, education and healthcare. Also included in the budget blueprint was defense funding in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the president's tax plan to reverse Bush era tax cuts for those in the wealthiest income bracket.

On March 26, 2009, House Republicans unveiled their own alternative to Obama's budget. The plan was less than 20 pages long and included no actual financials; instead, the pamphlet contained typical Republican policy positions on tax code simplification and tax cuts. Faced with criticism for their lack of specificity and detail, Republicans promised to furnish more information on April 1, 2009.

On March 30, 2009, the White House issued strict deadlines to ailing car manufacturers, General Motors and Chrysler, of 60 days and 30 days respectively to submit new restructuring proposals. To that end, General Motors would be under new leadership as CEO Rick Wagoner resigned under pressure from the White House. For his part, President Obama suggested that he did not want to see the United States auto industry fail but that serious changes needed to be made. He said, "We cannot, we must not and we will not let our auto industry simply vanish." He continued, "But our auto industry is not moving in the right direction fast enough to succeed."

The president also did not foreclose the possibility of bankruptcy in the restructuring process.

The Senate and House versions of the budget bill would thusly go to the floor of the two respective chambers for debate ahead of a final vote. Republicans were expected to voice their vociferous objections to the budget and Democrats were sure to remind them that there were no objections to rampant spending during the Bush years. In the Senate, moderate Democrats were likely to exert their influence; they already expressed concern over deficits. That said, the budget was expected to pass handily in the House where Democrats have an overwhelming majority.

On April 2, 2009, the House of Representatives, followed by the Senate, approved President Barack Obama's budget blueprint, which included plans for major legislation on health care, energy and education.

In the House, the budget passed overwhelmingly (233-196) with most representatives voting along party lines. A Republican alternative, strongly backed by the Republican leadership, went down to failure when 38 of that party's members voted against it. Hours later, the Senate -- presided over by Vice President Joe Biden -- passed a slightly different version in a decisive 55-43 vote. While the House version calls for \$3.6 trillion in spending in the budgetary year, the Senate version envisions \$3.5 trillion in spending. Both chambers forecast an extremely high deficit of \$1.2 trillion deficit, however, that number was still not as high as this year's projected \$1.8 trillion deficit. President Obama has said that his plan is to reduce the deficit notably in five years.

Republicans in both chambers said that the Democrats' plans would hurt rather than help the economy and mire future generations with debt. But Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada noted that the economic crisis had emerged under Republican leadership and a lot of effort would be needed to revive the economy and rescue it from recession. To those end, the budget was a step in that direction.

Note: Both versions of the budget have to be reconciled in conference; the budget does not require either the president's signature or a filibuster-proof super-majority in the Senate.

Foreign Policy of Obama Administration

Secretary of State Clinton Signals Shift in Foreign Policy

In mid-February 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton embarked on her first overseas trip as America's leading diplomat in Asia. Her Asian trip included stops in Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China. Not since the 1960s has Asia had the distinction of being the first destination for a United States Secretary of State. Working on behalf of the Obama administration, Secretary of State Clinton indicated that she would focus on a range of issues ranging from climate change and clean energy to the global financial crisis.

On her first stop in Asia, Clinton assured Japan that the United States intended to maintain strong ties with that country. Clinton aimed to assuage Tokyo of its primacy, given Tokyo's concern about the possibility of increasing rapport between Washington and Beijing.

In China, the antagonistic dynamic that was cast during the Bush years was on its way out. Instead, Clinton suggested that she, on behalf of the Obama administration, would strive to cultivate a more cooperative relationship between Washington and Beijing. This stance was not unexpected since Clinton has often emphasized the importance of improving Sino-American relations. Clinton did receive some criticism because human rights issues were left off the agenda in her meetings in Beijing. For her part, Secretary of State Clinton noted that while she did indeed hope to press China on issues including the status of Tibet and human rights, her immediate focus involved the global economic crisis. To that end, she said, "Our pressing on those issues can't interfere on the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis."

Overall, Secretary of State Clinton emphasized the significance of Asian-American ties. Striking a clearly collaborative tone, and making it apparent that Asia would factor as highly as Europe, the United States Secretary of State said during an address to the Asia Society, "I hope to signal that we need strong partners across the Pacific, just as we need strong partners across the Atlantic." She continued, "We are, after all, both a trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific power." Upon arriving in Asia, Clinton said, "I have come to Asia on my first trip as secretary of state to convey that America's relationships across the Pacific are indispensable to addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities of the 21st century."

In this way, Clinton was foregrounding an emphasis on regional alliances from east to west. At the philosophical level, Clinton was also indicating a return to the integrationist model of international relations. It was an ostensible departure from the hegemonic mode of neoconservative policy, which was made famous under the Bush-Cheney administration.

Before arriving in Asia on her first overseas trip, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned North Korea against any "provocative action and unhelpful rhetoric." En route to Asia, Clinton said that North Korea had to adhere to its commitments to dismantle its nuclear programs. She said, "The North Koreans have already agreed to dismantling...We expect them to fulfill the obligations that they entered into."

But the United States' top diplomat was also critical of the Bush administration for abandoning the 1994 agreement with North Korea, which was forged during the presidency of Bill Clinton. The 1994 framework, which called for North Korea to give up its weapons program, collapsed when the Bush administration accused Pyongyang of maintaining a parallel (secondary) enriched uranium program. Clinton suggested that Pyongyang's decision to restart its nuclear program may have been partially due to the Bush administration's intemperate accusations of North Korea.

Clinton was confronted with a significant challenge on the trip to Asia, and particularly, the Korean peninsula. Amidst devolving relations between Pyongyang and Seoul, North Korea was hinting that it was preparing to test-fire the long-range Taepodong-2 missile. As well, North Korea was declaring its right to launch a "space program." Since North Korea has, in the past, characterized rocket launches in similar terms, it was believed that the term

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"space program" or satellite launch was associated with the anticipated missile launch. Accordingly, she was tasked with taking a strong positions on, first, the missile test, and second, on North Korea's nuclear ambitions, while also working to reinvigorate the diplomatic process in the region and improving relations between Pyongyang and Washington.

To these ends, Clinton warned that relations between the U.S. and North Korea were unlikely to improve unless Pyongyang was willing to engage in dialogue with Seoul. Clinton, who was speaking in the South Korean capital, took a sharp tone as she called on North Korea to bring an end to its nuclear ambitions, consistent with the provisions of United **Nations** Security Council Resolution 1718. She also characterized the notion of a missile test as "provocative." Nevertheless, Clinton made clear that diplomacy was the central focus of her objectives by announcing a special envoy to North Korea. Clinton named former Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who served in South Korea from 1997 to 2000, to that role.

Relations between the United **States** and North Korea were likely to be quickly tested. At issue was the aforementioned satellite launch by North Korea.

In fact, by March 2009, North Korea was threatening to go to war with any entity that tried to shoot down the satellite it intended to launch. A statement by the North Korean military read, "We will retaliate any act of intercepting our satellite for peaceful purposes with prompt counter-strikes by the most powerful military means." It also included the following assertion: "Shooting our satellite for peaceful purposes will precisely mean a war." In a presumed effort to augment its warning, North Korea said its military was placed on full combat alert. This warning came at a time when scheduled joint military exercises between South Korea and the United **States** were about to commence.

Meanwhile, the newly-appointed United **States** envoy to North Korea, , Stephen Bosworth, who was in Asia to revitalize six-party denuclearization talks, noted that a launch by North Korea would be "ill advised."

Relations between the United **States** and China were indeed quickly put to the test in March 2009. The United **States** Pentagon said that five Chinese ships maneuvered in close proximity to an unarmed United **States** navy vessel -- the USNS Impeccable -- in the South China Sea. United **States** authorities said that one Chinese navy intelligence ship and four other Chinese vessels were acting in an "increasingly aggressive" manner over the course of days leading up to this incident. They described the incident as the ships moving dangerously close to the USNS Impeccable, which was conducting routine ocean surveillance in international waters. They described the moves by the Chinese ships as "unprofessional maneuvers" and "harassment." Accordingly, United **States** authorities indicated they would be launching a protest, pointing to the violation of international law that calls for respectful and responsible regard for the rights and safety of other vessels on the sea. There was no response from the Chinese government at the time of writing.

Meanwhile, United **States** Secretary of **State** Hillary Clinton was scheduled to travel to the Middle East at the start of March 2009. On the agenda of a meeting of international donors at the Egyptian resort of Sharma el Sheikh was the reconstruction of Gaza in the aftermath of the Israeli military operation into that Palestinian territory. Clinton, on behalf of the United **States**, was expected to pledge \$900 million to the cause of reconstruction, which was only to be distributed if the Palestinians met certain key conditions, as dictated by the Quartet of Middle East mediators (the Quartet is composed of the United **States**, the European Union, Russia and the United **Nations**). Ahead of the meeting in Egypt, Clinton said, "I will be announcing a commitment to a significant aid package. But it will only be spent if we determine that our goals can be furthered rather than undermined or subverted." Clinton was also scheduled to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders during her trip to the region.

President Barack Obama offers "new beginning" and possibility of engagement with Iran

Making good on a campaign promise, United States President Barack Obama offered the possibility of diplomatic engagement with Iran. In a videotaped message in the third week of March 2009, President Obama said, "My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us."

President Obama made a point of using the official name of the country when he said that he wanted "to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran." President Obama also indicated that his administration was committed "to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community."

President Obama's message was broadcast at the same time as the Iranian festival of Nowruz. The timing may have been orchestrated for its symbolic value since Nowruz is a significant celebration on the Iranian calendar marking the start of spring. Making clear that a new era of diplomacy was ahead, President Obama said, "With the coming of a new season, we're reminded of this precious humanity that we all share. And we can once again call upon this spirit as we seek the promise of a new beginning."

But President Obama also struck a warning when he noted, "This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect." He continued, "The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations. You have that right - but it comes with real responsibilities."

In response, an advisor to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad cautiously welcomed the United States President Obama's message but called for a fundamental shift in American foreign policy. Of particular concern to Iran was the United States' support for Israel, according to Ahmadinejad's advisor, Ali Akbar Javafekr, who also said that the sanctions against Iran had to end. He continued, "By fundamentally changing its behavior, America can offer us a friendly hand." Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a less diplomatic reaction, instead demanding that the United States radically change its policies.

Tense relations between the Washington D.C. and Tehran have been ongoing for decades but took a particularly negative turn when President Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, referred to Iran as part of the "axis of evil." Bilateral relations devolved further when Iran decided to pursue its controversial nuclear program.

To date, the United States and many other countries have expressed anxieties about Iran's nuclear ambitions, which the Iranian government has maintained is for peaceful purposes and not intended to build atomic weaponry. The United States, first under the Bush administration, and now under the Obama administration, wants Iran to abandon its nuclear enrichment activities. That said, analysts surmise that in advancing this overture, President Obama has signaled interest in building a more constructive relationship with Tehran before directly confronting the nuclear issue.

Indeed, Javier Solana, the foreign policy chief of the European Union, characterized Obama's overture as "very constructive" and called on Iran to heed the United States' president's core message. Whether or not Iran's government was willing to do so was yet to be determined. Other Middle Eastern players nevertheless applauded President Obama's gesture. Khaled Meshaal, the exiled political leader of Hamas, gave credit to the American president for using "a new language" for the Middle East.

U.S. President Barack Obama unveils strategy for Afghan-Pak region

On March 27, 2009, United States President Barack Obama unveiled a "stronger, smarter and more comprehensive strategy" for dealing with Afghanistan. At issue was a new foreign policy approach toward dealing with the threat posed by al-Qaida terrorists operating in the area from Afghanistan to Pakistan. President Obama explained that this new course emerged from a "careful policy review" that involved consultations with military commanders, diplomats, regional governments, strategic partners, NATO allies, as well as non governmental organizations.

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Making it clear that the United States would not be involved in an open-ended war, President Obama said the new strategy would be carefully circumscribed with clear objectives. He said that the United States effort in Afghanistan was only to confront our common enemy" and did not seek to "control that country or dictate its future."

Giving a glimpse of the new policy, President Obama said, during an interview on CBS television show 60 Minutes on March 22, 2009, that there must be an "exit strategy" with regard to United States policy in Afghanistan. He said, "There's got to be a sense that this is not a perpetual drift" and emphasized that the central mission was to ensure that al-Qaida was not able to carry attacks against the United States.

Less than a week later, President Obama again emphasized these themes saying, " So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan." As before, the United States president again emphasized the threat of al-Qaida in discussing the new strategy, noting that intensified efforts in the Afghan-Pak region was needed to deal with that "increasingly perilous" terrain.

Flanked by United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates, President Obama depicted a grim situation in which the resurgent extremists were consolidating control of the Afghan-Pak border zone. Indeed, he characterized that area as "the most dangerous place in the world." President Obama noted that the United States strategy should be directly related to the threat posed by al-Qaida to America and its allies. He also warned that credible intelligence warned that fresh attacks were being planned by the terrorists.

President Obama emphasized that the terrorist threat was not directed solely at the United States but also to Afghans at home, as well as the entire global community. To this end, President Obama said, "This is not simply an American problem. Far from it." He continued, "It is instead an international security challenge of the highest order." Accordingly, the United States leader called on NATO and other allies to assist in this effort.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signaled Russian support for the strategy during an interview with the BBC. He indicated that Moscow would be "ready to participate in the efforts directed at putting things in order" in Afghanistan. He also appeared to echo Obama's view that Afghanistan establish its own political system saying, "It is impossible to rule Afghanistan with the aid of the alliance; it is impossible to rule Afghanistan from abroad. Afghanistan should find its own path to democracy."

The Obama administration had already made good on an election promise to intensify its efforts in Afghanistan by deploying 17,000 more troops to that country to deal with the resurgence of the Taliban and the devolving security situation. But now President Obama was saying that there was a need for increased non-combat personnel of 4,000 in Afghanistan to train and strengthen Afghan security forces, and also to support civilian development.

Richard Holbrooke, the United States special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, has said that the United States could no longer treat the two countries separately. He said, "In the past, the United States government stove-piped it, they had an Afghan policy and a Pakistan policy. We have to integrate the two and I hope the rest of the world will join us in that effort." Holbrooke has also indicated there would be no further neglect of the region, suggesting more attention not just in terms of military strength, but also in terms of aid and resources aimed at rebuilding infrastructure, would be in the works.

Afghanistan was not the only country on the agenda, as suggested above. President Obama said that the United States efforts against al-Qaida would also extend to Pakistan. He said that the United States Congress would be asked to pass legislation authorizing an increase in expenditures to Pakistan for the purpose of rebuilding schools, roads and hospitals. But President Obama noted that he would not be granting a "blank check" to Pakistan, which would have to demonstrate a commitment to crushing al-Qaida and aligned extremists in that country.

According to Reuters News, the government of Afghanistan welcomed the new strategy by the United States, and particularly endorsed the regional approach. A presidential spokesman, Humayun Hamidzada, said that Afghan President Hamid Karzai welcomed "the recognition of the regional aspect of the problem in Afghanistan and specifically recognition that the al-Qaida threat is mainly emanating from Pakistan."

Leaders forge \$1 trillion deal at G-20 summit in London

Leaders of the world's largest economies, known as the "G-20," met in London in April 2009 to explore possible responses to the global financial crisis. To that end, they forged a deal valued at more than one trillion dollars (USD).

Central to the agreement was an infusion of \$750 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was aimed at helping troubled economies. Up to \$100 billion of that amount was earmarked to assist the world's very poorest countries -- an amount far greater than had been expected. In many senses, the infusion of funding to the IMF marked a strengthening of that body unseen since the 1980s.

In addition, the G-20 leaders settled on a \$250 billion increase in global trade. The world's poorest countries would also benefit from the availability of \$250 billion of trade credit.

After some debate, the G-20 leaders decided to levy sanctions against clandestine tax havens and to institute strict financial regulations. Such regulations included tougher controls on banking professionals' salaries and bonuses, and increased oversight of hedge funds and credit rating agencies. A Financial Stability Board was to be established that would work in concert with the IMF to facilitate cross-border cooperation, and also to provide early warnings regarding the financial system.

Aside from these measures, the G-20 countries were already implementing their own economic stimulus measures at home, aimed at reversing the global recession. Together, these economic stimulus packages would inject approximately \$5 trillion by the end of 2010.

United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown played host at the meeting, which most concurred went off successfully, despite the presence of anti-globalization and anarchist protestors. Prime Minister Brown warned that there was "no quick fix" for the economic woes facing the international community, but he drew attention to the consensus that had been forged in the interest of the common good. He said, "This is the day that the world came together to fight back against the global recession, not with words, but with a plan for global recovery and for reform and with a clear timetable for its delivery."

All eyes were on United States President Barack Obama, who characterized the G-20 summit as "a turning point" in the effort towards global economic recovery. He also hailed the advances agreed upon to reform the failed regulatory regime that contributed to the financial crisis that has gripped many of the economies across the globe. Thusly, President Obama declared the London summit to be historic saying, "It was historic because of the size and the scope of the challenges that we face and because of the timeliness and the magnitude of our response."

Ahead of the summit, there were reports of a growing rift between the respective duos of France and Germany -- and -- the United States and the United Kingdom. While France and Germany were emphasizing stricter financial regulations, the United States and the United Kingdom were advocating public spending to deal with the economic crisis. Indeed, French President Nicolas Sarkozy had threatened to bolt the meeting if his priority issues were not addressed. But this end did not occur, although tensions existed.

To that end, President Obama was hailed for his diplomatic skills after he brokered an agreement between France and China on tax havens. The American president played the role of peacemaker between French President Sarkozy and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao, paving the way for a meeting of the minds on the matter of tax havens.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that the concurrence reached at the G-20 summit were "more than we could have hoped for." President Sarkozy also credited President Obama for the American president's leadership at the summit, effusively stating: "President Obama really found the consensus. He didn't focus exclusively on stimulus ... In fact it was he who managed to help me persuade [Chinese] President Hu Jintao to agree to the reference to the ... publication of a list of tax havens, and I wish to thank him for that."

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel also expressed positive feedback about the success of the summit noting that the new measures would give the international arena a "clearer financial market architecture." She noted

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that the agreement reached was "a very, very good, almost historic compromise." Finally, Chancellor Merkel had warm words of praise for President Obama. "The American president also put his hand into this," said Merkel.

Note: The G-20 leaders agreed to meet again in September 2009 in New York to assess the progress of their agenda.

NATO meeting

On the heels of the G-20 summit in London, leaders of NATO member states met in the French city of Strasbourg amidst fierce --and sometimes violent --protests. The NATO meeting was being jointly hosted by the German city of Kehl although it was France that garnered more attention.

At the NATO meetings, United States President Barack Obama emphasized the need to repairing his country's ties with Europe in the wake of the Bush era, when unilateralism was the dominating philosophy. President Obama called for both greater responsibility and increased cooperation for the purpose of advancing global peace and security.

President Obama calls for nuclear weapons-free world and cooperative action on global security

Ahead of a meeting with European Union leaders in the Czech Republic in April 2009, United States President Barack Obama called for a world free of nuclear weaponry and cooperative action on global security.

In a speech to a receptive audience of 20,000 at a castle in Prague, President Obama expressed hopes of forging new agreements aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, including an end to the production of fissile materials used to create such weapons. He also said that his administration would work to bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force in order to end nuclear testing. To date, the CTBT has not been ratified by either the United States or China, and it has not been signed by either India or Pakistan.

President Obama referenced North Korea's rocket launch, characterizing it as "provocative," and emphasizing that it illustrated the crucial need for action. He said, "North Korea must know that the path to security and respect will never come through threats and illegal weapons." President Obama also noted that Iran posed a potential nuclear threat and, as such, the United States would move forward with its missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The American leader warned of al-Qaida's desire to acquire a nuclear bomb and the immediate threat to global security saying, "One terrorist with a nuclear weapon could unleash massive destruction."

That said, President Obama said his administration was committed to ultimately reducing the United States' nuclear arsenal, noting that the very existence of thousands of nuclear weapons was "the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War." He recounted a recent meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at the G-20 summit in London where the two leaders agreed to restart negotiations aimed at reducing nuclear warheads.

Acknowledging that a nuclear weapons-free world was unlikely to be realized in his lifetime, President Obama made clear that he intended to work toward that outcome.

U.S. president makes surprise visit to Baghdad

United States President Barack Obama made a surprise trip to Baghdad in early April 2009. He arrived in Iraq during his return trip from Europe where he attended the G-20, NATO and European Union summits. In an address to cheering United States troops serving in Iraq, he reiterated his 2010 intended timetable to withdraw most United States troops from Iraq, and he noted that the time had come for Iraqis "to take responsibility for their country."

Summit of Americas in Trinidad: U.S. President Obama calls for "new beginning" with Cuba, shares handshake with Chavez, and explains doctrine of engagement

The Organization of American States (OAS) convened the Summit of the Americas on April 17, 2009, for two days in Trinidad and Tobago and involved participation of by the heads of state of 34 democratic countries in the Western Hemisphere. The OAS has noted that Trinidad and Tobago would be distinguished as the first Caribbean

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country to host the summit. The meeting was set to take place at the Trinidad Hyatt in the country's capital city of Port of Spain. Typically, the Summit of the Americas has focused on issues including poverty alleviation, fighting narcotics trafficking, anti-terrorism measures, as well as strengthening democratic governance.

Ahead of the summit, on Feb. 26, 2009, the OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza announced that the economic crisis would be addressed during the meetings of the 34 leaders of OAS member nation states in April 2009.

Speaking at an Ordinary Session of 2009 of the Summit Implementation Review Group (SIRG), which brought together the member states negotiators to consider the Draft Declaration of Commitment of Port-of Spain, Insulza explained that the main focus would be upon the global financial and economic crisis on the region. He said, "We would like to have a declaration soon, so that the Heads of State and Government can read and examine it before attending the Summit; especially as there will be necessary modifications, after the G20 meeting (that was held in London on April 2, 2009), on the big topic about the economic crisis."

But by April 2009, while the financial and economic challenges continued to dominate the public purview, the focus of the summit appeared to be evolving. Indeed, relations with and policies regarding Cuba began to command attention. At issue were ties between the United States-Cuba and the prevailing policy of the United States to Cuba. These matters bubbled to the surface when the Obama administration in the United States decided to reverse restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba (see "Foreign Relations" for details).

At the broader level, other member states of the OAS were expected to place pressure on the United States to allow Cuba to re-enter its hemispheric body after decades of being suspended from participation. Cuba's suspension in 1962 has rested on the fact that it is governed by the personalist regime of the Castro brothers and not a democratically-elected government. The OAS resolution cast Cuba's communist system as incompatible with the democratic principles of the regional grouping.

In an editorial published in the Trinidad and Tobago Express on April 16, 2009, United States President Barack Obama signaled the spirit of change in hemispheric relations. He wrote, "We can overcome our shared challenges with a sense of common purpose, or we can stay mired in the old debates of the past. For the sake of all our people, we must choose the future."

Staying on the theme of past versus the future, President Obama said that the United State-Cuba relationship was often "dragged back to the 20th century" and eschewed the usual communism versus capitalism debate. Instead, the United States leader called for "pragmatic and responsible action" aimed at advancing "common prosperity." He likewise urged "practical cooperation" in the areas of security, energy and economic recovery.

President Obama acknowledged that the United States had not always maintained engagement in the region, noting, "We have been too easily distracted by other priorities, and have failed to see that our own progress is tied directly to progress throughout the Americas." He continued, "My administration is committed to renewing and sustaining a broader partnership between the United States and the hemisphere on behalf of our common prosperity and our common security." To that end, the president outlined a regional effort to confront the economic and financial crisis, while propelling forward renewable and sustainable energy, which would itself address the threat of climate change manifest by the diminishing glaciers of the Andes and the rise of sea level in the Caribbean.

President Obama emphasized that the OAS member states have had their own paths but that they must be "joined together" in the pursuit of "liberty, equality and human rights." With a nod to Cuba, President Obama expressed the hope that all OAS countries might one day sit at the table. President Obama suggested that even as his country extended its hand to Cuba -- in the form of the new policy changes -- the following move would have to come from Havana. In essence, the United States leader was noting that Havana should reciprocate the administration's decision to change its policy by allowing travel and remittances to Cuba.

Within 24 hours, Cuban President Raul Castro responded by making clear that Cuba would welcome talks with the United States; he also signaled that all topics would be open for discussion. Such a position has stood in contrast

to previous stances by Havana, upon which matters such as human rights and political prisoners were not welcomed subjects of discourse.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was traveling in the Caribbean en route to Trinidad, characterized Raul Castro's comments as a "very welcome gesture."

She said, "We welcome his comments, the overture they represent and we are taking a very serious look at how we intend to respond."

In the background of these developments, the OAS head, Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza, indicated that he could call on member states to re-admit Cuba 47 years after the communist country was suspended from the hemispheric body via the 1962 resolution. Such a decision was not soon to come but would likely be addressed at the OAS general assembly at the end of May 2009.

Most of the OAS countries that ended bilateral ties with Cuba at that time have subsequently restored relations, with the clear exception of the United States. Accordingly, most OAS states have been sympathetic to the notion of ending Cuba's exclusion. Moreover, Havana's rapid response to Washington's policy changes has likely fueled the energy surrounding the Cuba issue.

At the opening ceremony of the Summit of Americas at the Hyatt in Port of Spain, President Obama reiterated his administration's desire to accentuate engagement with other countries in the Western Hemisphere and to work cooperatively on the economic, political, energy-related, and security-oriented issues. The details of such efforts notwithstanding, it was Obama's emphasis on international engagement that took center stage. He said, "There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect, common interests and shared values." This lexicon marks a broader transformation from the United States on foreign policy from a more hegemonic positioning to one of practical cooperation.

But all attention was focused on whether or not the United States president would overtly address Cuba. Indeed, at the close of his speech on opening day at the summit, President Obama made a history-making assertion when he expressly said, "The United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba." He acknowledged that such an endeavor would entail a "longer journey to be traveled to overcome decades of mistrust."

Nevertheless, he emphasized that there were "critical steps" that could be taken "toward a new day." In a tacit acknowledgment of Raul Castro's offer of open discussion, President Obama warned that he was "not interested in talking for sake of talking," but he made it clear that he looked forward to a new era in bilateral relation with Cuba. President Obama ended by auguring the spirit of change between Washington and Havana. He said, "I do believe we can move U.S.-Cuban relations in a new direction."

Other developments at the summit involved a convivial handshake between President Obama and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The Venezuelan leader, known for his anti-American rhetoric, reportedly offered friendship to President Obama and also gave him a book as a gift, albeit one that detailed perceived ills of American hegemony.

Nevertheless, President Chavez approached Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to tell her that he was restoring diplomatic representation in Washington. He also expressed hopes for improved bilateral relations on state television saying, "We ratify our willingness to begin what has started: cementing new relations. We have the very strong willingness to work together."

Facing criticism at home by Republicans who did not look kindly on these encounters between President Obama and President Chavez, the United States leader said, "It's unlikely that as a consequence of me shaking hands or having a polite conversation with Mr. Chavez that we are endangering the strategic interests of the United States."

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Addressing his policy of international engagement, President Barack Obama said on the closing day of the summit that it "strengthens our hand" by reaching out to enemies of the United States. At an outdoor news conference in Trinidad, the American president said that the United States should be a leader and not a lecturer of democracy. Explaining the Obama doctrine of engagement, he said, "We're not simply going to lecture you, but we're rather going to show through how we operate the benefits of these values and ideals."

Obama and Clinton call for two-state solution in Middle East

In May 2009, following a meeting with United States President Barack Obama, newly-inaugurated Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that he was ready to commence peace talks with Palestinians and Syria. He said, "I said I am willing to open peace talks with the Palestinians - [and] by the way with the Syrians as well - of course without preconditions." He also noted that such talks should include the wider regional players saying, "We also agreed on the need to expand the peace process to Arab states."

Netanyahu, however, issued a caveat that there could be no peace agreement without Israel's security needs being adequately addressed. This move to embrace peace negotiations came after a visit to the United States where he was pressured by President Barack Obama to consider a two state solution to the ongoing conflict with Palestinians. Netanyahu described his meeting with Obama saying, "There was an agreement that we need to immediately begin the peace process." But he stopped short of endorsing the two-state concept, as advocated by President Obama, instead saying that Israel was ready to live "side by side" with the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, an aide to Netanyahu, Ron Dermer, entered the spotlight when it was widely reported that he decried the two-state solution, characterizing it as "childish and stupid." Faced with questions as to why he would condemn the idea of an independent Israel and an independent Palestine living side by side, Dermer offered the following clarification to the Associated Press: "I told reporters that the focus by the media on the concept of solving the Israel-Palestinian issue through a two-state solution is childish and stupid, but I deny that I described the idea that way."

Later in May 2009, on the heels of meetings with both the Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas, United States President Barack Obama said that he was confident about a two-state solution in the Middle East peace process. Earlier, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton echoed these statements saying "We believe strongly in a two-state solution."

She noted that a two-state solution was in the "best interests" of both Israelis and Palestinians.

President Obama said that he believed Israel would see that such a path would help that country achieve sustainable peace and security. President Obama also said that all Arab countries would be expected to support and respect the two-state solution, which would essentially require recognition of the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

With these ends in mind, President Obama said that Israel should stop its expansion of settlements -- a call made in emphatic terms earlier by Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. But Israel was not quick to give wholesale assent to this demand. While Israeli President Netanyahu said that no new settlements would be constructed, he noted that the natural growth of existing settlements would be allowed. Meanwhile, President Obama also demanded that Palestinians stop their violent attacks against Israel.

At the start of July 2009, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak denied that there was any impasse with the United States over Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank. Barak made the remarks even as talks with United States envoy George Mitchell ended without a clear agreement on the matter. Instead, the two sides issued a joint statement noting that a "full range of issues related to Middle East peace" had been discussed. These issues included security, normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel, as well as settlement activity.

Of key significance was this latter issue and the prevailing call by the United States for Israel to cease all settlement activity in the West Bank, while at the same time, Israel has maintained its right to the "natural growth" of existing Jewish settlements. Driving the perception of some sort of impasse has been the Palestinians' position that peace

talks cannot be started without a settlement freeze in areas it hopes to one day become part of an independent Palestinian state.

Defense Minister Barak characterized the meeting with Mitchell as "positive," although he acknowledged that there were differences. In an interview broadcast on Israeli radio, he suggested that a compromise was in the offing. The actual nature of such a compromise was unknown. However, it was revealed that Israel had approved the construction of several new residences in the Adam settlement -- an unofficial outpost deemed to be illegal under the aegis of international law.

For its part, Israel has said disputed this claim of illegality.

President Obama calls for "a new beginning" with the Muslim world from Cairo University

Summary:

On June 3, 2009, United States President Barack Obama arrived in Saudi Arabia on his first stop on a trip to the Middle East. On June 4, 2009, President Obama traveled onto Egypt where he addressed the Muslim world from Cairo University. The trip was aimed at strengthening United States' engagement in the region of the Middle East and the broader Islamic world.

Background:

During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised that he would travel to an Arab country to address the Islamic world, with an eye on improving America's image in that part of the globe. Obama aimed to regain global goodwill that was abundant after the terror attacks in the United States in 2001, but which he and other Democrats have said was squandered and lost as a result of the previous Bush administration's decision to launch a war in Iraq. To these ends, President Obama was making good on that promise by traveling from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, where he was scheduled to offer an address at Cairo University.

Another rationale for President Obama's trip was a meeting with King Abdullah while in Saudi Arabia. Describing that meeting, President Obama said, "I thought it was very important to come to the place where Islam began and to seek his majesty's counsel and to discuss with him many of the issues that we confront here in the Middle East." He continued, "I am confident that working together, the United States and Saudi Arabia can make progress on a whole host of issues of mutual interest."

Indeed, the meeting at the Saudi king's ranch involved dialogue on Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The Saudi monarch has long been considered a key player in regional stability, and his sanctioning of any given peace path could well advance such an end. It should be noted that some years earlier, the Saudi government advanced its own "land for peace" deal.

The Peace Process:

The trip came on the heels of meetings between the American president and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas respectively. President Obama made emphatically clear his commitment to the two-state solution as the ultimate end to the Middle East peace process. President Obama said he believed Israel would see that the two-state solution would help that country achieve sustainable peace and security. President Obama also said that all Arab countries would be expected to support and respect the two-state solution, which would essentially require recognition of the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

To date, the fate of the Palestinian people and the security of Israel have been flashpoints in the quest for peace. The Arab world, with the exception of Egypt and Jordan, have refused to recognize Israel and have used the issue of Palestinian sovereign status as a rallying call for anti-American sentiment. Meanwhile, the status of the Palestinian people has remained unresolved as various players and interest groups argue over who is to blame for the situation, and how it might be resolved. For his part, President Obama was to become one more American leader in a line of predecessors trying to solve this problem.

Al-Qaida Emerges

Middle East peace notwithstanding, it was Pakistan that emerged on the landscape as a new rallying call for Islamic extremism. As President Obama arrived in the region, there was a message from al-Qaida leader, Osama Bin Laden, transmitted on the Arabic television station al-Jazeera. In that message, Bin Laden accused the American president of being behind the ongoing crackdown on militants in Taliban strongholds of Pakistan. The terrorist leader warned that Obama had "sown new seeds to increase hatred and revenge on America." Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, also urged his listeners not to heed the "polished words" of the internationally-popular President Obama. These statements coincided with an al-Qaida statement vowing to attack President Obama's convoy in Riyadh.

The White House in Washington dismissed these messages, noting that Bin Laden and his ilk wanted to distract attention from Obama's much-anticipated speech to the Islamic world. White House Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs, said to reporters: "I don't think it's surprising that al-Qaida would want to shift attention away from the president's historic and continued efforts to have an open dialogue with the Muslim world." Meanwhile, United States special envoy to the Afghan-Pak region, Richard Holbrooke, made clear that the only sources of the chaos in Pakistan were al-Qaida and the Taliban. He also announced a fresh aid package aimed at helping the displaced populations in Pakistan suffering from the cross-fire of the violence there.

Geopolitical analysts surmised that back-to-back messages from the al-Qaida leadership indicated that it might well be threatened by the Obama administration's overtures to - and influence of -- the Islamic world.

The Speech:

In his address to the Muslim world, President Barack Obama said, "I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect." Speaking before a crowd of 4,000 Egyptians in the Grand Hall of Cairo University, President Obama noted that the centuries-long relationship between Islam and the West has involved both co-existence and cooperation, but that it has also been marked by conflict and religious wars. He acknowledged that the "years of distrust" would require both sides to make a "sustained effort... to respect one another and seek common ground."

President Obama succinctly explained some of the cause of the tensions between the West and the Islamic world when he said, "The sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam" and then observed that "violent extremists have exploited these tensions." He then went on to call for a new relationship based on common hopes and aspirations saying, "So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, and who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity. This cycle of suspicion and discord must end."

President Obama went on to describe the historical contributions of Islam to the world, referencing the development of Algebra, the invention of the magnetic compass and other tools of navigation, as well as cultural contributions in the realm of the arts. While not directly germane to geopolitics, these references served to show respect to the Islamic world, which has often been juxtaposed competitively against Western civilization.

Switching to the theme of Muslims in America, President Obama acknowledged that Islam has "always been a part of America's story" and noting that the country's first diplomatic relations were forged with Morocco. Conjuring up that history, he reminded people that during the signing of the Treaty of Tripoli in 1796, President John Adams wrote, "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims."

President Obama said that it was his responsibility as to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam, but also to advocate on behalf of his own country. To that end he said, "America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words - within our borders, and around the

world. We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: E pluribus unum: Out of many, one."

On foreign policy, President Obama explained that United States action in Afghanistan was not an act of war against Islam, but an imperative -- indeed, a necessity -- given the security threat posed by al-Qaida, which was responsible for the traumatic 2001 terror attacks in the United States. To that end, President Obama said: "But let us be clear: al-Qaida killed nearly 3,000 people on that day. The victims were innocent men, women and children from America and many other nations who had done nothing to harm anybody. And yet al-Qaida chose to ruthlessly murder these people, claimed credit for the attack, and even now states their determination to kill on a massive scale. They have affiliates in many countries and are trying to expand their reach. These are not opinions to be debated; these are facts to be dealt with." He went on to assert, "We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can. But that is not yet the case."

President Obama distinguished Iraq from Afghanistan by described the war in Iraq as optional. He also indicated that the war in Iraq had functioned as a cautionary tale within America, reminding everyone of the need to deploy diplomacy and forge international consensus to solve difficult global challenges, if at all possible. The American president also made clear that his country had no desire to establish permanent bases in Iraq.

Moving to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, President Obama emphasized the United States' special relationship with Israel, describing the bond as "unbreakable" and the existence of the Jewish state was rooted in an undeniable history of tragedy, including the horrors of the holocaust. He excoriated those who would deny the holocaust, saying vociferously: "Six million Jews were killed - more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, ignorant, and hateful. Threatening Israel with destruction - or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews - is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve."

President Obama also demanded that Palestinians abandon violent means of resistance. Contrasting the Palestinian struggle with that of African slaves, he said: "Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the center of America's founding." As if to underline his condemnation of violent resistance, President Obama said, "It's a story with a simple truth: that violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered."

At the same time, he acknowledged that the dislocation of Palestinians has been painful saying that the "situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable." As before, he emphasized the two-state solution and the right of Palestine to exist alongside Israel. "Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's," Obama said.

It should be noted that the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement following President Obama's speech that expressed the hope the American president's address would "lead to a new era of reconciliation between the Arab and Muslim world and Israel." On the other side of the equation, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas applauded the speech, saying that it was "a good start" to a reinvigorated peace process.

On the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions, President Obama appeared to strike a pragmatic tone when he said, "No single nation should pick and choose which nations hold nuclear weapons." But he also said that there should be no nuclear arms race in the Middle East -- a clear reference to the generally-held belief that Iran desires to build nuclear weapons. The American president also called for United States' relations with Iran to move forward saying, "The question, now, is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build." But Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, delivered his own speech in which he offered no signal of progress, preferring instead to

promote a negative stance in his pronouncement that that the United States remained "deeply hated" in the Middle East.

President Obama moved on to address the broad subject of democracy. President Obama said unambiguously, "No system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other." But he went on to note that his policy was founded on the notion that government should reflect the will of the people. President Obama stated: "I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere."

President Obama also disabused his listeners of the notion that elections were not the equivalent of democracy. He said, "No matter where it [change of government] takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who hold power: you must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy."

On the issue of women's rights, President Obama struck a culturally sensitive tone as he said, "I do not believe that women must make the same choices as men in order to be equal, and I respect those women who choose to live their lives in traditional roles. But it should be their choice." He continued by saying, "I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal, but I do believe that a woman who is denied an education is denied equality. And it is no coincidence that countries where women are well-educated are far more likely to be prosperous."

President Obama ended his historic address by noting that the path toward peace and understanding would be a difficult one, but that it must nonetheless be charted together for the sake of common purpose. He asserted: "The issues that I have described will not be easy to address. But we have a responsibility to join together on behalf of the world we seek - a world where extremists no longer threaten our people, and American troops have come home; a world where Israelis and Palestinians are each secure in a state of their own, and nuclear energy is used for peaceful purposes; a world where governments serve their citizens, and the rights of all God's children are respected. Those are mutual interests. That is the world we seek. But we can only achieve it together."

In closing, President Obama cited all three Abrahamic religions in a call for international peace as follows --

The Holy Koran tells us, "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace." The Holy Bible tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

Throughout his speech, President Obama was interrupted 30 times by applause. At one point, a man in the audience called out "We love you." At the close of his speech, the American president received a standing ovation.

Global Reaction:

Attention turned to how the address resonated with the Muslim world. Mina al-Oraibi, a columnist with the London-based Asharq Al-Awsat, emphasized the fact that "Obama mentioned the word peace 29 times and never mentioned terrorism." She said that his peace agenda would make him "the radicals' worst nightmare. In an interview with Egyptian media, famed Middle Eastern television personality Emad el-Din Adib, said, "President Obama's charisma is unquestionable, but it's the substance and depth of his speech that made the hall roar."

In Pakistan, Sherry Rehman, former information minister and parliamentarian for the ruling Pakistan People's Party, said that Pakistanis should welcome the speech; she also hailed his respectful tone. Moreover, Rehman said "It's not a strategic shift, but more a welcome step in the right direction." But retired Pakistani General Talat Masood said that the speech "went right to the heart of the issues that bedevil U.S.-Muslim relations."

Not all those who heard the speech had positive words for President Obama. On CBS television in the United States, former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer disapproved of President Obama's speech in Cairo. Fleischer said, "Bottom line -- the speech was balanced and that was what was wrong with it. American policy should not be balanced. It should side with those who fight terror." This view was reflected by the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), which charged that "Obama struck a balanced tone with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that's what was wrong with this speech." The RJC continued saying, "American policy should not be balanced in regard to... those [Palestinians] who either engage in [terror] or are too weak to prevent it."

Following along those lines, there was a consensus complaint from neo-conservatives that President Obama had not used the word "terrorism" during his address, preferring instead to deploy the phrase "violent extremists." Analysts observed that President Obama may well have made a conscious effort to adopt a new lexicon reflective of his policy of engagement. In so doing, he expunged the Bush administration's term, "global war on terror," which may unwillingly connote notions of a ceaseless clash of civilizations.

Other critics of President Obama argued that a well-delivered speech was no substitute for action. But the president himself acknowledged that "no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust." That said, he made clear that the objectives of a new relationship between the United States and the Islamic world could only be started with dialogue. Indeed, as media pundit and Newsweek columnist, Howard Fineman, noted: "In this case, words matter." For its part, the White House said that President Obama's address was intended to start a process to "re-energize the dialogue with the Muslim world."

During his trip, President Obama also met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Following his address, President Obama visited the pyramids at Giza before leaving for Germany and France. After leaving Egypt, President Obama was scheduled to travel to Germany where he met with Chancellor Angela Merkel and visited both the Dresden and Buchenwald concentration camps there. Following, he traveled to France to meet with President Nicolas Sarkozy and attend D-Day ceremonies in Normandy.

North Korea

In April 2009, North Korea announced that it was withdrawing from multilateral disarmament talks and restarting its operations at the Yongbyon nuclear plant. This decision to withdraw from the negotiating table and resume reprocessing spent fuel rods came after the United Nations (UN) Security Council decided to impose sanctions on three North Korean companies because of a controversial missile launch. Then on May 25, 2009, North Korea said that it had successfully conducted an underground nuclear test.

International news agencies reported that in addition to the underground nuclear test, North Korea also test-fired two short-range missiles. There were reports that the test firing of these missiles was aimed at disrupting the ability of United States surveillance of the nuclear testing.

Geopolitical analysts were trying to determine why North Korea had chosen to move from negotiations to a clearly confrontational stance. Two years earlier, North Korea agreed to close its nuclear facility at Yongbyong and comply with international monitoring of its nuclear assets. In exchange, it was to be the recipient of a generous aid package and the United States was to remove North Korea from its list of terrorism sponsors.

Later, however, North Korea withdrew from long-running multilateral negotiations and stopped inspectors from monitoring progress related to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

To this latest action, President Barack Obama said that the action by North Korea was a threat to international peace and stability. He warned, "The danger posed by North Korea's threatening activities warrants action by the international community." The American president observed that North Korea was "not only deepening its own isolation it's also inviting stronger international pressure."

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Not surprisingly, the United Nations (UN) Security Council rapidly reacted with a strenuous statement of condemnation, registering North Korea's contravention of the resolution, demanding that North Korea return to multilateral talks aimed at denuclearization, and reminding all member states that they must comply with sanctions imposed on North Korea. The UN Security Council also made clear that further action, in the form of a new resolution with stronger measures, was in the offing.

United States Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, also said that the formulation of a new resolution with more stringent measures would commence right away. Rice said, "The US thinks that this is a grave violation of international law and a threat to regional and international peace and security. And therefore the United States will seek a strong resolution with strong measures."

On May 27, 2009, the North Korean military announced that it was abandoning the armistice that brought an end to Korean War.

The North Korean military said that this action was being taken in response to South Korea's decision to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). North Korea said that South Korea's decision to join PSI -- a United States-led effort to patrol the oceans in search of nuclear weapons -- was tantamount to a "declaration of war" and promised military action if its shipping vessels were intercepted.

In the first week of June 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that North Korea could well be reinstated on her country's list of countries viewed as sponsors of terrorism. With some politicians in the United States calling for such a response, the country's top diplomat said, "Well, we're going to look at it. There's a process for it. Obviously we would want to see recent evidence of their support for international terrorism." Secretary of State Clinton observed, "Obviously they were taken off of the list for a purpose and that purpose is being thwarted by their actions."

Secretary of State Clinton also warned that North Korea was likely to face harsh consequences from the United Nations, as the international body contemplated a new resolution against North Korea. To that end, Clinton said, "We think we're going to come out of this with a very strong resolution with teeth that will have consequences for the North Korean regime." She continued, "If we do not take significant and effective action against the North Koreans now, we'll spark an arms race in North-East Asia."

In June 2009, the United States special envoy to North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, said in an address to the Korea Society in New York that his government was considering stronger responses to the challenges posed by North Korea's recent missile activities. He said, "North Korea's recent actions to develop a nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile capacity require that we expand our consideration of new responses." He continued, "However, the North Korean claim to be responding to a 'threat' or a 'hostile policy' by the United States is simply groundless. Quite to the contrary, we have no intention to invade North Korea or change its regime through force, and this has been made clear to the DPRK repeatedly."

Among the possible responses being considered by the United States were financial sanctions, as well as tougher inspections of shipping vessels in waters surrounding North Korea. Related to these possible moves was the unanimous decision by the United Nations Security Council to impose harsh new sanctions against North Korea in response to the nuclear test carried out in May 2009. Rosemary DiCarlo, the United States deputy ambassador at the United Nations said: "North Korea chose a path of provocation. This resolution will give us new tools to impair North Korea's ability to proliferate, and to threaten international stability."

For its part, North Korea reacted to these developments by threatening to weaponize its stocks of plutonium. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that this threat by Pyongyang was both "provocative" and "deeply regrettable." She warned that the move would serve only to isolate North Korea even further from the wider international community.

Meanwhile, a political confrontation between the United States and North Korea could become more likely after reports emerged that a North Korea court convicted two American journalists of "hostile acts" and illegal entry into

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the communist state. Despite international protests and the two journalists' insistence of innocence, Laura Ling and Euna Lee were sentenced them to 12 years in a labor prison. The families of the two journalists have urged that they not be part of the burgeoning political challenge over North Korea's nuclear activities.

By the third week of June 2009, as reports emerged about a long range missile launch by North Korea -- quite possibly in the direction of Hawaii -- United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted that his country was "in a good position" to protect itself. Secretary Gates said, "We do have some concerns if they were to launch a missile to the west in the direction of Hawaii." But he made it clear that the United States had approved the deployment of both radar and missiles "provide support," should the American state of Hawaii face attack. United States President Barack Obama later echoed these assurances in an interview with CBS News. President Obama said, "This administration - and our military - is fully prepared for any contingencies."

The American president dismissed the notion that it was warning of a military response against North Korea. But he also said, "I don't want to speculate on hypotheticals. But I do want to give assurances to the American people that the T's are crossed and the I's are dotted."

In other developments, United States President Barack Obama renewed its sanctions -- separate from the United Nations sanctions -- against North Korea. President Obama explained that North Korea's nuclear development combined with threats posed a national security risk to the United States and destabilized the region of eastern Asia. The American president also said his administration would end the cycle of responding to North Korean nuclear threats by granting concessions and incentives to Pyongyang.

On July 2, 2009, North Korea test-fired four short-range missiles. According to South Korea's Yonhap News Agency, two surface-to-ship missiles had been fired from the port of Wonsan while the other two were launched from Sinsang-ni. All four were fired into the Sea of Japan, which South Korea regards as the "East Sea." The missile tests were not surprising as Pyongyang issued warnings to shipping vessels, urging them to avoid coastal waters. Two days later, North Korea was suspected of firing another seven ballistic missiles. These seven Scud-type missiles were launched from an east coast base and, as before, fell into the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

The timing of the missile tests coincided with the United States' celebration of its Independence Day on July 4, 2009, and was regarded as a clear act of defiance against Washington. Nevertheless, the United States was joined by Russia and China in calling for calm. Russia and China urged North Korea to return to the negotiating table and said all parties should work to avoid further destabilization of the region. The United States also said that the tense situation should not be exacerbated. Using highly restrained language, a United States Department of State official said the volley of missile tests were "not helpful" and said that North Korea should not "aggravate tensions" but instead "focus on denuclearization talks." While British Foreign Secretary David Miliband echoed this sentiment by saying that tensions on the Korean peninsula should remain "at manageable levels," Japan and South Korea struck a somewhat harsher tone in saying that the missile launches constituted an "act of provocation."

Iraq

United States troops withdraw from Iraqi cities and towns --

United States troops withdrew from Iraq's cities, towns and military bases on June 30, 2009, in keeping with a prevailing bilateral agreement. Iraqi security forces were now charged with keeping the peace.

Iraqi politicians of various ethno-sectarian backgrounds lauded the move as a sign of progress is the path of sovereignty. Hashim al-Taie of the Accordance Front said, "The pullout is a very good step on the path to independence and sovereignty and Iraqis are glad of that." Mahmoud Othman, from the main Kurdish alliance in parliament, said, "We have concerns. Some towns still have trouble -- mixed areas -- but those concerns should not prevent the withdrawal."

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For his part, United States President noted that "Sovereignty Day" was a significant milestone for Iraq, but warned that Iraq would yet be faced with "difficult days" in the future. Indeed, there were some anxieties that the withdrawal of United States troops could well act as a trigger for increasing ethno-sectarian violence across the country.

Russia

U.S. and Russia forge agreement to cut stockpiles of nuclear weapons as Obama and Medvedev set new tone for bilateral relations --

On July 6, 2009, United States President Barack Obama met with his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev, for talks on their countries' respective nuclear arsenals. Following three hours of discussion, the two world leaders signed an outline agreement aimed at reducing their countries' stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The "joint understanding" was signed in a public ceremony in Moscow and would cut deployed nuclear warheads to under 1,700 on both sides within seven years of a forging new accord. That new accord would stand in replacement of the 1991 Start I treaty, which was set to expire at the close of 2009.

A statement from the White House explained that the new treaty would "include effective verification measures" and "enhance the security of both the US and Russia, as well as provide predictability and stability in strategic offensive forces."

While the terms of the new concord would still leave both countries with enough weaponry to destroy one another, the move was intended to stop the diplomatic "drift" away from cooperation on shared interests, which had occurred in recent times.

To that end, President Obama said the United States and Russia were both "committed to leaving behind the suspicion and the rivalry of the past." He also noted that the new agreement was part of an initiative "to reset U.S.-Russian relations so that we can co-operate more effectively in areas of common interest."

For his part, President Medvedev said that the talks had been "very frank and very sincere" and were

"without any doubt, the meeting we had been waiting for in Russia and the United States." The Russian leader went on to state, "I would like particularly to stress that our country would like to reach a level of cooperation with the United States that would really be worthy of the 21st Century, and which would ensure international peace and security."

In addition to reduced levels of nuclear warheads and delivery systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles, there were also provisions for submarine-launched missiles and bombers.

In a separate agreement, Russia said it would allow the United States military to transport troops and weaponry across its territory to Afghanistan, where the war against resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida was ongoing. This use of Russian territory to move troops and equipment into the conflict zone would foreclose the use of routes through Pakistan, which have been the target of attacks by militants on a frequent and increasing basis.

In another development, Russia and the United States agreed to establish a joint commission, which would facilitate greater cooperation on energy, fighting terrorism and dealing with narcotics trafficking.

In a particularly significant move, the two countries agreed to resume military cooperation, which was suspended in 2008 as a result of the conflict between Russia and Georgia.

Yet unresolved was the prevailing source of controversy on both sides -- the United States' plan to develop a missile defence shield system in Eastern Europe. This proposal has been strenuously resisted by Russia, which eschews greater American domination in its own backyard.

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In a move aimed at gradually moving the two countries toward consensus on the issue, both Obama and Medvedev said that they backed a joint study on the threat of ballistic missiles and the institution of a data exchange center.

Upcoming: President Obama, who characterized former President Vladimir Putin as having "one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new," was set to meet with the prime minister of Russia on July 7, 2009.

U.S. president says immediate mission is to see Afghanistan through elections

With casualties mounting amidst troops from the United States and the United Kingdom fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, there have been increasing anxieties about Western efforts in that country to crush Islamic militants. Indeed, recent times have seen resurgent Taliban become increasingly violent and brutal in their attacks while Western forces have seen ever-increasing casualty lists. In July 2009, the United Kingdom and the United States had lost several soldiers as a result of attacks by resurgent Taliban. Indeed, as many as 15 British troops died in the space of days while four United States marines died in two separate roadside bombings.

Given this climate, United States President Barack Obama sought to quell anxieties by staking out a clear set of objectives for United States and allied troops trying to repel the Taliban in Afghanistan. To this end, President Obama characterized the war effort in Afghanistan as a "serious fight" against terrorism, and the crucial need to establish regional stability. President Obama said that United States and allied troops had enjoyed some success but were immediately tasked with the mission of seeing Afghanistan through the forthcoming presidential election set for August 2009.

Across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom, British Prime Minister was compelled to justify his country's continuing effort in Afghanistan by explaining that there was a vital interest to his country in fighting terrorism. President Obama had also emphasized the fact that the effort against the Taliban was as much in the interests of Europe as it was for the United States. He said, "The mission in Afghanistan is one that the Europeans have as much if not more of a stake in than we do. The likelihood of a terrorist attack in London is at least as high, if not higher, than it is in the United States."

Obama on Constitutional Issues and National Security in 2009

Obama's CIA chief orders end to secret prisons

In April 2009, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Leon Panetta, announced an end to the global network of clandestine prisons that had been used to detain terrorism suspects. The prisons, also known as "black sites," gained notoriety for being the venue of harsh interrogation techniques, indeed torture, used on terrorism suspects. Shortly after his inauguration to office, President Barack Obama vowed to close down these facilities. Making good on that promise, Panetta wrote in a letter to staff, "CIA no longer operates detention facilities or black sites."

Obama orders revamping of military tribunals

The Obama administration in the United States announced in May 2009 plans to restart military tribunals for some detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Present Barack Obama said in a statement that the revived trial procedures would go forward, but issued the caveat that new rules -- including improved legal rights -- would have to be instituted. To that end, a new tribunal structure would include prohibitions of evidence obtained via harsh treatment, restrictions on evidence deemed to be hearsay, the ability for detainees to select their own defense attorneys, and protections for those detainees who chose not to testify in a tribunal.

One of President Obama's first decisions following his inauguration was to halt the tribunals, given his desire to usher in a new era of human rights. Before, as a candidate for the presidency, Obama characterized President George W. Bush's adoption of military tribunals at Guantanamo Bay as a failure. Accordingly, the president was expected to suffer a strong backlash from progressive and liberal Democrats, as well as human rights groups and civil liberties associations who have decried such procedures.

Indeed, Zachary Katznelson of Reprieve, a group representing some Guantanamo Bay detainees, expressed dismay at the president's decision. He said in an interview with the BBC: "He is taking a gravely, truly flawed system, tinkering at the edges and hoping that the world is somehow going to see this as legitimate, as open, as fair - it's not going to happen."

For his part, President Obama has sought to couch his apparent policy reversal in circumscribed terms. He explained that his opposition to the Bush administration's tribunals -- under the aegis of the Military Tribunals Act -- was due to the fact that they did not institute a legal framework for the trials. Moreover, he argued they actively undermined the right of swift and certain justice, thusly rendering the Bush era tribunals to be a failure of jurisprudence. President Obama was instead advocating the use of military commissions that met the burden of legitimacy for trying those deemed to have violated the laws of war. The president said, "These reforms will begin to restore the commissions as a legitimate forum for prosecution, while bringing them in line with the rule of law." He continued, "This is the best way to protect our country, while upholding our deeply held values."

Obama v. Cheney as torture debate and Guantanamo detainees take center stage

In April 2009, President Barack Obama's administration released Bush-era documents that both authorized and delineated the harsh interrogation tactics used on terrorism suspects. The documents, which were crafted by the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel in 2002 and 2005, were released in accordance with a court-approved deadline and as a result of a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union. Known as the "torture memos," these documents graphically outlined the techniques including "waterboarding," prolonged sleep deprivation, food deprivation, exposure to cold, psychological stress, prolonged shackling, slamming suspects against walls, forced nudity, and stress positions .

For his part, President Obama decided to release the documents despite pressure from former and current CIA officials to keep them secret. They had argued that exposing such measures would be a threat to national security. To that end, former CIA chief Michael Hayden, who worked under the Bush administration, said that CIA officers would feel constrained to act, while allies would be less eager to share sensitive intelligence. But President Obama concluded that transparency and the accuracy of the historical record were of essential importance. President Obama, however, decided to foreclose the possibility of prosecution of CIA operatives whom he said were merely "carrying out orders" that had been authorized by the Bush legal team. Critics argued that this rationale was not a defense against inhumane actions. For his part, President Obama said that he wanted to move beyond the "dark and painful chapter in our history." In a statement, he noted, "Nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past." That said, days later, he did not foreclose the possibility of some action being taken against those who orchestrated the policy; the president said that such a decision resided with Attorney General Holder.

By May 2009, President Obama was hoping that the United States could put the unsavory issue of torture in the background and move forward with his agenda. Such an end was unlikely to occur since the matter was not put the issue to rest. From the right side of the torture debate, conservatives -- led by former Vice President Dick Cheney -- were anxious to express their hard line views on the record, given the threat of terrorism. From the left, liberals were clamoring for investigations into the former Bush administration's use of torture in interrogating terrorism suspects. They argued that there were legal ramifications were looming in the background.

Meanwhile, the debate in the United States was evolving away from the question of whether torture had been committed to one surrounding its effectiveness. With Dick Cheney's entry into the morass, the debate soon shifted from the prevailing question of whether harsh tactics, such as waterboarding, constituted torture and were thusly a violation of the Geneva Conventions, and onto the merits of its utility.

It should be noted that waterboarding -- the act of simulated drowning -- was considered torture in the aftermath of World War II. Indeed, one particular memorandum by the military's Joint Personnel Recovery clearly used the word "torture" to describe the tactics and to discourage such usage. As reported by the Washington Post, the document asserted: "The unintended consequence of a U.S. policy that provides for the torture of prisoners is that it could be

used by our adversaries as justification for the torture of captured U.S. personnel." Bush White House stalwarts were arguing that such techniques yielded valuable information from 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed that ultimately thwarted an attack Los Angeles' Library Tower. But the timeline revealed that the Los Angeles plot was actually foiled in 2002 -- before Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured in 2003.

From Cheney's point of view, interrogation methods that pushed the envelope were just some of many measures taken by the Bush administration to ensure the security of the country. He lambasted the Obama administration for reversing many of the previous administration's security initiatives. Cheney also argued that harsh methods had exacted valuable evidence and intelligence, which helped keep Americans safe. Cheney has also demanded that documents be de-classified to prove his case; that request was denied by the Central Intelligence Agency because the information sought was the subject of pending litigation.

Nevertheless, as McClatchy News reminded its readers, Cheney's position on torture has been on the record as far back as 2004. In an interview with the now-defunct Rocky Mountain News, Cheney defended the invasion of Iraq by claiming that secular country had trained extremist Islamist al-Qaida operatives, based on interrogations of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. That claim has since been regarded as specious, but it nonetheless lays bare Cheney's stance on the utility -- indeed, the necessity -- of harsh tactics historically defined as torture.

Cheney's aforementioned claim additionally revealed the possibility that interrogators were called on to use torture methods, for the purpose of substantiating a connection between Iraq's leader at the time, Saddam Hussein, and al-Qaida. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, both the Iraq/al-Qaida connection, as well as the threat of weapons of mass destruction, were frequently used by members of the Bush administration to justify action against Saddam Hussein's regime. Fast-forward to 2009 and some -- including Larry Wilkerson (chief of staff to former Secretary of State Colin Powell) -- were beginning to speculate that the use of torture advocated by Cheney may not have simply rested on national security grounds, but extended to rationalizing a controversial war using shaky jurisprudence. To these ends, Wilkerson said: "Likewise, what I have learned is that as the administration authorized harsh interrogation in April and May of 2002 -- well before the Justice Department had rendered any legal opinion -- its principal priority for intelligence was not aimed at pre-empting another terrorist attack on the U.S. but discovering a smoking gun linking Iraq and al-Qa'ida."

Along a similar vein, McClatchy News reported on an assertion by the head of the Criminal Investigation Task Force at Guantanamo from 2002-2005 that intelligence officers were asked to search for evidence of such ties during the late 2002 to early 2003 time period. Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Brittain Mallow, who once served as a military criminal investigator said, "I'm aware of the fact that in late 2002, early 2003, that [the alleged al Qaida-Iraq link] was an interest on the intelligence side." He continued, "That was something they were tasked to look at." While Mallow did not furnish the name of who gave the directive, McClatchy news cited an anonymous former senior intelligence official's suggestion that those responsible included both Cheney as well as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

The late 2002-early 2003 time period was when Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheik Mohammed -- known to be two senior al-Qaida operatives -- were waterboarded repeatedly. According to the 2004 Senate Intelligence Committee report, both detainees were interrogated about possible ties between Iraq and al-Qaida and both said they were unaware of such a connection.

In yet another twist reported by McClatchy News, army psychiatrist, Major Paul Burney, told the Army Inspector General's office that interrogators at Guantanamo Bay were pressured to find connections between Iraq and al Qaida. In a declassified Senate Armed Services Committee report, which was released in 2006, Burney said: "The more frustrated people got in not being able to establish that link . . . there was more and more pressure to resort to measures that might produce more immediate results."

NBC News investigative producer, Robert Windrem, explored Cheney's desire to find an illusive connection between Iraq and al-Qaida and reported that the vice president's office called for the waterboarding of Iraqi prisoner Muhammed Khudayr al-Dulaymi, because it was believed he might have knowledge of such a link. In the Daily Beast, Windrem wrote, "Two U.S. intelligence officers confirm that Vice President Cheney's office suggested

waterboarding an Iraqi prisoner, a former intelligence official for Saddam Hussein, who was suspected to have knowledge of a Saddam-al Qaeda connection."

This allegation coincided with claims made by Charles Duelfer, the head of the Iraq Survey Group. Both in his own book titled, "Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq," as well as in an interview with The Daily Beast, Duelfer claimed that some senior non-CIA officials believed that the interrogation of Khudayr had been "too gentle." Hence, they advocated the use of other techniques. Duelfer wrote, "They asked if enhanced measures, such as waterboarding, should be used." He continued, "The executive authorities addressing those measures made clear that such techniques could legally be applied only to terrorism cases, and our debriefings were not as yet terrorism-related. The debriefings were just debriefings, even for this creature." Duelfer went on to note that he considered the suggestion to be "reprehensible," political-motivated, and "ultimately counterproductive to the overall mission of the Iraq Survey Group."

Since these revelations have surfaced, the torture debate has moved even further. No longer has the discussion focused on the very legality of torture, or the utilitarian value of harsh interrogation of terror suspects on the basis of national security. Instead, the media has focused on whether or not House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was informed of the use of waterboarding during briefings in 2002 and 2003, and was complicit with the Bush administration.

At a May 14, 2009, news conference in the Capitol, Pelosi vociferously declared what she learned at a Central Intelligence Agency briefing in September 2002. She said: "We were told that waterboarding was not being used." She continued, "That's the only mention, that they were not using it. And we now know that earlier they were." She was referring to a recently released Justice Department memorandum detailing the waterboarding of Abu Zubaydah at least 83 times in August 2002 -- one month before she was briefed that such techniques were not being employed. Pelosi then charged that the intelligence agency had lied to her about the use of waterboarding and called for declassification of documents surrounding the brewing controversy. The House Speaker also accused Republicans of trying to refocus attention on her, in order to obfuscate the Bush administration's use of tactics, historically understood to be torture.

It was widely reported in the mass media that Leon Panetta, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, pushed back against Pelosi's claims in a note he sent to agency employees saying: "Let me be clear: It is not our policy or practice to mislead Congress. That is against our laws and our values. As the Agency indicated previously in response to Congressional inquiries, our contemporaneous records from September 2002 indicate that CIA officers briefed truthfully on the interrogation of Abu Zubaydah, describing "the enhanced techniques that had been employed."

But Panetta appeared to issue some degree of a caveat in the letter he sent to the House Intelligence Committee, which read as follows: "This letter presents the most thorough information we have on dates, locations, and names of all Members of Congress who were briefed by the CIA on enhanced interrogation techniques. This information, however, is drawn from the past files of the CIA and represents MFRs completed at the time and notes that summarized the best recollections of those individuals. In the end, you and the Committee will have to determine whether this information is an accurate summary of what actually happened."

Leading Republicans, such as former House Speaker Newt Gingrich characterized Pelosi as a "trivial politician" who "dishonors the Congress by her behavior." He also drew his the timeline of decades, which included other controversies such as Iran Contra and Watergate, to assert: "I think this is the most despicable, dishonest and vicious political effort I've seen in my lifetime." House Minority Leader John Boehner took a less hyperbolic tone as he demanded that Pelosi furnish proof that the agency lied, or, apologize for maligning the intelligence professionals.

But on the other side of the equation, Pelosi's stance seemed to coincide with that of former Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, Bob Graham, who asserted that the briefings by the Central Intelligence Agency were not as informative as purported to be, or simply did not take place at all. In a media blitz, Graham repeatedly **stated** that some of the briefings in which he was allegedly told about waterboarding and harsh interrogation techniques simply

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did not occur. Known for his copious note taking, Graham's recollection of events was not likely to be challenged and, indeed, the Central Intelligence Agency conceded that some of its scheduling claims were not correct.

Meanwhile, House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey sent a letter to Leon Panetta questioning Central Intelligence Agency records showing a committee aide, Paul Juola, attended a September 2006 briefing that included a discussion of harsh interrogation techniques. His letter, along with Graham's objections, could raise some questions about the accuracy of the intelligence agency's records. Overall, the controversy has resulted in a louder clamor for the declassification of relevant documents, and raised the specter of investigations -- something the Obama administration has eschewed to date.

On May 20, 2009, attention was focused on the announced closure of the controversial detainment camp at Guantanamo Bay. Soon after coming to power, President Obama had announced that Guantanamo would be closed by the start of 2010. President Obama has consistently said that Guantanamo has become a negative symbol within the international community, effectively illustrating the perceived erosion of American constitutional values and the rule of law. However, with the reality looming that dangerous detainees might be moved from the isolated prison on the coast of Cuba, Obama was faced with resistance from both Republicans and his own fellow Democrats. Indeed, the Senate voted to deny funding the closure of the detainment camp at Guantanamo, pending the provision of a detailed plan for the placement of prisoners.

At issue was the growing concern that some detainees would be released into society and pursue terrorism. Also at issue was some concern that terrorism suspects could not be properly or safely held in prisons on the United States mainland. That latter argument has been somewhat challenged by defenders of the president who have pointed to a host of dangerous individuals from Charles Manson to the first World Trade Center bombers who were held in United States prisons, and then tried and sentenced within the United States justice system.

The matter came to a head on May 21, 2009, when President Obama and former Vice President Dick Cheney held dueling speeches on the matter of detainment camps and national security.

For his part, President Obama assured the American people that his administration would find suitable means to securely deal with the dangerous detainees of Guantanamo Bay. The president noted that a new legal framework could be instituted, making it possible to jail some detainees within the mainland prisons. He acknowledged the reality that many detainees likely posed grave threats to national security, but characterized the prison at Guantanamo Bay as a "misguided experiment." Speaking at the United States National Archives -- the location of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights -- President Obama made repeated reference of the underlying priority to respect the rule of law. To that end, he referred to the United States as "a nation of laws."

On the other side of the equation, Dick Cheney harshly defended Bush-era tactics, including enhanced interrogation techniques, historically understood as torture. Indeed, he acknowledged that three prisoners had been subject to waterboarding. As before, Cheney argued there was a need to garner important information from the suspects and he justified such actions on the basis that they were "legal, essential, justified and successful," claims to the contrary notwithstanding. He also denounced measures taken by the Obama administration to dismantle Bush-era security programs as being "unwise in the extreme."

CIA Director Panetta confirms CIA failed to inform Congress about secret program initiated by VP Cheney

On June 24, 2009 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Leon Panetta reportedly briefed House and Senate intelligence committees on a clandestine intelligence program that had been hidden from the United States Congress for eight years. Director Panetta apparently deemed the situation to be important enough to shut down the program and schedule close-door meetings with the relevant congressional oversight committees regarding the matter.

The development came at a time when the CIA was ensconced within a dispute with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi over similar allegations. At issue in that scenario was Pelosi's charges that the CIA intentionally misled her about the harsh interrogation techniques, or torture, of terrorist suspects in 2002. While the controversy surrounding Pelosi's knowledge of harsh interrogation techniques were distinct from the mystery intelligence initiative shut down

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by Panetta, it certainly served to bolster claims that the CIA may not have kept key members of Congress sufficiently informed during the Bush presidency. Indeed, the president is legally required to keep intelligence committees "fully and currently informed of the intelligence activities of the United States, including any significant anticipated intelligence activity." In particularly sensitive cases, such as covert action, the president is legally required to at least brief the "Gang of Eight," consisting of Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress as well as the leaders of the intelligence committees.

By July 11, 2009, the New York Times was reporting that former Vice President Dick Cheney directed the CIA to withhold information about this secret counter-terrorism program from Congress for eight years.

The New York Times made this claim on the basis of two sources with direct knowledge of the situation. The New York Times also reported that their efforts to reach Cheney for comment on the matter were unsuccessful.

The actual details of the mystery intelligence initiative has remained unknown, however, intelligence and congressional sources described it as being a counter-terrorism program that never became fully operational. They also said it did not involve either the CIA interrogation program, extraordinary rendition, or domestic intelligence activities. Accordingly, an anonymous intelligence official suggested that the matter was not quite as dramatic as it was being portrayed in the media. Congressional and Senate Democrats, however, were not likely to sweep the matter under the rug.

Indeed, on July 12, 2009, Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein of California confirmed that CIA chief Panetta placed the blame on Cheney for keeping the program concealed from the appropriate individuals. Senator Feinstein, who has served as chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said in an interview with Fox News, "This is a big problem." Senator Feinstein went on to state that the Bush administration may have violated the strictures of law, noting that the Congress should never be kept uninformed even though there was a climate of anxiety in the days after the 2001 terrorist attacks. She said, "I understand the need of the day... but I think you weaken your case when you go outside the law."

On the other side of the equation, Republican Senator John Cornyn of Texas rebutted Senator Feinstein by telling Fox News that the Democrats' claims were politically-motivated.

A week later, the Intelligence Committee in the United States House of Representatives reportedly intends to launch a probe into whether the Central Intelligence Agency violated the law when it concealed its secret program from Congress. At issue was a clandestine intelligence program that had been hidden from the United States Congress for eight years. CIA Director Leon Panetta deemed the situation to be important enough to shut down the program and schedule closed-door meetings with the relevant congressional oversight committees regarding the matter. The program was revealed to secret assassination squad, tasked with terminating terrorists. While its actual purpose was unlikely to evoke much criticism, the failure to inform Congress has been of grave concern to legislators.

Federal prosecutor appointed in criminal probe of CIA agents

In the last week of August 2009, the Justice Department in the United States said that it would appoint a federal prosecutor to investigate allegations of detainee abuse outlined in a newly declassified report. The report dated back to 2004 but was released with heavy redactions, leading ultimately to a court ruling that greater disclosure be made. Now, with this information available, Attorney General Eric Holder was reported to have appointed a federal prosecutor, John Durham, to probe these alleged abuses.

At issue were a number of revelations of inhumane practices, including the alleged case of an intelligence agent threatening to kill a terror suspect's children as part of interrogation techniques, and the case of another agent warning that a suspect that his mother would be sexually assaulted in front of him. Such cases, if proved true, would be violations of law.

For his part, CIA Director Leon Panetta promised that he would "stand up" for those who acted in keeping with the legal parameters of the time. He said, "[I will] stand up for those officers who did what their country asked and who

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followed the legal guidance they were given." That said, Panetta also said, "This agency made no excuses for behavior, however rare, that went beyond the formal guidelines on counter-terrorism." Thus, it was clear that those CIA employees who overstepped the legal guidance by Bush administration lawyers -- however debatable that guidance might be to constitutional scholars -- could well face prosecution.

The call for the investigation illustrated the uncomfortable balancing act that the White House has been forced to undertake. Upon his inauguration, President Barack Obama made clear that he did not want to concentrate on the perceived ills of the past, such as the illicit practice of torture, but to move towards the future. However, the Obama administration was also under pressure by the Democratic base to probe, expose and prosecute abuses and violations from the Bush era. This narrow probe, based on particularly egregious cases that exceeded the limits of the questionable legal guidance from the Bush team, was an attempt to offer accountability, but with clear constraints.

Congressional Republicans reacted negatively to the news of the probe, arguing that it would negatively impact the national interest. But Democrats, such as Senator Patrick Leahy, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said that the investigation should be broadened to include independent review of all Bush-era anti-terrorism policies.

Obama approves new interrogation team

In a related development, on August 23, 2009, President Barack Obama approved a new interrogation team that would be responsible for questioning terror suspects. This new team of interrogators, called the High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group, would rely on science and the army's field manual to implement "best practices" in operations. Accordingly, the White House was eschewing the harsh interrogations techniques, largely believed to be torture, used during the Bush administration. The Obama White House has also made clear that it will not follow in the Bush administration's footsteps by carrying out "extraordinary rendition," whereby terror suspects would be transported to prisons in foreign territory, commonly referred to as "black sites," where they would undergo harsh interrogation techniques, generally understood by international law to be torture.

Domestic Agenda Developments of Obama Administration in late 2009

United States House of Representatives pass landmark energy bill; massive health care reform also on policy agenda

In late June 2009, the United States House of Representatives passed landmark climate change legislation in the form of the Waxman-Markey American Clean Energy and Security Act. The bill endeavored to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases associated with global warming by instituting the use of cleaner alternative energy than high-polluting oil and coal. While the legislation constituted a major victory for President Barack Obama, Republican have opposed it on the basis of claims that it will be too costly to the overall economy.

That said, the proposal was yet to be passed in the Senate, where passage promised to be more difficult.

President Obama selection for Supreme Court faces confirmation hearings in the Senate

Summary:

The United States Senate was set to begin confirmation hearings of President Barack Obama's selection for the Supreme Court of the United States, Judge Sonia Sotomayor. Her selection has been met by a mixture of praise by supporters and condemnation by opponents. Should Sotomayor be confirmed by the Senate, she would become the first Hispanic and only the third woman to sit on the bench of the United States highest court.

Background:

In late May 2009, President Barack Obama made history in selecting the first Hispanic -- Judge Sonia Sotomayor of the -- to replace retiring Judge David Souter on the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS). If confirmed, Sotomayor will be only the third woman to sit on the SCOTUS.

Raised in the Bronx, Judge Sonia Sotomayor -- the daughter of Puerto Rican migrants, whose father died when she was young and whose mother worked two jobs to put her children through school -- graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University in 1976. She received her law degree from Yale Law School in 1979, where she was an editor at the Yale Law Journal. Sotomayor worked as an Assistant District Attorney in New York before entering private practice in 1984. She was nominated to the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York by President George H. W. Bush. A nomination by President Bill Clinton led her to becoming a federal judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

Soon after the announcement of Sotomayor as President Obama's selection for Supreme Court, polling data suggested strong support by the majority of Americans. Whether that support would withstand increasing scrutiny by opponents was yet to be seen. At the time, it was apparent that her compelling personal story was resonating with many people. That may have been part of her appeal to President Obama - a former constitutional law professor himself -- who reportedly was impressed with her during their first meeting and indicated that he believed they had much in common. Certainly, both Obama and Sotomayor were raised by struggling single mothers of humble origins; both pursued the law; and both achieved heights at the university level, before pursuing careers in public service. President Obama had earlier said that he was searching not only for someone with a strong legal background, but also someone who was empathetic and whose quotidian life experience could be drawn upon in the interpretation of the law.

While such criteria was hailed positively by many, it was also decried by the conservative opposition who have argued that empathetic capacity and personal experiences should have no bearing on legal rulings. Indeed, some within their ranks -- from conservative talk show commentator, Rush Limbaugh, to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich -- have railed at her less than artful reference to her Latina background in interpreting sexual discrimination cases, even characterizing her as a "reverse racist." Less vociferous voices, such as Fred Barnes, have claimed that she has an unimpressive intellect, and her educational accomplishments must be a result of affirmative action. Such rhetoric was eschewed by elected Republicans, such as Senator John Cornyn of Texas, who made his distaste for such intemperate language clear. Analysts surmised that Cornyn and other elected Republicans have understood the likely ramifications of alienating Hispanic and female voters. Whether or not Sotomayor will face a bruising confirmation battle in the Senate was yet to be seen.

Timing and the balance of power

Ahead of Judge Sotomayor's confirmation hearing in the Senate, there was no sign of unified and concerted opposition from the Republican ranks, although most Republicans were pushing for a longer time frame to consider Sotomayor's nomination than advocated by President Obama who wanted a confirmation ahead of the August 2009 recess, and therefore entrenched at the Supreme Court before the start of the next judicial session in October 2009. Republicans said that they want more time to examine Sotomayor's extensive record. Despite these inclinations, the confirmation hearings were ultimately scheduled to begin on July 13, 2009.

Senator Pat Roberts of Kansas was the first Republican to make it clear that he would not vote to confirm Sotomayor. He said, "She has made statements on the role of the appeals court I think is improper and incorrect." He continued, "I think that we should be judging people not on race and gender, or background or ethnicity or a very compelling story."

But Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina struck quite a different tone saying in an interview with McClatchy News, "I honestly think I could vote for her." He expressed some lingering concerns about her judicial temperament. Nevertheless, this recent statement was quite a departure from his earlier assessment, in which the South Carolina senator said that the president's nomination of Sotomayor "deeply troubled" him.

Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah -- the longest-serving Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee -- indicated in an interview with CNN that Sotomayor was headed for confirmation to the United States Supreme Court. Hatch said, "If there are no otherwise disqualifying matters here, it appears to me she will probably be confirmed."

But Hatch was not necessarily endorsing Sotomayor so much as acknowledging the reality of the Democratic-dominated upper chamber of Congress where Democrats now had 60 votes thanks to the recent inclusion of Senator Al Franken of Minnesota. Ahead of an actual vote on the floor of the Senate, Sotomayor's nomination will first be considered within the the Senate Judiciary Committee where Democrats hold 12 of the 19 seats. Ultimately, if confirmed, it was not expected that the balance of the court -- now divided between four conservatives (Roberts, Scalia, Thomas and Alito), one moderate conservative (Kennedy) and four liberals (Stevens, Breyer, Ginsberg and retiring Souter) -- was likely to change.

Sotomayor's record

Since the announcement of Sotomayor as President Obama's choice to replace retiring Justice Souter, legal analysts have had time to examine her rulings and have found few clues to indicate her positions on key controversial issues, including gun control and abortion.

That reality has done little to dampen Republicans' anxieties that she would be a liberal voice on the court. They have pointed to a court case, Ricci versus de Stefano, in which several white firefighters brought a lawsuit against the city of New Haven (in Connecticut) for throwing out the firefighters' examinations results because they did not produce sufficient African American applicants. Sotomayor had upheld the ruling at the appellate level, but the case went on to be overturned by the Supreme Court. Republicans were expected to call on the firemen to bolster their claim that Sotomayor was an activist judge, however, legal analysts point to the fact that she ruled with the majority and appeared to have actually exercised judicial modesty or restraint in this case.

In an interview on CBS, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee, reiterated doubts about Sotomayor's judicial capacity for fairness saying, "When you show empathy for one party, you necessarily show bias for another group." He went on to characterize Sotomayor's legal record as a "philosophical critique" of the idea of judicial impartiality.

On the day before the confirmation hearings were set to commence, Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, said during an interview on CBS, "I suspect she will be confirmed, but I would hope it does not turn into a partisan fight for the good of the courts and the good of the Supreme Court." He also interpreted Sotomayor's legal record quite differently from Sessions, saying: "She has a track record. She has shown to be a mainstream judge. You don't have to guess what kind of a judge she's going to be."

Democratic Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois echoed Senator Leahy saying, "There could be questions raised about any judge's ruling on any case. But the fact is, I believe she has a record that is unparalleled."

Latest Developments

Ahead of the commencement of the confirmation hearings, Judge Sotomayor continued to enjoy high public support. Judge Sotomayor also enjoyed the confidence of President Obama who telephoned her to wish her luck. A White House statement read as follows: "The president expressed his confidence that Judge Sotomayor would be confirmed to serve as a justice on the Supreme Court for many years to come."

During the week-long confirmation hearings, Judge Sotomayor repeatedly emphasized her credentials as an impartial arbiter on the judicial bench. Republican senators repeatedly questioned her on her controversial remarks about being "a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life." She repeatedly responded by expressing regret for her phraseology and noting that she did not believe any one ethnic group or gender to possess superior insights. On the other side of aisle, Democratic senators probed her judicial record, in an effort to shore up her qualifications as a thoughtful and retrained judge with no history of judicial activism.

On August 6, 2009, the United States Senate voted overwhelmingly to approve Judge Sonia Sotomayor as Associate Justice on the Supreme Court of the United States. The Senate voted 68-31 to approve Sotomayor, with 59 Democrats and nine Republicans voting in her favor. United State President hailed the development, saying: "The Senate has affirmed that Justice Sotomayor has the intellect, the temperament, the history, the integrity and

the independence of mind to ably serve on our nation's highest court." Two days later, Sotomayor was sworn into office by Chief Justice John Roberts. Accordingly, Justice Sotomayor made history as the first Hispanic to sit on the bench of the United States' highest court. She also holds the distinction of being only the third woman in United States history to become a Supreme Court Justice.

Obama re-appoints Bernanke as chairman of Federal Reserve

On August 25 2009, United States President Barack Obama announced that he would reappoint Ben Bernanke to a second term as chairman of the Federal Reserve. While Bernanke has been criticized for slow action in regard to the global financial collapse in 2008, he has also been lauded for his prudent handling of the economic recession affecting the country.

Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy, the "Liberal Lion of the Senate," dies at age 77; buried at Arlington Cemetery close to brothers President John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy

On August 25, 2009, United States Senator Edward Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, died of brain cancer at his home in Hyannis Port at the age of 77 years. His well-known family issued a statement which read: "We've lost the irreplaceable center of our family and joyous light in our lives, but the inspiration of his faith, optimism, and perseverance will live on in our hearts forever." The said statement continued, "We thank everyone who gave him care and support over this last year, and everyone who stood with him for so many years in his tireless march for progress toward justice, fairness and opportunity for all."

Edward Moore Kennedy was born on February 22, 1932. The long-serving United States Senator from Massachusetts and loyal member of the Democratic Party, also known as "Ted" or "Teddy" Kennedy, was best known as the brother of United States President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1963. His other brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, had presidential aspirations as well, and also died at the hands of an assassin. Like his brothers, Edward "Ted" Kennedy was also subject to the mystique of "Camelot" that came to be associated with the prominent Kennedy name. But it was this youngest brother, Edward "Ted" Kennedy, who would leave a lasting legacy in government, having served nine terms in the Senate after entering that legislative body in 1962.

The genesis of the philosophy that guided his policy efforts emerged during the 1968 eulogy Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy gave at his brother Robert F. Kennedy's funeral. He said, "My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it." In this way, he encapsulated the motivation behind the Kennedy call to public service. But it was at the the 1980 Democratic National Convention that Senator Kennedy issued a rallying cry for liberalism. In that speech, he said: "Circumstances may change, but the work of compassion must continue. It is surely correct that we cannot solve problems by throwing money at them, but it is also correct that we dare not throw out our national problems onto a scrap heap of inattention and indifference. The poor may be out of political fashion, but they are not without human needs. The middle class may be angry, but they have not lost the dream that all Americans can advance together."

During his tenure in the Senate, Edward Kennedy was involved in the crafting of at least 300 bills that passed into law, thanks to his ability to work across party lines, while holding true to his strong liberal inclinations.

At the start of his Senate career in 1964, one his first major speeches on the floor of the Senate concerned the Civil Rights Act, which outlawed public accommodation segregation. Also in 1964, he was a strong advocate of the poverty alleviation bill, known as the Economic Opportunity Act. In 1965, he gained his bona fides as a champion of civil rights and ethnic equality with the passage of two landmark bills -- the Voting Rights Act and the Immigration and Nationality Act. In 1971, he was involved in the National Cancer Act. A year later in 1972, he championed the popular "Meals on Wheels" program. In the 1980s, following a grueling and risky trip to South Africa, he came home to advocate against racial apartheid and was the powerhouse behind the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986. Other significant legislation that rest at the door of Senator Kennedy include the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Ryan White AIDS Care Act in 1990, the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the Mental Health

Parity Act in 1996 and 2008, the State Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997, and the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act in 2009.

Not all Senator Kennedy's initiatives were successful. His efforts at immigration reform in recent times had, at the time of his death, come to naught. As well, his self-described "cause of a lifetime" -- universal health care -- has seen no success during his lifetime. As well, Senator Kennedy's career was somewhat marred by what came to be known as the infamous "Chappaquiddick car accident." His involvement in that car accident - particularly, his failure to report the accident, which left a young woman dead in 1969 -- deleteriously affected his reputation for some time, although it never stopped him from being re-elected to the Senate. Another blight on his record was the unsuccessful bid to upset incumbent President Jimmy Carter in the presidential primary campaign of 1980.

Nevertheless, Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy clearly left a legacy on the American political landscape that has influenced the quotidian lives of ordinary American people. A passionate and forthright advocate of the poor, the down-trodden, the oppressed, the ordinary laborer, the minority, the immigrant, and the outsiders seeking inclusion, Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy's extensive policy accomplishments paint a picture of dedicated public service, legislative effectiveness, and ardent progressive philosophy. Accordingly, he gained the unofficial title of "liberal lion of the Senate."

In 2008, Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy took center-stage when he offered an endorsement of his colleague, Barack Obama, who was seeking the Democratic presidential nomination. The move was widely-seen as a symbolic "passing of the torch" from one generation to another. Indeed, Senator Kennedy made this clear when he wove together Obama's message of change with his own fiery rhetoric of 1980. He said: "There is a new wave of change all around us, and if we set our compass true, we will reach our destination -- not merely victory for our party, but renewal for our nation. And this November the torch will be passed again to a new generation of Americans, so with Barack Obama and for you and for me, our country will be committed to his cause. The work begins anew. The hope rises again. And the dream lives on."

Senator Kennedy's presence at the Democratic Convention in August 2008 was something of a surprise, since he had been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor only a few months before. But despite having been through surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, and also with the additional ailment of kidney stones, Senator Kennedy was insistent about delivering his speech at the historic convention. Only a month before, he had been on the floor of the Senate in July 2008 casting a vote for a bill that would preserve Medicare fees for doctors.

On January 20, 2009, Senator Kennedy was able to attend Barack Obama's presidential inauguration in Washington. However, he suffered a seizure at the luncheon following and had to be rushed to the hospital.

As the first part of 2009 progressed, Senator Kennedy's health prevented him from attending to his duties in Washington. He was reported to have been frustrated about his inability to be involved in the health care reform efforts. That said, with his colleague, Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut standing in his stead, a health care bill passed out of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which had Senator Kennedy's stamp of approval.

In March 2009, Senator Kennedy was awarded an honorary knighthood by the Queen England II for his lifelong efforts to strengthen health care and education in the United States, and also for his peace efforts to end the strife in Northern Ireland. In late July 2009, Senator Kennedy was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Again, his health prevented him from being able to attend the ceremony. In mid-August 2009, he attended the private funeral service for his sister, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, but was not in attendance at the public ceremony. His own death came in the weeks following.

Senator Edward Kennedy laid in repose for two days at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston. The two-day public viewing was attended by at least 50,000 people who came to pay their respects to the Massachusetts senator.

A private memorial ceremony was held at the same site on the the night of August 28, 2009.

The ceremony included moving tributes by Vice President Joe Biden, the new senior Senator from Massachusetts, Democrat John Kerry, other senatorial colleagues, such as Senator Chris Dodd, a Democrat from Connecticut, and Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah. Also offering tributes were Senator Kennedy's nephew, the eldest son of Robert Kennedy -- Joe Kennedy, Senator Kennedy's niece, Caroline Kennedy -- the daughter of President John F. Kennedy.

The funeral took place a day later, on August 29, 2009, at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Basilica in the Mission Hill area of Boston. En route to the basilica, the cortege was met by somber crowds of people, many of them carrying signs that read, "Thank you, Teddy" and others waving American flags. Personal remembrances were offered by Senator Kennedy's sons, Edward Kennedy II and Congressman Patrick Kennedy. President Barack Obama, who was asked to offer the eulogy, paid tribute to his "friend and mentor" and referred to Senator Kennedy as the greatest legislator of his time. The president described Senator Kennedy as a "kind and tender hero" and who exemplified the core of the party they shared saying, "He was the soul of the Democratic Party and the lion of the U.S. Senate."

Also in attendance at the funeral service in Boston were former President Jimmy Carter, former President Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former Vice President Al Gore, and former President George W. Bush.

After the funeral was over, Senator Kennedy's body was flown from Boston to Andrews Air Force Base, and from there, it was to be transported to the burial site. Before reaching Arlington National Cemetery, the motorcade stopped at the Capitol in Washington where hundreds of the senator's staffers, as well as other legislative colleagues, stood on the steps to show their respect.

Senator Kennedy was laid to rest with military honors near his brothers, former President John F. Kennedy and former Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, as well as former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, at Arlington Cemetery in Washington. At his gravesite, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick read a letter written by Senator Kennedy, which was personally handed to Pope Benedict II by President Obama. In that missive, Senator Kennedy, expressed his hope that he had lived a life consistent with his Roman Catholic faith, acknowledged his human failings, and made special mention of the work he tried to do throughout his life from removing discriminatory barriers to poverty alleviation, and trying to bring about universal health care, which he referred to as "the cause of my life."

Threat of terrorism and attacks on the troops in the homeland

In mid-September 2009, three men were arrested in connection with an alleged plot to carry out terror attacks in the United States. All three men were born in Afghanistan but living in the United States; they were accused of making false statements related to "international and domestic terrorism." At issue was a probe by the Federal Bureau of Investigation into a plot to detonate improvised explosive devices in the United States, according to the Justice Department. Media reports indicated that one of the arrested men, Najibullah Zazi, had attended terror training camps in the Afghan-Pak region and had ties to al-Qaida. The other two men who were arrested were Zazi's father as well as an Islamic imam. A week later, the younger Zazi was charged with plotting to carry out terror attacks on the United States, using one or more weapons of mass destruction in the alleged attacks. The United States Department of Justice asserted in a statement Zazi had "knowingly and intentionally conspired with others to use one or more weapons of mass destruction, specifically explosive bombs and other similar explosive devices, against persons or property within the United States."

Meanwhile, two other men were arrested and charged in two unrelated bombing plots in Illinois and Texas. In the first case, a federal courthouse was the target of the Illinois bomb plot. The suspect was a convert to Islam who was arrested in connection with an attempted car bombing outside a court building in Springfield. In the second case, a 19-year old Jordanian man was arrested on charges that he was attempting to blow up an office building in Dallas. Both of these arrests were made following sting operations in which undercover agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation provided fake explosives to the respective suspects.

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Then, at the start of November 2009, an army psychiatrist, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, opened fire on people at the Fort Hood army base, killing 13 people and wounding several more. He was himself shot by a policewomen and was hospitalized as a result.

Hasan was born in the United States but his Islamic faith was believed to have contributed to his increasingly conflicted feelings about being deployed to Afghanistan. Reports suggested that Hasan -- who was responsible for treating soldiers returning from combat zones -- had grown increasingly unhappy about his imminent deployment to Afghanistan. He was said to have become increasingly vocal in his opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hasan had even explored the possibility of leaving the military.

While officials refused to describe what happened as an act of terrorism, there were reports that Hasan shouted the Arabic phrase, "Allahu Akbar!" before opening fire. United States President Obama characterized the Fort Hood massacre as a national tragedy and called for all flags at the White House and other federal buildings to be flown at half mast until Veterans Day.

September 11, 2001 "mastermind" and four co-defendants to be tried in civilian court in New York

On November 13, 2009, United States Attorney General Eric Holder announced that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed -- the self-proclaimed "mastermind" of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks -- along with four co-defendants, would be tried in a civilian court in New York. Attorney General Holder said that these legal cases would be handled by prosecutors working in the Southern District of New York. Indeed, the courthouse in lower Manhattan has been the venue of several terrorism trials in recent times -- a fact that Attorney General Holder pointed out when he described the New York court system as "hardened" by a history of such cases.

The five detainees would be transferred from the military prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba to New York after formal charges have been filed, and after Congress has been given a 45-day notice. Attorney General Holder also declared that the Justice Department would seek the death penalty for each of the five suspects. He said, "I fully expect to direct prosecutors to seek the death penalty against each of the alleged 9/11 conspirators." As to the risk of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed being found not guilty in a United States civilian trial, Attorney General Holder said he expected a guilty verdict noting, "I would not have authorized prosecution if I was not confident our outcome would be a successful one." Likewise, United States President Barack Obama said, "This is a prosecutorial decision as well as a national security decision. I am absolutely convinced that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed will be subject to the most exacting demand of justice. The American people insist on it, and my administration will insist on it."

These moves were connected to President Obama's decision to close the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, which has become a controversial flashpoint in the realm of international jurisprudence. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the four other defendants had been faced with capital charges in a military commission at Guantanamo Bay. However, the Obama administration sought suspensions in those proceedings while they searched for the best alternative venue for prosecution. This decision to seek justice through the United States criminal court system was decried by Republicans, who have argued that Bush-era military tribunals provided a more secure forum. Of course, human rights groups have themselves condemned Republicans' contention that military tribunals offer sufficient legal protections to defendants, arguing instead that they fall short of acceptable judicial process. For its part, the Obama administration elected in May 2009 to institute a modified military commission procedures that included a proper legal framework.

Meanwhile, Attorney General Eric holder also announced a trial by military commission for Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a suspect in the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole. Analysts noted that the decision to pursue the now-modified military commission in this case was related to the fact that the target of the attack was a military vessel.

Five Americans arrested in Pakistan for alleged links to terrorists

On Dec. 10, 2009, five American men were arrested near the Pakistani city of Lahore during a raid. They were taken into the custody of the Pakistani authorities and accused of having links to the terrorist group, Jaish-e-Muhammad. The men were held on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack. Authorities in the United States confirmed the men were from Virginia and had been reported as missing.

Health Care Legislation

Landmark health care reform legislation at stake: Bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives now faces major test in Senate

Summary:

The United States House of Representatives passed its version of health care reform on Nov. 7, 2009. The health care bill -- H.R. 3962, the Affordable Health Care for America Act -- gained just enough votes to pass in the lower house of Congress, given the reservations of moderate Democrats in conservative districts ahead of the 2010 mid-term elections. The final vote was 220-215 with a lone Republican adding his bipartisan support. Passage of this legislation meant that comprehensive health care reform crossed a significant hurdle on the way to finally achieving the most sweeping domestic policy change in decades in the United States. That being said, the House legislation would still have to be reconciled with the Senate version, which itself was expected to face notable obstacles in the upper chamber before passage. To that end, the Senate version of the bill was at risk of being filibustered not by the Republicans, who appeared unified in their opposition, but from conservative members of the Democratic Party. Controversial wrangling gained their support and the bill moved forward in the upper chamber of the United States legislative body, eventually passing into law on the day before Christmas 2009.

Introduction:

Landmark health care reform legislation was on the political agenda in the United States for President Barack Obama as well as the Democratic-ruled bicameral Congress. When the issue of health care reform was first broached in the first months of his administration, President Barack Obama had hoped that legislators in Congress could forge bipartisan concurrence on legislation, aimed at ameliorating the health insurance regime and insuring many Americans not currently covered by health care. This objective faced grave difficulty, given Republicans' resistance to a public health care option (i.e. the concept of a government-run health care exchange to compete with private insurers), which progressive Democrats demanded. The general consensus was that the prospects for successful passage of health care reform would rise and fall on the willingness of both sides to compromise or the ability and desire of Democrats to pass health care reform without the help of Republicans.

Background:

Mid-2009 saw health care legislation at the apex of President Barack Obama's domestic agenda. To that end, legislation on health care reform cleared multiple House committees and one Senate committee by mid-summer 2009. At issue was the cost of health care reform, with critics worrying about the astronomical costs and lack of economic benefit.

By August, the debate about health care reform still raged on, with President Obama hoping to find some Republican support for his plan to ameliorate health insurance, giving greater rights to patients, as well as an overhaul of the health care system itself, with an eye on improved access to patients for affordable care. To that end, Republicans railed against the notion of a public option -- that is, a government-backed health care exchange - - that would compete with private insurers in a bid to drive down skyrocketing costs. But even a proposal for health care cooperatives from centrist Democrats in the Senate failed to decrease rising vitriol from the right wing base.

At issue for the Republicans were changes to the system they believed would hurt the private insurance industry. To that end, leading Republicans argued that a competitive government-run health care program could be so effective as to put private insurers out of business. There was also increasing evidence that efforts to craft a bipartisan bill in the Senate Finance Committee were not going well, with two leading Republicans indicating they would be unlikely to even support the very compromise bill upon which they were working.

The vociferous debate was not helped by the circulation of plainly false information about the proposed changes to health care, such as spurious claims by right-wing extremist voices claiming that "death panels" would be instituted for the elderly, that abortions would be federally funded, and that illegal immigrants would benefit from the new health care plan. Several congressional politicians were faced by angry attendees at town halls, making these

claims, and tried to make clear the falsity of these assertions. Nevertheless, they were confronted by angry citizens who declared their opposition to the notion of government-run health care, and who seemed unaware that the popular Medicare program for senior citizens was a government health care program existing under the aegis of the current health care regime.

On the other side of the equation, the left-wing base of the Democratic Party, angry about concessions being made to the Republicans in the hopes of gaining support from them, pointed to the fact that several Republican politicians--even the ones negotiating with Democrats in congressional committees -- seemed unwilling to support whatever compromise eventually might emerge. To that end, they pointed to an increasing number of Republicans who were suggesting that even the notion of cooperatives (as an alternative to the public health option) would be unacceptable to them. This reality meant that there was very little ground left upon which common ground with the Democrats could be forged.

Emboldened by the fact that Republicans appeared hard-pressed to actually make a deal with Democrats in committees, the left wing of the Democratic Party began to clamor for the public option, and placed pressure on both the president and moderates of both parties in congress. The pressure was manifested by an announcement by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that while Democrats had a clear majority in the lower chamber, a health care bill would not be able to pass through the body without a public option that would satisfy the Democratic base.

In this way, with the Senate trying to find a compromise proposal, and with the House moving fast toward a clenching embrace of the public option, the two chambers seemed to be on an ideological collision course with the president (and his agenda) in the middle of that path.

President Obama enters the debate:

Perhaps not surprisingly, by the close of the summer of 2009, President Obama's overall job approval numbers were on a downward slide due to anger from the left and right sides of the political spectrum. While there was an enduring and strong demand for health care reform of some sort, it was juxtaposed with

decreasing support for President Obama's handling of the health care issue. Faced with criticism that it had lost control of the health care reform debate, and with fears rising that the White House endeavor to advance health reform would end in failure, President Barack Obama prepared to give a national speech on the subject.

Indeed, the White House decided to take control of the policy agenda by scheduling a rare joint session of Congress for Sept. 9, 2009, to make clear President Obama's positions and expectations regarding health care reform in the United States.

On Sept. 9, 2009, President Barack Obama made the case for landmark health care reform in the United States of the type unseen in decades. President Obama made clear that he was ready to act saying, "I am not the first president to take up this cause, but I am determined to be the last." President Obama challenged members of both houses of Congress -- the Senate and the House of Representatives -- to take bold action on the issue of health care reform, warning that failure to do so could lead the country to "the breaking point."

President Obama noted that the United States was the only developed country that allowed millions of its people to experience "extraordinary hardship" -- either because fellow citizens simply live without health insurance and are therefore "just one accident or illness away from bankruptcy," or, because they are denied coverage even when insured due to the decisions made by insurance companies. He also addressed the fact that the existing health care system provided little stability or security to citizens saying, "More and more Americans worry that if you move, lose your job, or change your job, you'll lose your health insurance too."

Yet, as the president noted, despite these clear limits of the existing health care system, the United States actually spent more on health insurance than any other country.

President Obama explained that his plan for comprehensive health care reform would center on ameliorated health insurance for those already with coverage, and the creation of a health insurance exchange to extend cover to those who did not. Laying to rest speculation about whether he would address the matter of a "public option," President Obama said that such a choice would be made available to people, in order to force private insurance companies to operate in a competitive field, to the benefit of consumers. President Obama indicated openness to alternatives to the "public option" by mentioning co-operatives, but he drew a line in the sand on the government's role in health care. He asserted, "But I will not back down on the basic principle that, if Americans can't find affordable coverage, we will provide you with a choice."

On the issue of costs, President Obama said that a public insurance option would not be subsidized by the government.

The president also warned that whatever final legislation came before him would only be signed if it were deficit neutral. Funding for the health care plan would come through cost-cutting measures, but he noted that there would be a provision in any final bill requiring further spending cuts if the promised savings did not ultimately materialize. That said, he reminded lawmakers that the current deficits faced by the country were made under the previous Bush administration for the Iraq war and tax cuts for the wealthy. The reference was an implicit nudge to members of Congress who had voted for those two extraordinarily expensive initiatives in recent years past, but were now balking at the cost of comprehensive health care reform today.

President Obama made clear that the widespread practice by insurance companies of denying coverage on the basis of "pre-existing conditions" would be made illegal under his plan. He also said that health insurance would be mandated for all citizens, but that price caps along with subsidies and hardship waivers would be instituted to take care of the issue of affordability.

President Obama laid to rest some of the fears that were permeating amidst the health care debate. Specifically, he made it clear that for people who already had health insurance, no changes in coverage or choice of doctor were in the offing. Moreover, he noted that seniors receiving Medicare were not in danger of losing their coverage.

President Obama chastised lawmakers for failing to engage in "an honest debate" on health care, resorting instead to "scare tactics" and unyielding entrenchment in "ideological camps that offer no hope of compromise." He said, "Too many have used this as an opportunity to score short-term political points, even if it robs the country of our opportunity to solve a long-term challenge. And out of this blizzard of charges and counter-charges, confusion has reigned. Well, the time for bickering is over. The time for games has passed. Now is the season for action."

President Obama vociferously dismissed the spurious claims, such as the existence of so-called "death panels," as blatantly untrue, and rebuked Republican leaders and politicians for irresponsibly indulging in the dissemination of misinformation.

In one of the most dramatic sequences of the night,

Republican Congressman Joe Wilson, screamed "You lie" at the president who was trying to debunk the allegation that the proposed health care plan would not provide federal funding of health care for illegal immigrants. Representative Wilson later apologized for his outburst; however, he would not concede that independent research entities, such as FactCheck.org, had validated the factual accuracy of the president's statement.

While President Obama called for bipartisan action on the health care reform legislation being crafted in Congress, analysts observed that the White House privately did not think it would actually gain support from the Republicans in the end, with the lone exception of Senator Snowe. Instead, the objective at hand was to shore up support from moderate Democrats in swing districts at sufficient numbers as to pass the legislation through both Houses of Congress, while at the same time not losing liberal Democrats.

During President Obama's aforementioned address to the joint session on Congress, advocating on behalf of health care reform, he cited a letter from the late Senator Edward Kennedy -- known as the "liberal lion" of the Senate. President Obama used Kennedy's words to describe health care reform as "the great unfinished business" in the United States, which was more than a material interest. President Obama then went on to note that Kennedy "repeated the truth that healthcare is decisive for our future prosperity, but he also reminded me that it concerns more than material things." Reading from the letter, the president continued, "What we face is above all a moral issue; at stake are not just the details of policy but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country." The president continued to press his case, using his own words as follows: "Our ability to stand in other people's shoes. A recognition that we are all in this together, that when fortune turns against one of us, others are there to lend a helping hand. A belief that in this country, hard work and responsibility should be rewarded by some measure of security and fair play. And an acknowledgement that sometimes government has to step in to help deliver on that promise. This has always been the history of our progress."

President Obama was, in effect, making the philosophical case for liberalism. In so doing, he was hoping to remind not only members of the Progressive Caucus and moderate Democrats in Congress, but also frustrated members of the Democratic Party at large, as well as disillusioned Independents around the country, of the stakes in the national battle at hand. He was using soaring ideological rhetoric to remind them that their cooperation would be needed not only in terms of passing legislation, but in building public consent for such sweeping change on the domestic landscape.

Legislation:

By the fall of 2009, health care reform legislation had passed through three committees in the House of Representatives and one committee in the Senate. All eyes were on a second Senate committee, since it was likely to contain the fulcrum for funding whatever legislation would ultimately reach the president's desk for signature. Despite naysayers who argued that health care legislation was unlikely to make it through this conservative committee, a bill did indeed pass the committee with unanimous support from all the Democrats on the committee, and a lone centrist Republican -- Olympia Snowe of Maine -- largely due to the fact that the controversial public health option was excluded from the legislation.

However, the draft made mention of new non-profit health insurance cooperatives to compete with private insurers. The plan also included health insurance reforms, such as making the exclusions of people with "pre-existing medical conditions" illegal. The cost of the plan was estimated to be just over \$800 billion --significantly less than the other four other proposals in Congress. The costs would be offset by reductions in Medicare spending and by new revenue from an excise tax on health insurance companies and other industry entities. The advancement of the bill was regarded as a major achievement by this committee, headed by centrist Democratic Senator Max Baucus of Montana, and brought a lengthy and difficult process to an end.

After passage through committee, the legislation then entered a conference process with another already-passed bill in the upper chamber. That bill was crafted by Senator Chris Dodd and the late Senator Edward Kennedy in the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. After passage through the upper chamber, any legislation from the Senate would ultimately have to be reconciled with the bill ultimately emerging from the House of Representatives. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made clear that no legislation could pass through the Democratic-dominated lower chamber without inclusion of a strong government-run health insurance plan. Of course, such a bill was not expected to garner support from Republicans and could run afoul with centrist Democrats in the Senate. Indeed, it was likely to set up a massive and high stakes ideological battle.

On Oct. 26, 2009, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid presented the conference version of health care reform legislation. He announced that the health care legislation headed to the Senate floor would include an option for government-run health insurance.

In a bid to satisfy centrist Democrats and those from conservative states, this public option would contain an "opt out" provision, which had been crafted by Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York. To this end, Majority Leader Reid, said: "As we've gone through this process, I've concluded, with the support of the White House and

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Senators Baucus and Dodd, that the best way forward is to include a public option with an "opt-out" provision for states." Accordingly, states would have one year to decide for themselves whether or not to "opt out" of the government-run health care program. Addressing his decision to include the controversial public health option, Majority Leader Reid explained that polling data showed widespread and increasing support for the government's role in providing affordable health care to citizens, as advocated by President Obama and most Democrats in Congress. He noted that while the inclusion of this provision was no "silver bullet" in the health care reform effort, people nonetheless wanted the public option and it was crucial to providing competition.

Attention focused on the fact that while the bill included both the public option and the co-operatives, the "trigger" option was conspicuously absent from the legislation. The "trigger" was an idea championed by Senator Snowe and would allow the public option to be go into effect only if there was insufficient competition at the systemic level without it. That was the only version of a public option that Senator Snowe favored, however, it was strongly resisted by several Democrats in both chambers who characterized it as ineffectual reform to the system. The inclusion of the "opt-out" provision vis a vis the "trigger" indicated that the Democrats were willing to fight for strong health care reform even if it alienated the few moderate Republicans.

Senate Majority Leader Reid noted he was sending the legislation to the Congressional Budget Office for scoring. Ideally, he was hoping that the result would show that it was within the financial parameters set forth by the president to avoid adding to the deficit while saving the health care system money over the long haul.

Final health care reform legislation was not expected to garner support from Republicans and could still run afoul with centrist Democrats in the Senate. Indeed, every Democratic vote in the Senate --including the two votes from the Independents that caucus with the Democrats -- would be needed to move the legislative process along by voting for cloture (closing off debate and moving toward the vote), even if they ultimately voted against the final bill. To that end, Independent Democrat Joe Lieberman was already signaling that he might not vote for cloture to advance the Senate bill, a move that could single-handedly derail health care reform. In this way, the final health care debate was likely to set up a massive and high stakes ideological battle.

A week later, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi -- a Democrat from California -- released a health care reform bill, which also included a government-run insurance plan and was touted to provide almost-universal coverage. The legislation combined three health care bills from various committees and was paid for partially via the imposition of a tax on the wealthiest Americans. Democrats said that the Congressional Budget Office estimated that its version of health care reform would cost \$894 billion over 10 years, and therefore, be below President Barack Obama's target of \$900 billion, while also reducing the deficit over that 10-year period.

Speaking during an unveiling ceremony that took place on the steps of the United States Capitol, Pelosi said, "The bill is fiscally sound, will not add one dime to the deficit as it expands coverage, implements key insurance reforms and promotes prevention and wellness across the health system."

The government-run public insurance option would entail reimbursement rates to be negotiated with both doctors and hospitals. This measure was regarded as a blow to House liberals who were looking for a more strengthened hand by the government in competing with private insurers. To that end, there were insufficient votes to gain support for a government-run plan using lower rates pegged to Medicare.

A week later, Republicans unveiled their own health care plan. That alternative plan was not expected to go far in the House of Representatives, given the fact that it did not fully protect consumers from being subject to discrimination by insurers on the basis of pre-existing conditions, promise to insure only three million people (several millions less than the Democrats' version, which promised close to universal coverage), and came with a hefty price tag.

Bill Passes in the United States House of Representatives:

On Nov. 7, 2009, a vote on health care reform ensued in the United States House of Representatives. Yet to be seen was whether or not the proposed legislation would gain enough votes to pass in the lower house of Congress, given the reservations of moderate or "blue dog" Democrats in conservative districts ahead of the 2010 mid-term

elections. Indeed, there were some suggestions that there were simply insufficient votes to pass health care reform into law in the House of Representatives.

At issue were concerns that the legislation tightly prohibits federal funding of abortions as well as access to illegal immigrants. These were actually two concerns vociferously advanced by Republicans opposed to the health care legislation, but which were now being voiced by the moderate "blue dog" Democrats who had no desire to alienate their more conservative constituents a year ahead of the 2010 elections.

With an eye on ensuring that legislation would pass, House Speaker Pelosi tried to forge a deal to assuage the doubts of conservative Democrats. This effort ended unsuccessfully and, instead, Democrat Bart Stupak of Michigan was able to bring an amendment before the floor of Congress making clear that abortion would not be federally funded under the new health care exchange concept being offered in the health care reform plan. The Stupak amendment passed successfully, and effectively paved the way for some wavering conservative Democrats to support the health care reform bill.

Ultimately, late in the night on Nov. 7, 2009, the United States House of Representatives passed its version of health care reform. The health care bill -- H.R. 3962, the Affordable Health Care for America Act -- gained just enough votes to pass in the lower house of Congress. The final vote was 220-215, with a lone Republican adding his bipartisan support.

House Speaker Pelosi thanked President Barack Obama for his vision in bringing historic health care reform to the fore. She also thanked Democratic Congressman John Dingell of Michigan, who has championed health care reform for several decades, even bringing forth health care reform during every congress for decades to date. President Obama weighed into the matter, issuing a statement that read as follows: "The Affordable Health Care for America Act is a piece of legislation that will provide stability and security for Americans who have insurance; quality affordable options for those who don't; and bring down the cost of health care for families, businesses, and the government while strengthening the financial health of Medicare. And it is legislation that is fully paid for and will reduce our long-term federal deficit."

Passage of this legislation meant that comprehensive health care reform crossed a significant hurdle on the way to finally achieving the most sweeping domestic policy change in decades in the United States. Indeed, this was the first time a chamber of Congress had passed healthcare reform since Medicare was enacted. That being said, the House legislation would still have to be reconciled with the Senate version, which itself was expected to face notable obstacles in the upper chamber before passage.

Health Care Legislation in the Senate:

On Nov. 21, 2009, landmark health care legislation in the United States was still alive after Senators vote to open debate in the upper chamber of Congress. The vote to open debate passed with support from all 58 Democrats in the Senate, as well as two independent senators who caucus with the Democrats. Republicans were virtually united in their opposition to this move with all but one of the 40 Republican senators voting against the opening of debate. At issue was a landmark legislation aimed at reforming the country's health care industry via regulatory reform as well as increased access to affordable health care for the majority of Americans. Republicans were not keen on supporting health care reform not only because of their opposition to the inclusion of a government-backed health care exchange, which would compete with private insurers in a bid to drive down skyrocketing costs, but also because they argued that some of the regulatory reforms would adversely affect the private insurance industry. Indeed, Republican Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell said: "We're going to do anything and everything we can to prevent this measure from becoming law." But on the other side of the equation, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, was buoyed by the fact that the Congressional Budget Office concluded that the bill would ultimately reduce the deficit over a decade while extending health care coverage for 94 percent of citizens.

Full debate was set to commence on Nov. 30, 2009, with amendments expected to be proposed and considered before a full vote on the bill. To that end, various issues were emerging that appeared to require attention before gaining support from one or another Democrat. There were two key issues that were guaranteed to cause fissures

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within the Democratic corps -- (1) the matter of restrictions on abortion coverage, and, (2) the so-called "public option" to compete with private insurers. Still, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid indicated optimism saying, "We're now closer than ever to getting it [re: health care reform] done."

But such optimism was to come to a sharp halt when Senator Joe Lieberman, the Independent Democrat from Connecticut, warned that he would join the Republicans to filibuster the bill if it contained the so-called "public option." (Note: Filibustering is a parliamentary means to obstruct legislation to move forward in the Senate unless a 3/5ths of the Senate -- 60 out of 100 Senators -- brings debate to a close by invoking "cloture.")

In a bid to satisfy Lieberman's objection to the notion of a government-run health care option to compete with private insurers, the Democrats introduced an alternate provision in which Medicare -- the government-run insurance program for seniors -- would be opened up for more people and a non-for-profit exchange would be offered to people to insure insurance access. At first, Lieberman expressed support for this concept but later reversed his position, on the basis of support by liberal cohorts. According to the New York Times, Lieberman said: "Congressman Weiner [a liberal Democrat of New York] made a comment that Medicare-buy in is better than a public option, it's the beginning of a road to single-payer." In response, Lieberman renewed his threat to filibuster. Under pressure from the White House to make a deal with Lieberman, the public option and the Medicare "buy in" alternative were both dropped from the bill in the Senate.

Still, the Democrats were short one vote to gain the support for cloture due to abortion objections by Senator Ben Nelson, a Democrat of Nebraska. Modifications to the legislation easing Nelson's concerns about federal funding for abortions eventually gained Nelson's support.

With both Lieberman and Nelson on board, a 60-vote filibuster-proof super-majority was in place and the Democrats in the Senate were on their way to possibly achieving sweeping health care reform. Indeed, the concurrence in the upper legislative chamber had been crafted to keep liberal Democrats on board, while also bringing conservative Democrats into the fold, at the expense of the public option. Republicans were united in their opposition to the legislation. Despite objections from the liberal base of the Democratic Party, which was livid about the concessions being made to a small minority of conservative Democrats, President Barack Obama hailed the complex agreement in the Senate as "a major step forward for the American people." He continued, "After a nearly century-long struggle we are on the cusp of making healthcare reform a reality in the United States of America."

Ironically, the Congressional Budget Office's report on the new compromise bill noted that it was actually more expensive than the original version, which contained the public option. The new legislative language read as follows: "The presence of the public plan had a more noticeable effect on CBO's estimates of federal subsidies because it was expected to exert some downward pressure on the premiums of the lower-cost plans to which those subsidies would be tied." In essence, although the deficit would be reduced by the enactment of either the original or compromise plan, and the cost of actual premiums to consumers would not change in either case, the Congressional Budget Office concluded that the inclusion of the public option would have saved the federal government more money by placing downward pressure on the premiums of low-cost private plans, which was to be heavily subsidized.

A key test was before the Senate -- would the vote for cloture ensue as expected, with final passage coming before Christmas? Indeed, in the dead of night on Dec. 21, 2009, Democrats of all stripes closed ranks in the first procedural vote in the Senate. A vote for cloture passed on strict party lines -- 60 to 40 -- shortly after 1 a.m. in Washington D.C.

Further procedural votes took place in the days ahead of the final vote, which was tentatively scheduled to take place on the day before Christmas 2009. That final vote would require only simple majority for passage.

On December 24, 2009, the United States Senate passed the historic \$871 billion health care reform bill. The bill passed with support of every Democrat and Independent in the Senate. Indeed, the vote was 60-39 and allocated along strict partisan lines, with one Republican missing the vote. In effect, despite using every possible legislative tactic to derail the passage of the bill, and in the face of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's claiming that

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"this fight isn't over," in fact, the Senate Republicans suffered a resounding defeat on an issue for which they have conveyed strong opposition. By contrast, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid enjoyed a legislative victory, by showing that he could effectively unify the most liberal and conservative members of his caucus, with strongly divergent views, to pass comprehensive health care reform -- a marquee Democratic concern -- into law. Reid spoke to the importance of the issue, characterizing it as being "a question of morality, of right and wrong" and a means to alleviate human suffering. Reid also excoriated the Republicans for their intransigence saying, "he was sorry to say that for the first time in American history, a political party has chosen to stand on the sidelines rather than participate in great -- and greatly needed -- social change."

Following the historic vote, President Obama hailed the development saying, "We are now finally poised to deliver on the promise of real, meaningful health insurance reform that will bring additional security and stability to the American people."

Key provisions of the Senate version of the legislation were as follows --

- mandated health insurance but with subsidies to lower income brackets
- young adults would be able to retain coverage longer under their parents' insurance
- private insurers would be prohibited from refusing coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions
- expansion of access to Medicaid for those in lower income brackets
- ability to purchase insurance from newly-formed not-for-profit exchanges or marketplaces

There was some overlap with the House version in these regards although the House version offered the public option health exchange. There were key differences on funding. Whereas the House version finances its plan through a combination of a tax surcharge on high income brackets and new Medicare spending reductions, the Senate version imposes a tax on insurance companies providing expensive health plans although it also uses cuts on Medicare for financing.

See below for further developments related to health care reform in 2010.

Other Recent Developments Related to Foreign Policy (2009)

In August 2009, former United States President Bill Clinton traveled to Pyongyang in the North Korea to try to press for the release of two American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, who had been arrested and sentenced to prison for crossing the border into North Korea. Former President Clinton -- the husband of the United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- arrived in Pyongyang in the early hours of August 4, 2009 and was warmly met by a North Korean delegation that included a nuclear negotiator.

The landmark visit by the former United States leader came at a time of increasing tensions between Pyongyang and the West over its nuclear program. After a meeting between Clinton and Kim Jong-il, a special pardon for Ling and Lee was announced. Former President Bill Clinton is the highest ranking American to visit North Korea since his own Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Kim Jong-il in 2000. Whether or not this particular success would extend to an overall thaw in relations between Pyongyang and Washington D.C. was yet to be seen. See "Foreign Relations" for details.

Later in August 2009, North Korea deployed envoys to the United States to meet with New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. The seasoned diplomat, Richardson, served as United Nations ambassador and Energy Secretary under the Clinton administration in the 1990s, and was responsible for helping to broker an agreement with the North Koreans that brought a temporary end to its nuclear development.

Following his meeting with the North Koreans, Governor Richardson, a Democrat who endorsed Barack Obama for president, said that believed that Pyongyang had issued "good signals" that pointed toward the restarting of dialogue with Washington. Indeed, multilateral talks on North Korea's controversial nuclear program had stalled in recent times, and relations became increasingly strained after North Korea went forward with an underground

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nuclear, followed by a succession of missile tests. Now, however, in the aftermath of a successful but unofficial trip by former President Bill Clinton to North Korea to secure the release of two American journalists, Governor Richardson said that he believed the climate had improved and that North Korea was "ready for a new dialogue with the United States regarding the nuclear issue."

That said, an actual diplomatic breakthrough was still in the offing. According to Governor Richardson, North Korea remained intransigent on the issue of returning to six-party talks. Instead, Pyongyang believed that it had earned some goodwill and wanted to pursue direct bilateral talks with the United States. To this end, Governor Richardson said that Pyongyang had "obviously used the journalists as a bargaining chip" and was looking for a reciprocal a "gesture" from Washington. The Obama administration has indicated that while it was willing to return to the negotiating table with North Korea within the multilateral framework, with an eye on irreversible denuclearization, it would not soon engage in direct talks. The White House also made clear that it had not orchestrated the meeting between the North Korean envoys and the New Mexico governor.

After the meeting between the Governor Richardson and the North Korean envoys, North Korea invited the United States envoy to North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, for direct negotiations on its nuclear program. South Korea media reported that there were rumblings about the White House giving serious consideration to the idea of actually sending Bosworth to North Korea. But on the record, the United States embassy in Seoul would offer no comment on the matter.

September 2009 was marked by developments on the peace process front. United States envoy, George Mitchell, met with Israeli leaders to discuss the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The issue of continued expansion of Jewish settlements has been an obstacle in the peace process, and one that the Obama administration in the United States has taken a key role in resolving. On the other side of the equation, Mitchell was also pushing Arab nation states to officially recognize the Jewish state of Israel. The dual moves were part of an effort by the Obama administration in the United States to finalize the terms of fresh peace negotiations between Israel and Palestinians. Following a meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Mitchell said "While we have not yet reached agreement on many outstanding issues, we are working hard to do so."

Also in September 2009, the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear program returned to the fore. A report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) noted that Iran's Natanz nuclear plant registered a reduction in the number of centrifuges used to actively enrich uranium. Nonetheless, the IAEA also charged that Iran was not cooperating in an investigation of allegations that Iran was on the path toward weaponization of uranium.

To that end, the United States envoy to the IAEA, Glyn Davies, asserted that Iran was continuing to enrich uranium in defiance of the United Nations Security Council and could already have garnered sufficient enriched uranium to eventually produce a nuclear bomb. At a meeting of the IAEA in Vienna, Davies said, "We have serious concerns that Iran is deliberately attempting, at a minimum, to preserve a nuclear weapons option." In response, Iran's envoy to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, argued that there had been false accusations about Iran's nuclear program from the United States before. He said, "The world is observing curiously whether or not this [American] administration follows the same trend as the Bush administration - pursuing hostile political confrontation, using fabricated baseless allegations." Iran has maintained that its nuclear program has only a civilian energy purpose and that its rocket building activities would be oriented toward satellites alone.

But analysts warned that Iran's vociferous defense of its nuclear program could be a strategy intended to stall further international action that might be in the offing. Indeed, United States President Barack Obama has warned Iran that its friendly overtures toward engagement with Tehran would expire by the end of September 2009. At that time, the United States president was prepared to pursue new sanctions against Iran. Mohamed El Baradei, the head of the IAEA, urged Iran to accept the United States' offer of dialogue. Ahead of the IAEA meeting in Vienna, he said, "The U.S. is making an offer without preconditions and on the basis of mutual respect." He continued, "The offer by the U.S. is an offer that should not be refused, that cannot be refused, because it has no conditions attached to it. And I hope [the] response will be positive."

Such hopes of dialogue were somewhat complicated after Iran put forth its package of proposals to the five permanent United Nations Security Council members and Germany. According to the independent United States-based entity, ProPublica, the five-page proposal, Iran called for "comprehensive, all-encompassing and constructive" negotiations on a range of security issues, including global nuclear disarmament. However, the document detailing Iran's latest proposals on its nuclear ambitions conspicuously failed to mention Iran's own nuclear program.

The United States reacted by registering dissatisfaction with the proposal package. Philip Crowley, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, said that the proposed measures failed to address the status of Iran's nuclear program. He said, "Our concern is that the response itself did not really address what is the core issue of the international community and the core concern, which is Iran's nuclear ambitions." Conversely, Russia reacted by suggesting that the Iranian proposals signaled positive progress. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Based on a brief review of the Iranian papers my impression is there is something there to use." Lavrov also indicated that there would be no oil sanctions against Iran. "Some of the sanctions under discussion, including oil and oil products, are not a mechanism to force Iran to co-operate, they are a step to a full-blown blockade and I do not think they would be supported at the UN Security Council."

The American and Russian responses showed divergent approaches to the Iranian nuclear issue, and suggested that consensus on the matter would not be easily achieved.

On September 12, 2009, it was announced that more than 600 prisoners held by the United States military at the Bagram air base in Afghanistan would be given new legal rights to challenge their detention. The new legal guidelines would include the right of each detainee to be represented by a United States military official, and the right to present evidence before a military board, which would determine whether or not continued detention was in order. The new legal guidelines presented the first significant shift in overseas detention policies since the Bush administration was in power. To date, human rights groups have condemned the practice of holding detainees as "enemy combatants" indefinitely at Bagram, with many of them not knowing the reasons for their imprisonment. Sahr Muhammed Ally of the Human Rights First cautiously welcomed the news saying, "Any reform in U.S. detentions in Afghanistan is an improvement, but it remains to be seen whether the new procedures will cure the ills of arbitrary and indefinite detention that have been the hallmark of detentions in Bagram."

On September 13, 2009, an audio message, believed to have been recorded by al-Qaida terrorist leader, Osama Bin Laden, was released on an Islamic website. The message was titled "a statement to the American people" and in it, the taped voice argued that the United States President Barack Obama was "powerless" to stop the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The taped voice -- believed to be Bin Laden -- accused the new United States president of failing to significantly change its foreign policy, as evidenced by the decision to retain officials from the previous Bush administration, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates. The timing of the release of the message was significant, given that it occurred two days after the eighth anniversary of the tragic 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Indeed, the taped voice said that one motivating factor behind the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington was the United States foreign policy towards Israel. To date, Bin Laden is believed to be alive and living in the mountainous Afghan-Pak border region.

On September 14, 2009, United States President Barack Obama extended the 47-year-long trade embargo on Cuba for one year. He said, "I hereby determine that the continuation for one year of the exercise of those authorities with respect to Cuba is in the national interest of the United States." This move to extend the 1917 Trading With the Enemy Act (TWEA) with regard to Cuba was undertaken despite an earlier vow to seek a new beginning in the United States-Cuba relations. Indeed, in April 2009, at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, held in Trinidad and Tobago, President Obama said that he hoped bilateral relations could move in "a new direction." The extension of the embargo was viewed by some as a contradiction of this promise. That said, President Obama has directed his administration to ease restrictions on travel as well as the transfer of money by Cuban-Americans to Cuba. President Obama also authorized American companies to enter into limited Cuban commercial arenas, such as the telecommunication and satellite television markets. He explained that such a move would help advance freedom and self-determination in Cuba, which would -- by extension -- be in the national interest of the United States.

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On September 15, 2009, United States Vice President Joe Biden arrived on an unannounced visit to Iraq. His arrival coincided with an attack by militants firing rockets and mortars at the heavily fortified Green Zone. During his third visit to Iraq in 2009, Vice President Biden met with key Iraqi officials in Baghdad, including Vice President Adi Abdul-Mahdi the next day. After greeting Abdul-Mahdi, Vice President Biden jokingly said, "You can't get rid of me. I keep coming back, coming back." United States President Barack Obama has charged his second-in-command with providing "sustained, high-level focus" on Iraq, according to the White House.

On September 17, 2009, United States President Barack Obama announced that his administration was abandoning the Bush-era missile defense shield program in Eastern Europe, which caused the grave consternation of Russia. In its place, President Obama unveiled a "phased, adaptive approach" for missile defense on the European continent. At a news conference in the White House, President Obama said, "This new approach will provide capabilities sooner, build on proven systems and offer greater defenses against the threat of missile attack than the 2007 European missile defense program."

President Obama explained that he made the decision based on an assessment of Iran's missile threat and the Pentagon's "phased and adaptive" approach, which would ensure the American homeland defense. While President Obama acknowledged the threat posed by Iran, and although he insisted that he was committed to "deploying strong missile defense systems which are adaptable to the threats of the 21st century," he also wanted to institute a plan that would be appropriate and effective in responding to the current intelligence assessment of Iran's missile programs. To that end, recent intelligence appeared to indicate that Iran's capacity to attach warheads to long-range missiles would not pose an immediate strategic threat to the United States and its allies. Indeed, Iran was more likely to pursue short-range and medium-range missile development.

President Obama noted, "The best way to responsibly advance our security and the security of our allies is to deploy a missile defense system that best responds to the threats that we face and that utilizes technology that is both proven and cost-effective." He explained that the new missile defense architecture would provide "stronger, smarter and swifter defenses."

The plan would essentially nullify former President George W. Bush's plan to deploy 10 missile interceptors in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic as part of its European missile shield, charged with preventing European allies from missile threats by "rogue states," such as Iran. Bush's plan had been criticized by some as being impractical to implement. Perhaps more significantly, Russia strongly opposed the missile defense shield concept and argued that it posed a security threat to the region. The matter caused a devolution in positive relations between the United States and Russia at the time, with Russia warning of retaliatory moves.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Russia was now lauding the decision by the Obama administration to dispense with the Bush missile defense shield system. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev welcomed the shift as "positive" and made clear that there were now "good conditions" for United States-Russia talks on dealing with missile proliferation. It was apparent that the "reset button" on bilateral relations between the two countries had, indeed, been pressed.

At home in the United States, Republicans such as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell decried the move as "short-sighted" and "harmful." Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, who was defeated by President Obama in 2008, called the decision "seriously misguided." Other conservatives also accused the Obama administration of appeasing Moscow and getting nothing in return. On the other side of the equation, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the decision by the Obama administration was "brilliant" and had been forged from an accurate assessment of the current threats. As well, United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates -- a Republican who also served in the Bush administration -- penned an article in the New York Times, which explained the pragmatic value of President Obama's proposed changes. He also excoriated those whom he described as a "devoted following" to missile defense plans that were "unworkable, prohibitively expensive and could never be practically deployed."

Russia quickly announced that it would now scrap its own controversial plans to deploy missiles close to Poland. That proposal had been advanced in response to the Bush missile shield plan.

But now, as noted by Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin during an radio interview in Moscow, "Naturally, we will cancel the measures that Russia planned to take in response to the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems." He continued, "Common sense has finally prevailed over ambitions."

For his part, President Obama said on an interview with CBS on September 20, 2009, that his decision was not dictated by Russian opposition. He said, "The Russians don't make determinations about what our defense posture is." He continued, "If the by-product of it is that the Russians feel a little less paranoid... then that's a bonus." President Obama also noted that one of the bonus effects could be that the Russians might be more willing to work with the United States in dealing with ballistic missiles from Iran or nuclear development in Iran.

President Barack Obama met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders on September 22, 2009, with an eye on revitalizing the peace process. President Obama held separate talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas before convening a joint meeting. This announcement came in the aftermath of a visit by United States Middle East envoy, George Mitchell to the region, with an eye on trying to find some common ground ahead of the meeting in the United States. Mitchell returned home without consensus and with both sides blaming one another for the inability to find common ground. Nevertheless, Mitchell, said that President Obama's willingness to engage directly at this stage with the two principal players showed his "deep commitment to comprehensive peace."

In his first address to the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly in late September 2009, United States President Barack Obama called for global unity and joint action in tackling the complex challenges facing the international community. Expounding on a litany of global problems, such as nuclear proliferation and disarmament, war and conflict, global warming and climate change, as well as financial instability and economic crisis, President Obama called on all nation states to meet their responsibilities in dealing with these challenges. President Obama also acknowledged that foreign policy in the previous years had not advanced global goodwill to his country saying that when he took office, "many around the world had come to view America with skepticism and mistrust." But President Obama also heralded a new day dawning marked by international cooperation and team effort. In a reference to the purpose of the United Nations, he said, "We must build new coalitions that bridge old divides... All nations have rights and responsibilities - that's the bargain that makes this work." President Obama additionally noted that just as America should not exert its military might while alienating the global community, it was concomitantly unfair to expect America to act on its own to resolve problems facing the countries of the world. To this end, he said, "Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world's problems alone."

One day after giving his first address to the United Nations General Assembly, United States President Barack Obama issued a call for nuclear disarmament. Ironically, this call came at a time when the attention of the international community was focused on Iran's nuclear development program and amidst increasing fears that Iran's nuclear ambitions might include weaponization. That said, in a session of the United Nations Security Council that was chaired by President Obama, member states unanimously adopted a resolution calling for nuclear disarmament, advancing efforts to halt the proliferation of nuclear arms, and boosting endeavors aimed at decreasing the risk of nuclear terrorism. After the resolution was adopted, President Obama said, "The historic resolution we just adopted enshrines our shared commitment to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons." United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hailed the newly-adopted resolution as "a fresh start toward a new future." The occasion was distinguished as being the first time an American president had chaired a United Nations Security Council summit.

At the start of October 2009, the United States had accelerated its military withdrawal from Iraq and will redeploy 4,000 troops within a month. Accordingly, the number of United States troops in Iraq was expected to go from 124,000 to 120,000 by the close of October 2009. The top American commander in Iraq, Army General Ray Odierno, explained that it was the latest move aimed at ending the United States engagement in that country. In an eight-page statement intended to be delivered at a Congressional committee, he said, "We have already begun deliberately drawing down our forces - without sacrificing security." Odierno continued, "As we go forward, we will

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thin our lines across Iraq in order to reduce the risk and sustain stability through a deliberate transition of responsibilities to the Iraqi security forces."

Odierno expressed tentative optimism about the prospects of a stable Iraq in the future, while acknowledging the reality of continued violence, as evidenced by the August 19, 2009 bombings at two Iraqi government ministries. He also noted that ethnic, sectarian and regional divisions continued to plague the country. He observed that unresolved tensions between the Arab and Kurdish populations promised to present problems in the 2010 parliamentary elections, with various groups seeking control over regional oil wealth. That said, Odierno suggested that most Iraqis sought peace and security, while opposing militancy and violence. He said, "The overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people have rejected extremism," Odierno said. "We see no indications of a return to the sectarian violence that plagued Iraq in 2006-2007."

Note: Odierno's congressional testimony was obtained by the Associated Press and the plan to reduce the number of brigades in Iraq was confirmed by the Defense Department.

Meanwhile, on September 21, 2009, it was reported in the Washington Post that General Stanley McChrystal, the chief United States and NATO commander in Afghanistan was calling for more troops on the ground. McChrystal argued that the United States risked failure in the war in Afghanistan without such a commitment.

In a Pentagon report that was sent to United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates, McChrystal wrote, "Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it." He continued, "Although considerable effort and sacrifice have resulted in some progress, many indicators suggest the overall effort is deteriorating." Indeed, McChrystal warned that the United States had to reverse the momentum of the resurgent Taliban. The commander also indicated that beyond military tactics, there was a need to revise overall strategy in Afghanistan. To this end, he wrote: "We run the risk of strategic defeat by pursuing tactical wins that cause civilian casualties or unnecessary collateral damage. The insurgents cannot defeat us militarily; but we can defeat ourselves."

The Pentagon's decision to release the document to the Washington Post gave rise to speculation that some were attempting to force President Obama's hand on action in Afghanistan at a time when the American public's support for that military effort was waning.

In October 2009, as the Pakistani military was carrying out an offensive operations against Islamic militants, it was clear that there would be some degree of an impact on the extremists living in the tribal region of South Waziristan. One of the core implications of the offensive operation would be the substantial displacement of militants, as they flee the air strikes and ground offensive. Strategic experts have said that the militants who are flushed out of the combat zones would likely take refuge in nearby areas, also characterized by lawlessness and difficult terrain, such as tribal Balochistan and North-West Frontier Province. Still other experts warn that some militants will relocate to areas further away, essentially guaranteeing that the problem of extremist Islamists will have a wider, regional effect, ultimately requiring a broader response from policy makers not only in Pakistan but internationally.

To that end, Hakeemullah Mehsud, a top commander in the Pakistani Taliban, issued an ultimatum to Pakistani forces. He said that the Taliban in Pakistan would halt its attacks if the Pakistani military would cease cooperating with the United States. Clearly, the Taliban in Pakistan was responding to pressure by United States drone attacks on its strongholds -- some of which have resulted in the deaths of high value militant targets, not the least of which was the strike on Baitalluh Mehsud. This call by Hakeemullah Mehsud also highlighted a shift on the geopolitical terrain. Specifically, in a shift from the past in which the Pakistani intelligence units were often complicit in attacks by militants, now the Pakistani authorities were actively cooperating with the United States in the fight against Islamic militants.

The new strategic partnership between the United States and Pakistan was brought into sharp relief when United States President Barack Obama signed into law "The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009."

White House spokesperson, Robert Gibbs, said that the bill was "a tangible manifestation of broad support for Pakistan in the U.S., as evidenced by its bipartisan, bicameral, unanimous passage in Congress." Gibbs said that

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the bill formalized a partnership whereby the United States was committed to improving living conditions in Pakistan via economic development, strengthened democracy, and combating extremists.

In November 2009, the United States and the Russian Federation announced that they would present a new treaty, aimed at replacing the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) -- the prevailing nuclear arms agreement between the two countries that was set to expire in December 2009. The announcement came at the close of a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders in Singapore, and occurred following discussions between United States President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. According to United States officials, the leaders of the United States and Russia found concurrence on the broad outline a new treaty, which could be signed in December 2009 when President Obama was expected to travel to Europe to accept the Nobel Peace Prize.

Earlier, in April 2009, United States President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to forge a new nuclear arms reduction pact, which would not only replace START --the treaty signed by former United States President George H. W. Bush and former Soviet President Michel Gorbachev -- but also expand upon its parameters, with an eye on increased disarmament.

Then, in July 2009, at a summit in Moscow, President Obama and President Medvedev agreed to cut the number of nuclear warheads in the possession each country to between 1,500 and 1,675 over the course of the next seven years. Russian President Medvedev described this particular objective as "reasonable." The agreement was expected to set the foundation for a later treaty to be forged, which would replace START as noted above. Speaking from the Kremlin in Moscow, President Obama explained that he intended to move toward nuclear arms reduction and greater bilateral engagement saying, "We must lead by example, and that's what we are doing here today." He continued, "We resolve to reset U.S.-Russian relations so that we can cooperate more effectively in areas of common interest."

In October 2009, United States officials were in Russia for missile defense negotiations with Russian counterparts. Speaking ahead of the negotiations, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said the United States and Russia must advance strategic arms reduction. In an interview with Russia's Channel Once, President Medvedev said, "While dealing with non-proliferation, we must simultaneously deal with the limitation and reduction of strategic offensive potentials -- both carriers and nuclear warheads." Medvedev continued, "Today we have the chance to advance this process. We will be dealing with this. And I call on our American partners to do the same."

With the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty set to expire on Dec. 5, 2009, President Medvedev said he believed Russia and the United States could reach a new strategic arms reduction accord.

He observed, "There is definitely a chance for the agreement, since the new U.S. administration has demonstrated interest in this issue." Medvedev also said he did not support the expansion of nuclear weapons states recognized by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Striking a tone harmonious with his American counterpart, President Barack Obama, president Medvedev said, "We are against the extension of the nuclear club. Otherwise the situation will get out of control. The world without nuclear weapons is an ideal which should be on our agenda."

President Medvedev also reiterated his appreciation for President Obama's decision to scrap the Bush-era missile defense shield plan, calling President Obama's new missile shield plans "sensible." He additionally noted that Russia was eager to extend missile defense cooperation with the United States and Europe.

On October 13, 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Moscow to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In addition to the issues related to a new successor treaty aimed at strategic arms reduction, the two diplomats also discussed the matter of missile defense. Secretary Clinton addressed the Obama administration's plan to scrap the Bush-era missile defense system in Eastern Europe saying, "On the question of the missile shield, we are very open to cooperation with the Russians. We have made this clear to them. We believe that a joint missile defense would make sense."

In November 2009, as intimated above, the matter of crafting of a new agreement that would replace START was at the head of the bilateral political agenda. Ahead of negotiations with Russian President Medvedev, during a news

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conference in Japan with Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, United States President Obama signaled his country's readiness to move forward on the issue of joint disarmament saying, "We are already taking steps to bring down our nuclear stockpiles in cooperation with the Russian government." Days later, the United States and the Russian Federation announced that they would present a new treaty, aimed at replacing START. The announcement came at the close of a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders in Singapore, and occurred following discussions between United States President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. According to United States officials, the leaders of the United States and Russia found concurrence on the broad outline a new treaty, which could be signed in December 2009 when President Obama was expected to travel to Europe to accept the Nobel Peace Prize.

As reported in the Associated Press, President Obama said that he and his Russian counterpart had made "excellent progress" on the new treaty negotiations. President Medvedev said that his objective was to "finalize the text of the document by December." While acknowledging that technical details were yet to be worked through, President Obama said, "I'm confident that if we work hard and with a sense of urgency, we'll be able to get that done."

With such a tight timeline in the offing, Daryl Kimball, the executive director of the Arms Control Association, said that he did not anticipate any significant obstacles that foresee could not be resolved before December 2009. According to the Associated Press, he described the urgency motivating both American and Russian negotiations saying, "Neither side wants to go without a new agreement for very long."

The news agency, Itar-Tass, cited Russian presidential aide -- Sergei Prikhodko -- who described the timeline on the agreement as follows: "We are working in order to prepare the treaty within the timeframe about which the presidents spoke."

Prihodko also lauded the spirit of engagement from the Obama administration in the United States saying, "We are satisfied at present with the nature of the open, pragmatic and future-oriented dialogue that is developing with the new administration: it allows us to hope for the continuation of the joint work on issues where solutions have not been found yet." He continued, "Each meeting of President Medvedev with Barack Obama give a considerable impulse to the interaction in bilateral affairs, contributes to confidence building, understanding on key issues." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the current climate of bilateral relations as follows: "The two presidents absolutely agree that we should overcome the stagnation in relations between Moscow and Washington that was observed during the Bush administration when good personal relations did not transform in any way into something really partnership-like."

The White House has not denied the existence of disagreements between the United States and Russia on certain elements of the proposed agreement to replace START. As noted by Itar-Tass, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council, Mike Hammer, explained that both countries were working to resolve the existing disagreements. Echoing some of the sentiment expressed by Prihodko and Lavrov, Hammer characterized relations with the Russians as constructive, and he noted that both the United States and Russia were committed to the December 2009 deadline, given the imperative of increasing global security and advancing the objective of global non-proliferation.

Indeed, President Obama's call for nuclear disarmament was one of the key rationales behind the Nobel Committee's decision to award him the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize (discussed below). At the time of its announcement, the Nobel Committee said that it "attached special importance to President Obama's vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons." To that end, the committee noted that Obama's vision and work related to a nuclear weapons-free world has "powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations."

On Dec. 21, 2009, Russia and the United States were reported to have made good progress on negotiations on a new strategic arms agreement. In an off-side meeting at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, United States President Barack Obama met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and expressed confidence that a new treaty would soon be signed. At issue was the impending expiration of the existing Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the need to forge a new agreement.

Editor's Note: The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) was forged between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. START prohibited its two signatories from deploying more than 6,000 nuclear warheads on a total of 1,600 intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and bombers. START has been regarded as the most complex and substantial arms control treaty in history. It was signed just months before the collapse of the Soviet Union on July 31, 1991 and its entry-into-force was delayed as a result. An annex was crafted, which enforced the terms of the treaty upon the newly-independent states of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, and called for the transposition of nuclear arms from Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to Russia for disposal.

Meanwhile, in October 2009, the commander of United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, officially submitted a set of possible options to policymakers, aimed at curbing the advance of resurgent Taliban. Among the proposals given to the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Admiral James Stavridi, was an option to deploy between 30,000 to 40,000 additional combat troops and trainers to Afghanistan. This option was said to be strongly favored by McChrystal, although there were other options, such as a more modest increase of troop strength by 10,000, as well as another plan calling for a surge of 60,000 troops to be sent to Afghanistan, and an option for maintaining current troop strength. While the actual content of the proposal has remained confidential, McChrystal has himself said that more troops were needed to help support the Afghan security forces who were preparing to take full control over the country's security in 2013. Moreover, McChrystal -- who was backed by NATO leadership -- was calling for a broad counter-insurgency strategy.

General McChrystal's report was being reviewed by President Barack Obama who had said earlier-- on Sept. 20, 2009, during an interview on CNN -- that he would assess the findings from his commander on the ground, before making a decision as to the possible deployment of troops to an increasingly unpopular conflict. President Obama noted, "I don't want to put the resource question before the strategy question." He then continued, "But right now, the question is, the first question is, are we doing the right thing? Are we pursuing the right strategy?" The president acknowledged that the original mission to hunt those responsible for 9/11 could be subject to what is known as "mission creep."

Before considering McChrystal's request for more combat troops in Afghanistan, the White House in the United States said it wanted to undergo an overall strategic review of its policy in the Afghan-Pak region. At issue for the Obama administration was the question of whether to remain on track with the existing mission, and perhaps with an extended nation-building imperative, aimed at securing the cooperation of the Afghan populace. Alternatively, there was the question as to if the mission should be recalibrated, perhaps with reduced military operations, and a concentration purely on striking al-Qaida terrorists in the Afghan-Pak border area.

By the end of October 2009, media reports emerged that the Obama administration would make their Afghanistan strategy known after that country's contested presidential election was decided, given the rising clamor for the establishment of a credible government in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Obama administration noted there would be no action pending the establishment of a legitimate government in Afghanistan. In an interview with CNN, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said it would be "reckless" to make such a decision without thoroughly determining whether or not the government at the helm of Afghanistan held democratic authority. That rationale was not helped by the fact that the election was marred by allegations of fraud, and the fact that the main opposition candidate withdrew from the second round, effectively allowing President Karzai to hold onto to power by default.

Around that period, there were intimations that President Obama was prepared to accept that Afghanistan's political future might well include the Taliban's involvement, given the Islamist movement's ingrained influence on Afghan culture. However, the Obama administration was not willing to go so far as allowing the Taliban to regain control over Afghanistan, and thus be able to give sanctuary to al-Qaida, as was the case in the period leading up to the September 2001 terror attacks. This approach could gain steam at home in the United States where the citizenry was war-weary, consumed with domestic challenges, and hostile to the idea of a surge in Afghanistan. Indeed, polling data showed ever-devolving public support for the war itself in Afghanistan. While Democrats in Congress were not keen to endorse the deployment of additional troops to Afghanistan, Republicans argued that without such

an escalation, the war effort could end in failure. Also at play was the fact that the United States military forces were severely strained after eight years of war.

The focus on the dwindling number of al-Qaida in Afghanistan was derived from President Obama's repeated question of "Who is our adversary?" during strategy meetings. Clearly, the United States military has been involved in a fight primarily against resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan -- a distinct entity from al-Qaida. While the Taliban has given safe haven to al-Qaida in the past, and even though the two groups have reportedly worked together, the Taliban's objective has typically been local and territorial, while the terrorist network, al-Qaida, has global jihadist aspirations.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs conveyed the Obama administration's stance on the distinction between the two entities saying, "They're not the same type of group. It's certainly not backed up by any of the intelligence." Following this trajectory, in an interview with the BBC, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized this objective saying that the United States goal in Afghanistan was to defeat al-Qaida. Secretary of Clinton also indicated that the White House's forthcoming strategy would involve "a much more careful analysis of who actually is allied with al-Qaida." Accordingly, the escalation of United States forces in Afghanistan could only be justified with a modified mission.

At the same time, the reality was that as of 2009, while al-Qaida saw dwindling numbers in Afghanistan, its terrorist objectives were now being carried out by an emboldened Taliban, and were illustrative of shifting alliances and power dynamic in the region. Of course, that region is not limited only to Afghanistan, and active factions of both al-Qaida and the Taliban have been waging violent attacks in neighboring Pakistan. Accordingly, President Obama was expected to be considering a strategy that addressed the Afghan-Pak region.

Whatever strategy was ultimately selected, it was apparent that Vice President Joe Biden's preference for targeted strikes in the wider Afghan-Pak region, coupled with downgraded emphasis on the Taliban, was having an influence on the decision-making process. In an article in Newsweek by Holly Bailey and Evan Thomas, there was a description of an insider strategy meeting that included the president and his top advisors. It read as follows:

"Joe Biden had a question. During a long Sunday meeting with President Obama and top national-security advisers on Sept. 13, the VP interjected, 'Can I just clarify a factual point? How much will we spend this year on Afghanistan?' Someone provided the figure: \$65 billion. 'And how much will we spend on Pakistan?' Another figure was supplied: \$2.25 billion. 'Well, by my calculations that's a 30-to-1 ratio in favor of Afghanistan. So I have a question. Al Qaida is almost all in Pakistan, and Pakistan has nuclear weapons. And yet for every dollar we're spending in Pakistan, we're spending \$30 in Afghanistan. Does that make strategic sense?'"

In this way, Vice President Biden was not only emphasizing the concentration on al-Qaida -- the identified primary enemy of the United States, as noted above -- but, he was also illuminating the reality of the threat, which had to be addressed at the broader regional -- Afghan-Pak -- level. Furthermore, he was questioning the strategic value of United States expenditures in a country where there were only a few hundred al-Qaida vis a vis nuclear Pakistan where al-Qaida has been a far more dominant force.

Augmenting the Biden approach has been the fact that the Pakistani government has been willing to carry out aggressive offensive operations against militant Islamic extremists within its own borders. Until recently, courting Pakistani cooperation has been a difficult task, as certain factions of Pakistani society eschew close ties with the United States.

By the close of October 2009, there was no decision forthcoming from the president who was, in fact, requesting status reports from across Afghanistan to assess specific conditions on the ground. At home in the United States, there was a clear division among those -- disproportionately from the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party -- who wanted the president to quickly assent to McChrystal's wishes, and the liberal base of the Democratic Party, which has demanded that President Obama bring an end to the war in Afghanistan.

Opponents of the president from the Republican Party have also accused him of taking too long to make the crucial decision on the war strategy for Afghanistan. Former Vice President Dick Cheney has gone so far as to

characterize President Obama as "dithering" over this key decision to be made. However, military experts have noted that any offensive operation would not begin until the spring of 2010. Other voices have said that when one considers the criticisms of the Bush administration's decision-making with regard to war, Cheney holds no credibility on the matter. They pointed to the fact that the rationale behind the Iraq war was flawed, and Republicans now clamoring for intensified efforts in Afghanistan held no such priority while the Iraq war was in full swing. Allies of President Obama have said that he is functioning true to form, by acquiring as much information as possible and acting in a deliberative manner on the important issues of the day.

At the close of October 2009, President Obama flew to a military air base in Dover, Del.. to witness the return of 18 Americans who had died in Afghanistan. President Obama noted that the experience was a "a sobering reminder" of the human toll exacted by war. His predecessor, George W. Bush, never met the return of American servicemen and servicewomen returning from war at Dover. In fact, the Bush administration barred such events from being publicized.

By the first part of November 2009, it was reported that President Barack Obama had, in fact, rejected all four of the options for Afghanistan, which had been presented by security advisers. He asserted that they did not satisfy his concerns over a clear exit strategy. This position was confirmed by White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs who said in an interview on Air Force One, "An exit strategy is as important as ramping up troops. It's important to fully examine not just how we're going to get folks in but how we're going to get folks out."

In a related development, the United States ambassador to Afghanistan was reported to have sent two classified cable to Washington expressing concern over the deployment of further troops to Afghanistan, at a time when the Karzai government in Kabul was re-elected amidst allegations of vote fraud -- the latest manifestation of corruption and mismanagement at the core of governance. Indeed, it was the very climate of corruption and mismanagement that facilitated the resurgence of the Taliban in the first place. Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry -- who served as the United States military commander in Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007 before retiring from the military and taking on a diplomatic role in April 2009 -- apparently characterized Afghan President Hamid Karzai as erratic, excoriated senior Afghan government officials for their rampant corruption, and criticized the installation of warlords and drug smugglers in influential positions on the Afghan governing landscape. Eikenberry reportedly concluded that the Afghan leadership was incapable of being an effective -- or appropriate -- partner, and accordingly, advised President Obama against escalating troop strength in Afghanistan.

No actual decision on the Afghan-Pak strategy was expected until later in November 2009 when President Obama was expected to return from a trip to Asia. White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs defended the protracted process of decision-making saying, "This has been a very rigorous and deliberative process ... to get the best decision possible." He continued, "The president outlined the way we would go about making this decision, and that's what he's stuck to. He understands that the key is getting this decision right. "

Ahead of the unveiling of United States President Barack Obama's anticipated policy for Afghanistan on Dec. 1, 2009, sources at the White House indicated that there was almost no chance that there would be a withdrawal or de-escalation of the effort in Afghanistan. Accordingly, speculation rested on the following -- (1) the number of United States troops to be deployed in a spring offensive, (2) the strategy behind United States efforts in Afghanistan [was it quelling al-Qaida and the Taliban?], (3) the exit strategy. To these ends, President Obama was expected to convey his plans to the American people in an national address from the United States Military Academy at Westpoint.

In a rare twist, Republicans were expected to applaud action pointing toward additional troops being deployed to Afghanistan whereas Democrats were expected to denounce such a course. That being said, in his presidential campaign before being elected, Barack Obama never suggested that he would withdrew troops from Afghanistan. While he was an early vocal opponent of the Iraq war, characterizing it as "the wrong war," Barack Obama simultaneously asserted that the United States was not paying attention to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. He had steadfastly stated that the United States military objectives should focus on the hunt for those responsible for the 2001 terror attacks at home -- al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden in the mountainous region

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spanning Afghanistan and Pakistan. As such, President Obama's continuing concentration on Afghanistan appears to be consistent with his expressed campaign promises and stated foreign policy stances.

During his address to the nation from Westpoint, President Barack Obama ordered another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan on an accelerated timetable starting in late 2009 and reaching an apex in mid-2010. The president explained that the mission at hand would focus on "disrupting, dismantling, and defeating" al-Qaida in Afghanistan, and denying them any further safehaven in Afghanistan under Taliban auspices.

As such, a concomitant aspect of the mission would include reversing recent Taliban momentum.

The troops would also be tasked with the training of Afghan security forces, with an eye on turning over the security apparatus to locals. To that end, President Obama noted that the another central component of the mission was to stabilize Afghanistan so that the Afghan people would soon be able to take responsibility for their own security. Ahead of the speech, there were reports that one "brigade-sized element" of between 3,000 to 5,000 troops would be solely tasked with training of Afghan troops.

At the same time, the president noted that the redeployment of United States forces was expected to commence within a year and end in mid-2011, pending favorable circumstances on the ground.

In this way, a timeline ending theoretically in 2011 appeared to be a core aspect of the exit strategy. To that end, the president emphasized that he was ordering the fastest possible deployment of additional troops to Afghanistan, in order to facilitate the conditions for a responsible exit from that country. Ultimately, the president said that the objective was to "come together to end the war successfully... for common security."

President Obama called on the international community to continue to work with the United States to deal with the global threat posed by militant Islamic extremists, noting that "this burden is not ours alone to bear." According to media reports ahead of the speech, the president had already conducted talks with the leaders of several key countries, including Denmark, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and India, and had called for other countries to contribute up to 10,000 troops for the NATO war effort in Afghanistan.

The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan also factored highly in the president's speech, with increased emphasis being placed on their responsibilities for advancing stable governance free of corruption and fighting terrorism respectively. He additionally addressed the Afghan people in saying that the United States did not seek to occupy their country, and sought to be a partner in the process toward stability, rather than a patron. On Pakistan, he particularly emphasized the nuclear capacity of that country and the heightened geopolitical stakes therein.

For his part, President Obama cast this war plan for Afghanistan as being a matter of necessity and not choice -- a view consistent with his campaign position on the topic. In his speech, however, he made clear that his decision was not made easily, saying: "I do not make this decision lightly."

The president's philosophical stance on the matter was made clear when he said that he had opposed the Iraq war because he believed in restraint when it comes to the use of military force. But at the same time, the president acknowledged that he believed the current course of remaining in Afghanistan at current levels and without an exit strategy was "unsustainable." To this end, President Obama said that "the status quo of muddling through" would only be a costly option that served to prolong the current farrago, ultimately never generating the conditions in which United States forces could leave Afghanistan.

The president went on to state that the decision was made in the interests of national security, noting that the dangers emanating from the Afghan-Pak region were "no idle danger" and "no theoretical threat."

President Obama addressed the fact that he inherited two costly wars amidst an economic crisis in saying: "In the face of the current economic crisis, we simply cannot afford to ignore the price of these wars...All told, by the time I took office the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan approached a trillion dollars." He thusly specified a current price tag of \$30 billion for the year, while also noting, "I will work closely with Congress to address these costs as we work to bring down our deficit."

Obama connected his aforementioned exit strategy with former President Eisenhower's call for balancing domestic and foreign interests by saying: "Our prosperity provides a foundation for our power. It pays for our military. It underwrites our diplomacy. ... That is why our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended -- because the nation that I am most interested in building is our own." Fundamentally, the president made clear he was not interested in an endless war in Afghanistan precisely because American interests at home and abroad were at stake.

While the president did not go into great detail about the Afghan-Pak strategy in his speech, his administration's policy was illuminated in a separate interview with United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice, which was conducted by MSNBC News. Dr. Rice explained that while many al-Qaida members had crossed the porous border from Afghanistan to Pakistan after the Taliban lost power, they were still moving across the border regions, and could re-establish safehaven in Afghanistan if resurgent Taliban in that country regained control over broad swaths of Afghan territory. She explained the symbiotic relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida by characterizing Afghanistan under Taliban rule as the "tissue" within which "the cancer of al-Qaida" develops. In effect, resurgent Taliban can facilitate the ascendancy of al-Qaida. While the United States and NATO forces were actively dealing with this threat on the Afghan side of the border, there was pressure on the Pakistanis to continue their efforts to the same on their side of the border. Dr. Rice also emphasized the fact that although al-Qaida members could be found in various countries across the world, the mountainous Afghan-Pak region was the very location of terror training camps -- a venue for far more ambitious terrorist planning than single cell terror operations. Moreover, she echoed the president's own words when she said that there was a "proximate threat to national security emanating from Afghan- Pak border."

In a related development, a report by the United States Senate indicated that United States military forces had al-Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden "within their grasp" in Afghanistan in late 2001. The report, which was prepared by the Foreign Relations Committee staff, stated that calls for reinforcements of United States troops were dismissed, effectively allowing the world's most well-known terrorist mastermind to "walk unmolested" into Pakistan's tribal regions. The report stated that United States commanders in the field "chose to rely on air strikes and untrained Afghan militias" to pursue Bin Laden in the mountainous region of Tora Bora, while at the same time keeping most of America's military power "on the sidelines." In many senses, it was an argument articulated by former Democratic presidential contender Senator John Kerry, who was now serving as the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The report placed blame on officials in the administration of former United States President George W. Bush. Notably, there was a sense that former United States Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld objected to an escalation of troop strength in Afghanistan because it could present a backlash of sorts, and also because he did not believe the evidence about Bin Laden's location was conclusively accurate. The report excoriated this claim as follows: "The review of existing literature, unclassified government records and interviews with central participants underlying this report removes any lingering doubts and makes it clear that Osama Bin Laden was within our grasp at Tora Bora."

While the report acknowledged that eliminating Bin Laden would not have removed the global threat from Islamist terrorists, his escape and survival served elevate the al-Qaida leader into being a "potent symbolic figure" among Islamic extremists. The report also argued that the failure to kill or capture Bin Laden has had long-term deleterious effects, while also contributing to the ongoing and protracted conflict in Afghanistan, marked by the efforts of resurgent Taliban. To that end, the report stated that the "failure to finish the job" laid the groundwork for the current insurgency in Afghanistan, and inflamed the "internal strife now endangering Pakistan."

The release of the report has coincided with an anticipated announcement by United States President Barack Obama on a strategy for Afghanistan going forward. For his part, President Obama was an early vocal opponent of the Iraq war, characterizing it as "the wrong war." President Obama simultaneously asserted that the United States was not paying attention to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. He had steadfastly stated that the United States' military objectives should focus on the hunt for those responsible for the 2001 terror attacks at home -- al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden in the mountainous region spanning Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On Dec. 10, 2009, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) announced that it was cancelling its contract with the controversial private security firm, once known as Blackwater but which was renamed Xe. The company gained notoriety after several of its employees were accused of killing 17 civilians in Iraq in 2007. At issue in December 2009 was the decision by CIA Director Leon Panetta that work such as the loading of bombs onto drone aircrafts in Pakistan and Afghanistan should be done by CIA employees only. The move appeared to be linked with a review of the company's contracts that had been ordered by Panetta earlier in the year to ensure that only security-related work was being done. While these developments were revealed, the New York Times reported that Xe employees were not only involved in the aforementioned bomb loading activities in the Afghan-Pak region, but as security on rendition flights, and also "snap and grab" operations in Iraq. To that latter end, the New York Times reported not only that Blackwater was involved in raids on suspected militants from the period 2004 to 2006, but also that joint operations involving Blackwater personnel and CIA officers became so much of a routine as to be characterized as partnership missions. Indeed, one CIA officer said, "There was a feeling that Blackwater eventually became an extension of the agency." Clearly, such a characterization casts Blackwater as far exceeding its actual contracted role in foreign military theaters. But the company disputed the claim that it participated in covert operations "with CIA or Special Operations personnel in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else."

As of December 2009, George Little, a spokesperson for the CIA, confirmed in an interview with the New York Times that Blackwater was no longer involved "in any CIA operations other than in a security or support role."

On Dec. 30, 2009, seven Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers were killed by a suicide bomber in the Afghan area of Khost -- a known hotbed of Taliban militant activity. It was the worst attack against United States intelligence agents since the American embassy was bombed in Beirut in 1983. United States intelligence officials later said that CIA agents may have been trying to recruit the suicide bomber as a possible informant, not knowing that he would turn out to be a "double agent" of sorts. It was possible that this background may have accounted for the fact that he had not undergone a full body search before entering the military base at Khost and was, therefore, able to move inside the base with the explosives belt undetected. The Taliban claimed responsibility saying that one of its members carried out the attack.

Special Report

Barack Obama wins Nobel Peace Prize

The Nobel Committee in Oslo (Norway) announced on October 9, 2009, that United States President Barack Obama won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize for his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples." For his part, President Barack Obama said that he was "surprised and deeply humbled" to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize less than 10 months into his presidency. He said that the award was a "call to action" and urged international action in facing the global challenges that "cannot be met by one person or by one nation alone."

Barack Obama joins three American presidents and one vice president in a select club of peace prize laureates. Theodore Roosevelt was the prize laureate in 1906 for negotiating an end to the war between Russia and Japan. In 1919, Woodrow Wilson earned the Peace Prize for his work towards the formation of the League of Nations. Jimmy Carter garnered the 2002 Peace Prize after he left office for his work in advancing peace and democracy in countries across the world. In 2007, former Vice President Al Gore earned the Peace Prize for his work on climate change after he left office.

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The announcement was regarded as something of a surprise with detractors claiming that President Obama had only been in power for a few months and, therefore, had not necessarily accomplished anything of substance. Other critics of the award going to Obama have said that he received the award while two acting as Commander in Chief over two wars. But it should be noted that the Nobel Peace Prize is not necessarily awarded to pacifists or on the basis of accomplishments. It is also not a humanitarian reward. Indeed, it is a political award, oriented to achieving certain broadly-defined liberal and democratic outcomes.

To these ends, the Nobel Committee has made a point of awarding some recipients who are "in process" in their pursuits, essentially encouraging the peace process along. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi's plight to free Burma from the rule by military junta has yet to be realized, yet her distinction as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate has only augmented her influence. Likewise for the case of Iranian dissident, Shirin Abadi. As noted by Kristian Berg Harpviken of the International Peace Institute in Oslo in regard the selection of Obama - "They want the prize to have an impact on things that are about to happen and want to affect events." Accordingly, this is part of the revitalized activist thrust of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.

Nevertheless, the Nobel Committee was quick to point out that it had chosen Obama precisely for his significant accomplishment in shifting the climate of international relations to one of diplomacy and engagement reliant on international instruments of peace and stability, and away from muscular militarism and hegemony. To that end, the Nobel Committee said that Barack Obama "created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play."

The Nobel Committee also said that it "attached special importance to Obama's vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons." To that end, the committee noted that Obama's vision and work related to a nuclear weapons-free world has "powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations."

The Nobel Committee appeared to issue a tacit rebuke against the previous Bush administration -- sustained by a nod to the new Obama administration -- in regard to environmental policy. The committee noted that Obama's initiatives were responsible for the fact that United States was now playing a "more constructive role" in meeting climate change challenges.

But in addition to these accomplishments, the Nobel Committee explained its central reason for choosing Barack Obama as its 2009 Peace Prize recipient. It said, "Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future." It continued, "His diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority of the world's population." Perhaps most importantly, the Nobel Committee underlined its core rationale for selecting Barack Obama as the 2009 Peace Prize recipient when it said, "For 108 years, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has sought to stimulate precisely that international policy and those attitudes for which Obama is now the world's leading spokesman." In this way, the Nobel Committee was suggesting that Obama was leading global consensus on how to address and resolve global conflicts and challenges, and he was leading this charge while embodying the Nobel Peace Prize ethos.

On Dec. 10, 2009, United States President Barack Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway . President Obama acknowledged the irony of receiving the lauded peace prize at a time when he had ordered more troops to fight the ongoing war against militant terrorists in Afghanistan. By way of explanation, he attempted to thread together the notion of a just war with the tragic realities of conflict. He explained: "A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaida's leaders to lay down their arms." He then said, "To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history." At the same time, President Obama noted that this understanding had to go hand in hand with the realization that "no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy."

President Obama also linked the war in Afghanistan with the matter of religious extremism by railing against the use of religion "to justify the murder of innocents." He went onto note, "Such a warped view of religion is not just

incompatible with the concept of peace but the purpose of faith -- for the one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion is that we do unto others what we would have them do unto us."

President Obama additionally addressed one of the themes that won him the Nobel Peace Prize in the first place -- nuclear disarmament by mentioning the security conflicts posed by the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama in the first year of his presidency has been a matter of consternation, with some critics alleging that the United States president had not been in office long enough to deserve the honor. At the ceremony in Oslo, the head of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, Thorbjørn Jagland, said, "Many have argued that the prize comes too early, but history can tell us a great deal about lost opportunities. It is now, today, that we have the opportunity to support President Obama's ideas. This year's prize is indeed a call to action for all of us."

Special Report

Attempted Terrorist Bombing of U.S. Airliner

The Attempted Terror Attack

On Dec. 25, 2009, a Nigerian national on a flight from Amsterdam in the Netherlands to Detroit in the United States attempted to carry out a bomb attack. The Christmas Day incident occurred when Northwest Airlines Flight 253, carrying 278 passengers and 11 crew, was less than half an hour from arriving at its destination. A suspect, identified as 23-year old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, tried to ignite an incendiary device, and burnt his leg in so doing. No one else was hurt in what United States officials described as a failed terrorist attack. It appeared that the attempted bomb attack was thwarted when one passenger, Dutch tourist Jasper Schuringa, jumped across several rows of seats to tackle the suspect, and other passengers then helped to fully subdue him. A report by the Associated Press noted that the lives of the passengers and crew about Flight 253 were actually saved because the explosive device failed to detonate due to an apparent malfunction. Nonetheless, Schuringa was hailed as a hero for his quick reaction to the unfolding crisis aboard the flight.

The aircraft was soon cleared for emergency landing at Detroit Metropolitan Airport where Abdulmutallab was taken into official custody and treated for the aforementioned burns at the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor. While there, United States District Judge Paul Borman officially charged Abdulmutallab with placing a destructive device on an aircraft, and attempting to destroy a passenger jet by detonating a bomb. According to the Associated Press, Abdulmutallab was asked in English if he understood the charges being brought against him and responded, "Yes, I do." Abdulmutallab's lawyer later said he had been transferred to a federal prison in Milan, Michigan.

Abdulmutallab reportedly told United States authorities that he was acting on behalf of the notorious terrorist enclave, al-Qaida. Indeed, ABC news reported that Abdulmutallab told authorities that he spent one month being trained by al-Qaida in Yemen. Abdulmutallab also apparently explained that he acquired the explosive powder from al-Qaida operatives in Yemen, which he attached to his leg and mixed in a concoction with liquid chemicals, with the intent of causing an explosion. Subsequent media reports indicated that the highly explosive substance was pentaerythritol (PETN) -- the same substance used by the failed shoe bomber, Richard Reid, exactly eight years earlier in December 2001, when he attempted to bring down a flight from France to the United States. CNN reported that the amount of PETN in this 2009 case was certainly enough to destroy the aircraft, presumably killing all those on board.

Counter-terrorism authorities in the Netherlands confirmed that Abdulmutallab first boarded a KLM flight in Lagos, Nigeria, bound for Amsterdam. It was not known at the time of writing if Abdulmutallab had the explosives attached to his body when his originating flight departed from Nigeria at the very start of the journey. In fact, the logistical details were complicated by the revelation that Abdulmutallab actually flew from Ghana to Nigeria on a one-way ticket.

Nevertheless, once Abdulmutallab arrived in the Netherlands, he transferred to the Northwest flight headed to the United States. According to the Justice Department in the United States, Abdulmutallab at that point had "a device attached to his body" when he boarded the flight in Amsterdam bound for Detroit. He presumably was allowed to board that flight because he had a valid United States visa.

There were serious questions being raised regarding the ease with which the transportation of explosives was able to elude detection. It was possible that security conditions in Nigeria helped in this regard. That is to say, the Lagos airport has long held the dubious distinction of being one of the least efficient travel centers in the world, where lax security runs rampant, largely as a result of widespread corruption. On the other hand, later evidence showing the explosives had been carried in a specially-made pouch within the alleged bombers undergarments would suggest that detection would be almost impossible using a regular magnetometers, and would require more intrusive body scanning techniques.

Accordingly, security at airports worldwide was expected to increase. For his part, United States President Barack Obama ordered that air travel be subject to heightened security measures. Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration in the United States warned that additional screening procedures would be implemented, however, they declined to specify particulars, suggesting that the intent was to preserve the element of surprise for obvious security reasons. Certain international aircraft carriers, though, such as Air Canada and British Airways, noted on their websites that passengers on international flights would be subject to much more intense security, and would be prevented from accessing carry-on luggage or getting up from their seats at certain points during flights. Delays, particularly on trans-Atlantic flights, were being anticipated.

White House spokesperson Robert Gibbs announced that a review of air safety was underway. On one front, there would be an investigation into the systems in place for detecting explosives before passengers board flights. On another front, there would be an examination of the terrorist identification protocols, in light of the revelation that Abdulmutallab was already listed in a broad terrorist database and yet allowed to board a flight. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano explained in an interview with CNN that despite the fact that Abdulmutallab's own father had warned the United States' embassy in Nigeria that his son might have jihadist inclinations, it was not sufficient actionable information to have moved him to the terrorism "no fly" list. The actual criteria for inclusion in these various databases -- some overseen by the Director of National Intelligence and some by the Federal Bureau of Investigation -- was not made known to the public.

Nevertheless, the fact that Abdulmutallab's own father -- a well-known Nigerian banker -- had gone to such lengths to notify United States officials of his suspicions, along with revelations that Abdulmutallab had purchased a ticket from Ghana using cash and was carrying only one carry-on piece of luggage, were matters expected to be subjects of grave critique in the coming weeks. Typically, such actions would be flagged as suspicious and indicative of a possible terrorist threat and so Secretary Napolitano's assurances that flying was still "very, very safe" were unlikely to go unchallenged. However, despite the perception of breaches in the air transport security system, preliminary examinations in the Netherlands -- where Flight 253 originated -- found that existing security procedures were correctly followed. The obvious conclusion, therefore, has been that current security technology does not facilitate the easy detection of explosive devices and substances. Indeed, as indicated above, most passengers in airports have to pass through only magnetometers, which detect metal and not explosives. Accordingly, there was likely to be intensified focus in the future on equipping airports with "puffer" machines that detect explosive powder residue, manual hand swabs to the same end, bomb-sniffing dogs as well as body scanners.

Meanwhile, attention was on Abdulmutallab himself, who was born into a life of relative privilege. He once studied engineering at a prestigious school in the United Kingdom, but his Islamic views had caught the attention of his own family, including his father, Alhaji Umaru Mutallab. Indeed, media reports suggested that he was estranged from his family, actually losing touch with them in the months he may have been living in Yemen. The official Saba News Agency in Yemen subsequently reported that Abdulmutallab had, in fact, been living in that country from August 2009 to the start of December 2009 while he attended the Sanaa Institute for the Arabic Language (SIAL). Nigerian authorities suggested that Abdulmutallab used surreptitious means to re-enter Nigeria before departing on the trip that would span three continents.

Yemen and al-Qaida:

The United States government has been reticent about drawing conclusions about a global terrorist plot in this case. Nevertheless, this attempt to carry out an in-flight bombing on Christmas Day appeared to be in keeping with al-Qaida's latest terrorist directives. The NEFA Foundation published an October 2009 al-Qaida article calling for operatives to use "small explosives" to kill "apostates" and Westerners at airports and in aircrafts. Moreover, Abdulmutallab -- the man at the center of the Christmas Day attempted terror attack -- has expressly conjured up al-Qaida in his interrogations with authorities. Finally, a Yemen-based branch of the network removed some prevailing doubts about the orchestration of the failed terrorist attack by claiming responsibility.

It should be noted that al-Qaida was not the only meaningful reference point offered by Abdulmutallab to the authorities during initial interrogations. Also of significance was his mentioning of Yemen as being the place he garnered the PETN, as well as the venue of his Islamic militant training. Yemen -- the ancestral home of Osama Bin Laden -- is strategically located at the end of the Arabian peninsula and stretches from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. It is also located in close proximity to another emerging al-Qaida haven -- Somalia. Accordingly, Yemen has increasingly factored into the discussions of global terrorism.

Al-Qaida's satellite base in Yemen may be attempting to gain ascendancy at a time when global attention is on the Afghan-Pak region. To this end, Anwar Eshki, the head of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, has argued that al-Qaida in Yemen "is stronger than it was a year ago" and intent on turning that country into a major base of operations against the West. Part of that strength may be derived from the fact that Saudi and Yemeni elements of al-Qaida have joined forces to form the merged entity, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. The Saudi authorities, who have carried out a crackdown on its elements, have suggested that many Saudi operatives have fled to Yemen. The Saudi authorities have sometimes accused Yemen of not doing enough to round up its own bastions of extremism.

In the aftermath of the failed terror plot aboard the airliner discussed above, the government of Yemen indicated that while it had the will to deal with al-Qaida, it was hampered by a lack of support. Nonetheless, the Yemeni authorities insisted that they have been working with regional and Western powers to crush militancy within its borders, noting that such action was in the country's own best interests since Islamic extremists pose a grave national security threat. It should also be noted that in the latter part of 2009, faced with the threat that Yemen was becoming a stronghold for Islamic extremists, United States intelligence was credited with helping Yemeni forces carry out military offensives against major al-Qaida bases in that country, much to the consternation of al-Qaida itself. But the Yemeni authorities have to contend with not only the al-Qaida threat, but also a secessionist movement in the south and a Shi'a Zaidi rebellion in the north. This complex political terrain has left large isolated swaths of land vulnerable for use by extremists of many stripes in Yemen.

Meanwhile, Evan Kohlmann, a senior investigator for the NEFA Foundation, warned that rivalry among al-Qaida's branches could be a driving force behind the uptick in Yemen-based al-Qaida activities. He said, "There's now a competition in the world of al-Qaida between various al-Qaida factions, with each trying to prove themselves and prove their worth." There could therefore be an attempt by Yemen-based al-Qaida to distinguish itself as an active base of anti-Western and Jihadist militancy.

This threat was amplified when, a week after the aforementioned attempted terrorist attack, the Yemeni authorities warned that hundreds of al-Qaida operatives were present in Yemen and could be plotting further terrorist attacks. This claim appeared to coincide with warnings made by Abdulmutallab -- the man behind the attempted Christmas Day attack -- who said that there were other al-Qaida operatives who stood ready to strike with fresh attacks.

Some of those al-Qaida operatives could well be among the hundreds already present in Yemen, as noted by the Yemeni authorities. But Yemen's location close to Somalia might also be a factor. The militant extremist Islamist group, al-Shabab, which has held sway in portions of Somalia, has warned it would send its fighters to assist fellow Islamic militants in Yemen. Sheikh Mukhtar Robow Abu Mansour of al-Shabab reportedly said: "We tell our Muslim brothers in Yemen that we will cross the water between us and reach your place to assist you fight the enemy of Allah."

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With attention now focused on the Islamic extremist threat emanating from Yemen, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for a summit to be convened in London at the end of January 2010 simultaneously with a pre-scheduled conference on the future of Afghanistan. The objective of the summit on Yemen would be identify Yemen's counter-terrorism requirements and to determine ways of dealing with the thrust towards extremism via aid and reform. Prime Minister Brown also urged all key international partners to be involved in this endeavor saying, "The international community must not deny Yemen the support it needs to tackle extremism." He also announced that the United Kingdom would commit 100 million British pounds and intelligence support to Yemen -- the most significant outlay by any global power to that Middle eastern country.

Meanwhile, General David Petraeus, head of United States military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, visited the president of Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh, to pledge American support in the fight against al-Qaida. One day earlier, Petraeus announced that the United States would double its counter-terrorism aid to Yemen in 2010.

Across the globe, clearly there was increasing anxiety about Yemen becoming a failed state -- the very environment within which violent extremist groups often find safe haven. To that end, Mark Pritchard, a British parliamentarian and the vice chairman of the Parliamentary Yemen Group, said: "If Yemen does become a failed State it will provide a safe haven for terrorists with close proximity to important shipping routes and neighboring oil-producing Saudi Arabia. The stakes for the region and the West are very high indeed."

For its part, the government of Yemen appeared to give tacit sanction for greater assistance from the Western powers with the Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi saying in an interview with the BBC, "We need more training. We have to expand our counter terrorism units and this means providing them with the necessary training, military equipment, ways of transportation - we are very short of helicopters. The United States can do a lot, Britain can do a lot, the European Union can do a lot in that regard."

Such help would be of paramount importance given the reports in the early days of 2010 that al-Qaida was planning an attack on the Yemeni capital of Sanaa. In an interview with ABC News, John Brennan, the top counter-terrorism adviser to United States President Obama, said, "We know that they [al-Qaida operatives] have been targeting our embassy, our embassy personnel." Because of this threat, Brennan announced that the United States was temporarily closing its embassy in Sanaa. The British and French governments reportedly moved to do the same. Brennan's claims were consistent with a call from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula encouraging Muslims to assist in "killing every crusader who works at their embassies or other places."

Latest Developments:

On Jan. 5, 2010, it was reported that Yemeni security forces killed several suspected al-Qaida militants as part of its ongoing effort to crush al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. According to reports, the Yemeni forces ambushed a cadre of militants in the Arhab district -- about 40 miles north of the Yemeni capital -- effectively igniting a violent clash with the militants, ultimately yielding the aforementioned deaths.

But even as this offensive operation was taking place, the Yemeni president was signaling that it was interested in engaging with al-Qaida in an effort to end the violence in his country. President Ali Abdullah Saleh suggested he would grant leniency to members of al-Qaida who were willing to enter talks with his government and renounce violence. In an interview that was broadcast on Abu Dhabi TV, he said: "Dialogue is the best way ... even with al-Qaida, if they set aside their weapons and return to reason." The move was essentially an extension of the Yemeni president's previous stance in dealing with al-Qaida. Accordingly, it was expected to be met with grave disapproval from Western powers who have viewed it as a failed strategy, given the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen.

Yemen is the base of both foreign and local al-Qaida fighters. The local fighters are often aided by relatives, typically as a result of tribal loyalty more than ideology. However, when these fighters are killed or arrested by government forces, these heavily-armed tribes often are emotionally driven to increase support of the militants. Meanwhile, Yemen has also been home to thousands of Islamic militants who are veterans of several "holy wars" in other countries and regions, including Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. While most of these Islamic militant veterans are no longer active, they nonetheless maintain their extremist views in keeping with al-Qaida ideology. As noted by Ali Saif Hassan, the manager of a Yemeni group that mediates between the government and opposition:

"It is difficult to draw the line between who is a fundamentalist and who is al-Qaida. It's a spectrum." As constituents of the country, these elements form part of the broader anti-American and anti-Western base of the country, over which President Saleh has only fragile control.

It is this matter of fragile control that informs President Saleh's stance. With a rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement in the south, extremists in other parts of the country, and actual control over only Sanaa, Yemeni President Saleh has moved cautiously in the fight against al-Qaida. This wary and cagey positioning has been largely due to President Saleh's concern that working closely with the United States and the West on anti-terrorism efforts could spark a backlash.

In fact, the Yemeni leader has to walk a political tightrope of sorts. He has had to crack down on the rebels, secessionists and militants in order to maintain national security, while simultaneously demonstrating anti-terrorism efforts for geopolitical reasons. Yet, in so doing, President Saleh cannot afford to alienate significant elements of Yemeni society. To this end, he must demonstrate the precise amount of cooperation with the Western powers to assuage them, while currying favor with the extremist elements of his own country. In many senses, it has been the same challenge facing other leaders in the region who must contend with a volatile population base while attending to the geopolitical and national security threats posed by militant Islamic terrorism.

The other territorial battles in Yemen have also factored into the country's complex landscape and challenging security situation. In January 2010, Yemeni security forces entered into the sixth month of conflict with Shi'ite rebels in the northern part of the country. This was part of the government's ongoing "Operation Scorched Earth" offensive aimed at ending the Houthi rebellion. The situation in the north has intersected to some degree with the increasing global attention on Yemen as an emerging base of al-Qaida extremist militants. The government of Yemen has had to balance fighting terrorism and rebellion with appeasing extremist elements of the society, amidst a country with rebels in the north and secessionists in the south. To satisfy these contradictory objectives, the Yemeni government has at times aligned itself with controversial Islamists. Among them has been Sheik Abdul-Majid al-Zindan whom the United States has classified as a terrorist due to his alleged connection to al-Qaida, and who has gained notoriety for his anti-Western rhetoric. But the Yemeni government has relied on its alliance with cleric like al-Zindani in the fight against the Shi'ite rebels in the north, to oppose the secessionists in the south, and to hold onto its tenuous grip on power.

Cast along the complicated landscape has been the growing international call for the government to take a harder stance against al-Qaida, and the reality that such a move could ignite a fierce and deleterious repercussions from the Islamic fundamentalist and tribal factions of Yemeni society. Indeed, as noted by Ali Mohammed Omar, a Yemeni who, according to a report by the Associated Press, fought in Afghanistan in the early 1990s and met Osama Bin Laden: "Any movement against al-Qaida will lead to the fall of the Yemeni regime." He went on to note that if the United States or its allies were to become too directly involved in Yemen, "the whole (Yemeni) people will become al-Qaida. Instead of 30 or 40 people, it would become millions."

Clearly aware of this potentiality, while the United States and the United Kingdom have increased support for anti-terrorism efforts in Yemen in the form of increased funding and training for counter-terrorism forces (noted above), there is no indication of an overt military presence in that country. In fact, in an interview with People magazine, United States President Obama made clear that he had no intention of deploying American troops to Yemen (or Somalia), despite the nations' growing importance as emerging centers of terrorism on the global landscape. To this end, President Obama said: "I have no intention of sending U.S. boots on the ground in these regions." Instead, he suggested that working with international partners on the situation in Yemen would be the best course. President Obama also emphasized that the main center of al-Qaida activity was still in the Afghan-Pak region.

The president's sentiment was reflected in statements by General David Petraeus, who has been directing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In an interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN, he said of the Yemeni government that it was "quite clear that Yemen does not want to have American ground troops there. And that's a ... good response for us to hear, certainly." He continued, "We would always want a host nation to deal with a problem itself. We want to help. We're providing assistance." Echoing what was clearly the Obama administration's position on the matter, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN,

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"Right now, as far as any kind of boots on the ground there, with respect to the United States, ... that's not a possibility."

In late January 2010, the Obama administration in the United States said that in addition to expanding military support to Yemen in the fight against al-Qaida, it would also bolster its economic assistance program in that country, with an eye on decreasing the influence of Islamist extremists. In this way, the United States Pentagon would provide increased military cooperation, training and counter-terrorism forces, while the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development would work on preparing a development plan that targeting tribal youth who are particularly vulnerable recruits to al-Qaida.

Foreign Policy Developments (2010):

Imbroglio With Israel

Roadmap for peace hits roadblock with East Jerusalem settlement plan; diplomatic imbroglio ensues between Israel and United States as a result

On March 8, 2010, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators agreed to indirect peace talks. Following a meeting with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Israeli Vice Premier Silvan Shalom confirmed that his country wanted to "move to direct talks" with the Palestinians. He said, "Israel would like to resume the negotiations directly immediately." He also called for a shortened period before both parties moved toward direct dialogue. At issue has been the so-called "roadmap for peace," which has been sanctioned by the Middle East Quartet made up of the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia, and which calls for the establishment of two states -- Israel and Palestine -- living side by side in peace and security.

Days later on March 11, 2010, this "roadmap for peace" appeared to have hit a roadblock when the Palestinian Authority made clear that indirect talks could not proceed unless Israel could commit to a total construction freeze of Jewish settlements. According to Ynetnews.com, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was not willing to negotiate "under the current circumstances" -- an apparent reference to the news that Israel had new construction plans for east Jerusalem. At the heart of the matter was a plan by Israel to build 1,600 new homes in in Ramat Shlomo in east Jerusalem, despite repeated pressure by the United States for a halt on Jewish settlements in the interests of peace.

For some time, Jerusalem has been a flashpoint in the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Jerusalem is the official capital city of the Jewish state of Israel, and Israel has laid claim to the eastern part of the city since the 1967 war. However, Palestinians have clamored for East Jerusalem to be the capital of a future Palestinian state. Palestinians have argued that settlement activity in east Jerusalem is illegal under international law. Israel, though, has disputed this view of international jurisprudence. Of course, to date, these competing claims over the contested part of the city have seen no resolution, and the status of Jerusalem has remained a sticking point in the peace process.

Key officials in the Obama administration in the United States have registered disapproval of this development, noting that it was an obstacle to the process of building trust, confidence, and ultimately peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed, the Obama administration in the United States railed against Israel in response to the announcement of settlement activity in east Jerusalem.

Vice President Joe Biden, who was ironically in Israel at the time for the purpose of advancing the peace process, denounced the development. On NBC News, David Axelrod, senior adviser to President Barack Obama, referred to Israel's settlement announcement as both destructive to the peace effort, and insulting to the United States, a likely reference to the timing of the announcement when Vice President Biden was in Israel. He said, "This was an affront, it was an insult but most importantly it undermined this very fragile effort." He continued, "We have just started proximity talks, that is shuttle diplomacy, between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and for this announcement to come at that time was very destructive." Earlier, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that this move by Israel was "deeply negative" for American-Israeli relations.

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For his part, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his apologies for the situation that unfolded and explained that the announcement had been accidental, however, even a promise for an inquiry into the timing of the announcement did little to assuage the White House. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said that the Israeli premier's regrets were only "a good start" and pressed for more constructive dialogue with an eye on peace. The situation was not helped by news reports that Prime Minister Netanyahu's brother in law, Hagi Ben-Artzi, referred to President Obama as "anti-Semitic." This declaration only exacerbated the tense climate of relations and Netanyahu was compelled to make it clear that he did not share the views of Ben-Artzi.

For his part, Prime Minister Netanyahu was trying to negotiate a difficult balancing act. On one hand, he could not afford to alienate Israel's most important and most powerful ally, the United States. This was a particularly pressing priority at a time when global action was needed to deal with the nuclear ambitions of Iran, whose leadership has been vitriolic in its anti-Israeli sentiment. But on the other hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu also had to deal with coalition partners at home from nationalist and Orthodox parties that embrace expanded settlement activity. In an effort to simultaneously downplay the diplomatic imbroglio unfolding with the United States, and to shore-up the right-wing elements of his fragile ruling coalition, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed members of a cabinet meeting as follows: "I propose not to be carried away and to calm down." He continued, "We know how to handle these situations, calmly, responsibly and seriously."

By March 16, 2010, the situation in Jerusalem was marked by a lack of calm as angry Palestinians in the Arab-dominated eastern part of the city set fire to garbage cans and tires, and also hurled stones and rocks at Israeli riot police. In response, Israeli riot police used tear gas and rubber bullets to try to quell the violence. The devolving security scene only served to underline the complicated scene unfolding in Israel.

Meanwhile, United States envoy George Mitchell, cancelled his scheduled trip to Israel as a result of the diplomatic imbroglio. On the issue of that diplomatic imbroglio, Secretary of State Clinton brushed aside claims that relations between the United States and Israel were in a state of crisis. She emphasized the "close, unshakeable bond" shared between the two countries. But at the same time, Clinton noted that her country wanted Israel and the Palestinians to demonstrate their clear commitment to the peace process. Days later, at an address before the pro-Israel lobby group, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Israel to make "difficult but necessary choices" if it desired a peace agreement with the Palestinians, emphasizing the "unsustainable" nature of the status quo. She also highlighted the "unshakable" bond between her country and Israel.

In a move intended to emphasize Israel's commitment in this regard, Prime Minister Netanyahu proposed "trust-building measures" with the Palestinians, in the context of renewed peace negotiations. Of course, the Palestinians noted it would be difficult to move forward with "proximity talks," given Israel's decision to expand settlement in Ramat Shlomo, as discussed above. An already-scheduled trip to the United States to address AIPAC, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered the opportunity for face-to-face talks with United States President Barack Obama, with an eye on resolving the diplomatic imbroglio. However, Netanyahu's decision not to call for a halt on the settlement plan in Jerusalem did not bode well for progress. Indeed, the closed nature of the talks suggested that the dissonance would not easily be ended.

At the broader level, the Middle East Quartet of peace mediators -- the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia - - has issued its own condemnation of Israel's construction plan in east Jerusalem. The Quartet made it clear that the matter would be reviewed during its forthcoming ministerial meeting, which took place on March 19, 2010, in Moscow.

Romanian president says his country will host United States missile interceptors

On February 4, 2010, President Traian Basescu of Romania said that his country would host missile interceptors as part of a new United States defense shield system. President Basescu explained that Romania's chief military and security entity, the Supreme Defense Council, agreed to such the proposal by the United States. While the proposal would still have to be ratified by the legislative branch of government, there was some degree of confidence that it would successfully pass through that branch of government.

President Basescu said in an interview with Radio Free Europe, "Terrestrial interceptors will be placed on Romania's territory as part of the anti-missile system. According to the calendar agreed with the American side, the components located on Romania's territory will become operational in 2015." While he noted that the missile defense system would protect Romanian territory, he emphasized that the move would not threaten Russia.

Indeed, the plan for Romania to host the missile defense system was a departure from a Bush-era program to station 10 long-range interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. These directives raised the ire of Russia, which threatened to relocate its own missiles closer to Europe. But the new proposal, which would instead involve Romania, appeared to be part of the Obama administration's approach to missile defense. Indeed, this new approach would focus on a combination of both fixed and movable Standard Missile 3 interceptors, as well as radars responding to the threat posed by short- and medium-range missiles. The location of fixed or ground-based interceptors in Romania was thought to be related to that country's proximity to Iran.

Russia and United States work on new arms treaty

On Feb. 24, 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged her Russian counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to move forward with efforts to finalize a new arms reduction treaty. During a briefing, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said the United States' top diplomat "emphasized to the foreign minister that our negotiators are close to reaching an agreement and encouraged Russia to continue to move ahead, push hard so we can reach an agreement in the next couple of weeks." That timeline seemed to coincide with Russian expectations, since a Russian lawmaker, Konstantin Kosachyov, noted that discussions were underway on a new treaty to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expired on Dec. 5, 2009.

In March 2010, Secretary of State Clinton was in Moscow for meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov. From Moscow, Clinton and Lavrov noted that a new START would soon be finalized.

At a joint press conference with Lavrov, Clinton said, "The results of the latest negotiation rounds lead us to believe we'll be reaching a final agreement soon." At issue is a plan that would reduce the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of close to 3,000, be reduced to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. There was, however, some dissonance on verification measures aimed at quantifying weapons and launch systems.

Meanwhile, as progress was being made on a successor treaty to START, United States President Barack Obama called for a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons, as part of a changing national security strategy. To this end, he said: "The United States reaffirms our resolve to strengthen the non-proliferation regime to meet the challenges of the 21st century as we pursue our ultimate vision of a world without nuclear weapons." As President Obama marked the 40th anniversary of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, he intimated new post-Cold War policy, saying: "Our forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review will move beyond outdated Cold War thinking and reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, even as we maintain a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent." President Obama also said he would work to seek ratification on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1996, but which had yet to be enforced. These statements appeared to reify President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world, which was laid out in a keynote speech in Prague in 2009. It also came ahead of a nuclear security summit, set to take place in Washington D.C. in April 2010.

The Iranian Nuclear Issue

On the issue of Iran, the international community, led by the United States, was looked toward imposing a new round of economic sanctions on Iran for its intransigence regarding its controversial nuclear development program. At the start of 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was reportedly discussing a sanctions proposal with allied nations aimed at placing pressure on the Iranian regime and the Revolutionary Guard. Indeed, Secretary Clinton emphasized the inclusion of the Revolutionary Guard in this proposal saying, "We have already begun discussions with our partners and with like-minded nations about pressure and sanctions. Our goal is to pressure

the Iranian government, particularly the Revolutionary Guard elements, without contributing to the suffering of the ordinary people, who deserve better than what they currently are receiving."

This proposal by the United States was being advanced in the wake of the fact that Iran missed the Dec. 31, 2009, deadline set by the United States for Iran to accept a compromise deal to transfer its low enriched uranium outside its terrain for processing into fuel rods with the purity of 20 percent.

Accordingly, five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany met for several hours on Jan. 16, 2010, to discuss the matter. The meeting ended without a clear agreement but Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov explained that most of the discussions were focused on the "second track" - a reference to the path of sanctions.

By February 2010, in defiance of the international community, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called on his country's nuclear head, Dr. Ali Akbar Salehi, to intensify uranium enrichment. The move was essentially a fulfillment of an earlier threat by Iran to enrich uranium at a higher purity level of 20 percent. At issue has been Iran's prevailing claim that it is entitled to carry out a civilian nuclear program, aimed at generating energy. This claim has been disputed by several countries of the West, and Iran's case has been compromised by revelations of clandestine nuclear development facilities.

This development came after Iran rejected a compromise deal to transfer its low enriched uranium outside its terrain for processing into fuel rods and, instead, imposed an ultimatum of its own. Specifically, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki warned that his country would enrich uranium at the higher purity level (20 percent) if the West did not meet its counter-demand that nuclear fuel be sold to Iran or nuclear fuel be swapped for Iran's low-enriched uranium. Of significance has been the fact that civilian nuclear power requires uranium enriched to about only three percent, whereas weapons grade uranium has to be enriched to 90 percent. Intensification beyond the three percent range has, therefore, signaled alarm bells across the globe.

Clearly, the situation marked a further deterioration of relations between Iran and the West. The United States called for united global action in the face of a possible Iranian nuclear threat. United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that while there was time for the proposed sanctions to work, the world would have to "stand together." During a visit to Italy, Gates said, "Pressures that are focused on the government of Iran, as opposed to the people of Iran, potentially have greater opportunity to achieve the objective."

In May 2010, as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan traveled to Tehran for negotiations on Iran's controversial nuclear program in that country, there were suggestions from Ankara that a compromise deal was at hand. The Turkish leader, along with Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, were playing key roles in trying to persuade Iran's government to agree to a deal that would transport its nuclear material abroad for processing. There were hopes that the two countries, which have enjoyed relatively friendlier diplomatic terms with Iran than the Western powers and Russia, might be positioned to successfully make the case for compromise.

This plan has seen several iterations over recent times, including provisions for the transfer of stockpiles of low enriched uranium to Russia and France for processing. It should be noted that until this time, the proposal has never garnered Iranian concurrence. In this new arrangement, the low enriched uranium would be transferred to Turkey. With Iran already trying to avert the prospect of new sanctions being imposed by the United Nations, it was possible that there would be greater receptivity to the resurrected compromise deal, albeit with a more neutral country as the partner state. There were hopes that such a proposition would allay the West's fears that Iran's nuclear ambitions include nuclear weapons proliferation. These anxieties have only been strengthened by revelations about secret nuclear facilities in Iran, and non-compliance with monitoring regulations set forth by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

However, the United States dismissed the deal brokered by Turkey, and drafted its own proposal to levy new sanctions against Iran. That United States-drafted proposal was tabled at the United Nations Security Council, prompting Turkey to call for a delay in the interests of further negotiations.

Such a delay was unlikely, as United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the strong draft proposal against Iran was already backed by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. For his part, United States President Barack Obama made it clear that his country intended to pursue the new sanctions against Iran, irrespective of the new nuclear deal with Turkey and Brazil. President Obama reportedly informed Turkish Prime Minister during a phone call that the new agreement failed to build "necessary confidence" that Iran would abide by its international obligations. Further, the United States leader acknowledged Turkey's and Brazil's efforts, but noted that the new deal left open a host of "fundamental concerns" about Iran's atomic ambitions and broader nuclear program.

From Tehran, the head of Iran's atomic energy organisation, Ali Akbar Salehi, dismissed the prospect of looming sanctions and predicted that such a move by the international community would ultimately backfire. Salehi said, "They won't prevail and by pursuing the passing of a new resolution they are discrediting themselves in public opinion." Nevertheless, the draft resolution on sanctions against Iran was reported to be already circulating in the chambers of the United Nations Security Council.

Nevertheless, by June 2010, the United Nations had passed sweeping sanctions against Iran, which reflected the United States' draft proposal and the expressed objective to specifically target the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which has emerged as a power center within that country.

Soon thereafter, the United States announced its own unilateral sanctions to be imposed on Iran. The new sanctions by the Treasury Department targeted Iran's nuclear and missile programs, by concentrating on the financial sector, the shipping industry and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Other Key Foreign Policy Developments --

On March 2, 2010, the United States agreed to move forward with the sale of missiles, helicopters and ships to Taiwan, effectively sparking the anger of the Chinese government in Beijing. Despite a thawing of relations generally between Washington D.C. and Beijing, this move was expected to raise bilateral tensions, which had been strained over a number of issues ranging from Internet censorship to climate change. The United States moved to dispatch envoys to Beijing to calm the situation. But on the other side of the equation, the Chinese government made it clear that arms sales to Taiwan would deleteriously affect Sino-American relations.

For its part, however, the United States has been compelled to ensure Taiwan's ability to defend itself under the Taiwan Relations Act. In an effort to act in accordance with this accord, while also recognizing China's sensitive relationship with Taiwan, United States President Barack Obama attempted the geopolitical balancing act by reaffirming his country's acknowledgment of "only one China."

Also in March 2010, the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States Congress approved a resolution, which characterized the World War I killing of Armenians by Turks as a genocide. At issue for many Armenians has been the sense of betrayal over the deaths of 1.5 Armenians between 1915 and 1923 at the hand of the Ottoman Empire. Armenia has steadfastly called for international recognition of what they term as the Armenian genocide, but Turkey has vociferously denied this bloody legacy. The Armenian call for recognition came to fruition in the United States, largely as a result of the determination of the Armenian diaspora, particularly in California. But with it has come the outrage of the Turkish government. With an eye on preserving its crucial NATO alliance with Turkey, the Obama administration said it intended to block the bill from passage into law. This scenario repeated a similar situation two years prior when the same committee approved a similar resolution, but which did not go forward due to concerns of the previous Bush administration for precisely the same reason. President Barack Obama, however, had said he intended to characterize the mass deaths of Armenian Christians as a genocide

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during his 2008 campaign for the presidency. As such, this new position by his administration was regarded as something of a policy reversal. Secretary of States Hillary Clinton explained the shift noting that circumstances had "changed in very significant ways." Specifically, she pointed toward the 2009 accord, which normalized bilateral relations between Armenia and Turkey.

March 2010 was also marked by violence across the border. A couple from the United States and one Mexican national were killed in two separate incidents in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, just across the border from El Paso in Texas. All of the three victims were affiliated with the United States Consulate in Ciudad JUarez. United States President Barack Obama expressed "outrage" and "deep sadness" at the killings. A statement releeeased ed by the White House read as follows: "The president is deeply saddened and outraged by the news of the brutal murders of three people associated with the United States Consulate General in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, including a U.S. citizen employee, her U.S. citizen husband and the husband of a Mexican citizen employee. He extends his condolences to the families and condemns these attacks on consular and diplomatic personnel serving at our foreign missions. In concert with Mexican authorities, we will work tirelessly to bring their killers to justice."

On March 28, 2010, United States President Obama made a surprise trip to Afghanistan to show resolve for the peace and security effort in that country. It was his first trip to Afghanistan since becoming president and lasted only a few hours; it was not pre-announced for ostensible security reasons. Addressing United States troops at the Bagram air base close to Kabul, the president thanked them for their service and sacrifice to the United States saying, "My main job here today is to say thank you on behalf of the entire American people." To that end, President Obama emphasized that the central mission of the United States forces in Afghanistan against al-Qaida and the Taliban, noting that it was ultimately aimed at "keeping America safe and secure." President Obama also met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, whom he invited to the United States for talks in May 2010. President Obama indicated that he wanted to press for progress on not only the peace and security front, but also in terms of corruption and narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan.

In a strange twist, following this visit from President Obama, Afghan President Karzai accused the West of election fraud plot and threatened to join Taliban. Karzai's rhetoric would likely feed sentiment that the Afghan leader was an unpredictable and erratic player on the geopolitical scene. It would certainly do little to help the increasing perception by the West that he was not acting in good faith and could not be counted on as a stable partner for the peace effort in Afghanistan. The actual degree of damage to relations between Washington D.C. and Kabul was yet to be measured at the time of writing.

On June 28, 2010, ten individuals using aliases were arrested in the United States for allegedly spying for the Russian government. According to the Justice Department of the United States, the ten individuals were charged with conspiracy to act as unlawful agents of a foreign government. Eight of the ten suspects were reported to have had "long-term, deep-cover assignments" in the United States. As well, nine of the ten suspects were charged with conspiracy to launder money. Five of the suspects appeared in a New York federal court where they were ordered to remain in jail pending hearings set for the end of July 2010. Other suspects soon faced court in Virginia. The arrests came after an investigation that went on for several years and, if convicted, the suspects could face five years in prison.

Authorities said they were in pursuit of an eleventh suspect. That eleventh suspect was soon arrested in Cyprus and released on bail; he was subsequently reported to be missing after failing to present for a scheduled "check in" meeting with the Cypriot police. An arrest warrant was issued for that individual as a result but reports soon emerged that he may have fled that country. The Cypriot authorities were now under fire for mishandling the situation; members of the opposition party in that Mediterranean country railed against the fact that an alleged spy was allowed bail rather than being subject to a detention order.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on a trip to Eastern Europe, made clear that the U.S. was committed to positive ties with Russia, the emerging spy scandal notwithstanding. Secretary Clinton said, "We're committed to building a new and positive relation with Russia." She continued, "We're looking toward the future." For its part, Russia has also indicated that the scenario would not affect closer bilateral relations with the United States.

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By the first week of July 2010, plans were in the works for a Cold War era "spy swap" in which ten Russian agents would be deported in exchange for the return of United States agents being held in Russia. Those agents sought by the United States included a Russian nuclear scientist, a former Russian military intelligence agent and a former KBG agent who were jailed for spying on behalf of the United States. There was also a former military intelligence agent jailed for spying for the United Kingdom.

The exchange ensued in Austria with the ten Russian agents boarding a flight to Moscow, and the four agents released by the Kremlin boarding an American aircraft close to the main passenger terminals at the airport in Vienna. The entire exchange took a total of 90 minutes.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the two countries involved cast the spy swap in positive terms. Russia said that the ten persons in United States custody facing charges there had been freed "for humanitarian considerations." Russia also lauded the move as being illustrative of "the general improvement of Russia-United States relations." Meanwhile, the United States was dismissing claims that only four agents were released in exchange for the ten Russians. United States authorities made clear that then four in question were "high value" and garnered far more usable information in comparison to the ten Russians. Moreover, the White House in the United States was playing up the fact that knowledge of the spy ring and plans for the spy swap had been in the works for several months before the Russians were ever arrested.

In the third week of July 2010, the United States (U.S.) announced that it was imposing new sanctions against North Korea. The announcement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came in the aftermath of her visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates North Korea from South Korea. Secretary of State Clinton explained that the sanctions would target North Korea's sale and purchase of arms, and were aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation and discouraging provocative actions by North Korea.

South Korea accused North Korea of provocative action over the sinking of its Cheonan warship months earlier, which an international investigation ultimately blamed on North Korea despite Pyongyang's denial of culpability. As one the most sanctioned countries in the world, these new sanctions were likely intended to intensify the pressure on North Korea in response to the Cheonan incident. In fact, as indicated by Secretary of State Clinton, they were aimed at compelling Pyongyang to take responsibility for the sinking of the warship that left 47 dead. For its part, North Korea warned that fresh sanctions would be interpreted as an act of war.

Tensions on the peninsula were unlikely to decrease since the U.S. and South Korea conducted joint naval exercises, which North Korea characterized as "dangerous sabre-rattling." But defense officials of United States and South Korea said that the military drills were intended to deliver a clear message to North Korea that its "aggressive" behavior should cease. Indeed, the North Korean official news agency reported the following statement from the government in Pyongyang: "The army and people of the DPRK will legitimately counter with their powerful nuclear deterrence the largest-ever nuclear war exercises to be staged by the U.S. and the South Korean puppet forces."

In November 2010, a nuclear scientist from Stanford University in the United States, Dr. Siegfried Hecker, said that during a visit to North Korea, he was shown a new nuclear facility. There -- at the new nuclear facility at the Yongbyon nuclear complex to the north of the capital of Pyongyang -- he viewed "more than 1,000 centrifuges" for enriching uranium -- elements needed for the production of nuclear weapons.

Since the nuclear facility did not exist when international nuclear weapons inspectors were expelled from North Korea in 2009, it was clear that it had been constructed quickly. But Dr. Hecker noted that the facility boasted a high level of sophistication, and as reported in the New York Times, it included an "ultra-modern control room." According to Dr. Hecker, the facility appeared oriented for the use of civilian nuclear power. Noting that there was no sign of plutonium production, which is needed for weapons proliferation, Dr. Hecker nonetheless cautioned in an interview with the Associated Press that the new facility could be "readily converted to produce highly enriched uranium bomb fuel."

Dr. Hecker additionally shored up previous reports that North Korea has been constructing a light-water nuclear reactor. His observations on the ground in North Korea appeared to coincide with satellite imagery depicting the

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construction of the reactor at Yongbyon. Typically, light-water reactors are associated with civilian energy usage, however, uranium enrichment is part of the process, it was not inconceivable that further enrichment could potentially ensue at weapons-grade levels.

To date, North Korea is believed to have sufficient weaponized plutonium for about six atomic bombs, although there has been little evidence to suggest that the country has actively pursued a weapons program. That being said, Western powers have been advocating a resumption of six-party talks dealing with North Korea's nuclear program. Those talks stalled as relations between North Korea devolved due to the sinking of a South Korean warship earlier in the year.

In November 2010, a senior United States Department of State envoy, Stephen Bosworth, was in Asia on a trip aimed at reviving the multilateral negotiations. However, those efforts were placed on hold due to the Nov. 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (in South Korea's jurisdiction) by North Korea. By the close of the month, tensions on the Korean peninsula remained high, as South Korea and the United States carried out joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea, to the south of the disputed maritime border. North Korea said it viewed the previously -arranged military exercises as a provocation and warned of retaliation if there was any violation of its territorial waters. A statement from Pyongyang broadcast by the state-controlled KCNA news agency read as follows: "We will deliver a brutal military blow on any provocation which violates our territorial waters." But in December 2010, South Korea was taking a highly assertive position, warning that North Korea would face a harsh response, including air strikes, if it dared to act aggressively in the future.

With fears of renewed war on the Korean peninsula at hand, the landscape became even more complicated when in mid-December 2010, South Korea said that it suspected North Korea of secretly enriching uranium at locations beyond its main nuclear site at Yongbyon. South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan would not confirm a media report that North Korea was home to three more plants where uranium enrichment could take place, however, he admitted to having suspicions along these lines. During a news conference, he said, "It is a report based on what is still intelligence and let me just say that we have been following this issue for some time." Should this claim be proved correct, North Korea could conceivably possess material -- potentially for building more nuclear bombs. Moreover, such actions would fly in the face of renewed nuclear disarmament talks, which were already on a downward slide as a result of North Korea's latest aggressive actions (as discussed above).

Special Report: U.S. Policy on Afghanistan:

This Special Report commences with a briefing on the new command structure for Afghanistan, following the exit of General Stanley McChrystal and the naming of his replacement, General David Petraeus. It includes an inquiry into counterinsurgency strategy for fighting the Taliban and al-Qaida, and its use of "human terrain teams." The report additionally considers accusations of the Pakistani intelligence agency's complicity with the Afghan Taliban. Also considered in this report are the politically-driven financial constraints at home in the United States related to the funding of the war effort. These issues collectively have influenced emerging questions about the United States' policy in Afghanistan and the timeline for continued engagement there.

New commander for Afghanistan: Petraeus in; McChrystal out --

On June 23, 2010, United States President Barack Obama announced that General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of United States forces in Afghanistan, was relieved of his duties. The president also announced the nomination of General David Petraeus, commander of United States Central Command, to take over command of the war in Afghanistan against the resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida. President Obama explained that he had decided to replace Gen McChrystal "with considerable regret." The president explained that McChrystal failed to "meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general." President Obama additionally called on the Senate to quickly confirm Petraeus to his new position in Afghanistan.

The announcement came following a meeting between the president and his Afghanistan war advisers, and after McChrystal was summoned from Afghanistan to Washington D.C. McChrystal first met with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and then with President Obama at the White House. There was some suggestion that McChrystal would participate in the monthly strategy meetings of President Obama's Afghan war advisers, however, media

reports indicated that he left the White House right after the meeting with the president. McChrystal apologized for controversial statements in a recent Rolling Stone article saying, "It was a mistake reflecting poor judgment and should never have happened." McChrystal also asserted in an official statement that he held a "desire to see the mission succeed."

President Obama said that the difficult decision to relieve McChrystal of his command duties was driven by the controversial remarks published in a Rolling Stone article written by journalist Michael Hastings. The remarks were attributed to McChrystal and his aides. In the article titled "Runaway General," McChrystal and his aides were reported as having made disparaging comments about the civilian control of the United States military and the war effort. Of note were mocking statements made about senior members of the Obama administration, including Vice President Joe Biden and National Security Adviser Jim Jones. McChrystal also said he felt betrayed by U.S. ambassador to Kabul Karl Eikenberry. McChrystal additionally complained about having to reply to electronic communication from United States special representative for the Afghan-Pak region, Richard Holbrooke. Furthermore, the article referenced pejorative statements made by McChrystal and his aides about foreign allies fighting the war in Afghanistan alongside the United States forces under NATO command. Notably, McChrystal decried a dinner meeting with the French allies.

President Obama cast aside the notion that he was making the decision to dismiss McChrystal for personal reasons saying, "I don't make this decision based on any difference in policy with General McChrystal... nor do I make this decision out of any sense of personal insult." Instead, the president and commander-in-chief said McChrystal's conduct did not meet the standards of a commanding general. President Obama also foreclosed criticism from potential opponents of this decision by saying, "War is bigger than any one man or woman, whether a private, a general, or a president."

The politics of the situation demanded that President Obama dismiss McChrystal, or, risk being viewed as a weak commander in chief. While some McChrystal stalwarts argued that he has simply indulged in inappropriate discourse and should be allowed to finish the mission, other analysts noted that McChrystal was barely short of violating the United States Military Code of Justice Article 88, which calls for consequences for military personnel on duty maligning the president and vice president. As such, President Obama warned that some of the sentiments expressed by McChrystal and his aides via the Rolling Stone article "undermines the civilian control of the military that's at the core of our democratic system." In this way, President Obama reminded the country of the requirement that the military ranks remain neutral in a democracy.

A week after the announcement about the dismissal of McChrystal, Petraeus was unanimously confirmed as the new commander of the Afghanistan war with a vote of 99-0. Petraeus, as expected, garnered praise from both Republicans and Democrats, irrespective of their core disagreements on the policy toward Afghanistan.

During confirmation hearings, Petraeus painted a grim picture of the war effort in Afghanistan, noting that an "industrial-strength insurgency" by the Taliban and al-Qaida elements were in the offing. As well, Petraeus warned that the fighting and violence would "get more intense in the next few months." That being said, he indicated that it was part of the counterinsurgency process. He said, "My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it may get more intense in the next few months. As we take away the enemy's safe havens and reduce the enemy's freedom of action, the insurgents will fight back." Additionally, Petraeus did not foreclose the possibility of recommending that President Barack Obama extend United States troops engagement in Afghanistan beyond the August 2011 timeline for redeployment .

President Obama's decision to name Petraeus as Chrystal's replacement was hailed positively by politicians on both sides of the proverbial aisle in the United States, as well as the Karzai government in Afghanistan, which was anxious about effects on the war effort. The selection of Petraeus -- a celebrated military figure, thanks to his stewardship of the "surge" in Iraq, as well as his notoriety as one of the key authors of United States modern counterinsurgency strategy in war zones -- clearly banished such anxieties. The president's assertion that there was "a change in personnel but not a change in policy" further augmented the widespread support for his decision. Indeed, the White House sought to show that the controversy ensconced within the Rolling Stone article, titled "Runaway General," did not overtly extend to dissonance over the policy itself. Certainly, McChrystal expressed

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support for President Obama's strategy in Afghanistan saying, "I strongly support the president's strategy in Afghanistan and am deeply committed to our coalition forces, our partner nations, and the Afghan people." As well, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen affirmed that the Western military alliance's Afghan war strategy remained unchanged. Nevertheless, with the refocused attention on the war in Afghanistan came the refocused attention on the policy itself.

Costs and complications of counterinsurgency strategy and human terrain units --

It should be noted that the Afghan war strategy -- to fight resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida, improve security in Afghanistan, and develop governing stability in that country as an alternative to a culture of warfare -- is founded on the principles of counterinsurgency (COIN). The long-term objectives of COIN entail not only the clearing the field of insurgents by the military, but also political imperative of replacing the insurgent power base with more stable governance. Effective counterinsurgency strategies, therefore, require close collaboration of the military, political, economic and diplomatic spheres in the conflict zone. Clearly, puerile and openly-disdainful remarks about senior members of the Obama administration -- as uttered by McChrystal and his aides -- would not help the climate of effective cooperation, where support from the varying spheres would be critical to success of the mission.

Perhaps not surprisingly, President Obama emphasized the need for unity in the effort to secure and stabilize Afghanistan saying, "I won't tolerate division." Also not surprisingly, strong support for the selection of Petraeus as McChrystal's successor in Afghanistan, as discussed above, was regarded as a boon for the counterinsurgency strategy. But also as indicated above, the renewed focus on the war in Afghanistan brought with it fresh scrutiny of the policy itself.

One particularly key reason for a sense of skepticism about the war strategy and its associated timeline were matters of financial costs of the war, and the timeline attached to the Afghanistan strategy. That is to say, when President Obama first outlined his plan to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, he also noted that the United States would begin a redeployment of those troops by 2011. With debt worries prevalent in the United States and other NATO countries (as discussed below), questions arose as to whether or not the continued war effort in Afghanistan was a financially feasible endeavor. That is to say, the war and counterinsurgency mission requires a substantial outlay of resources that few governments (including the United States) could realistically commit to for the long term.

Complicating matters further has been the rising death toll of NATO forces in a war that has continued for close to a decade. That increased death toll has contributed to decreasing support for the Afghanistan war effort.

Moreover, analysts have pointed to the fact that COIN involves the idea of clearing the landscape of insurgents, followed by the establishment of a government as an alternative to the war culture. But clearance in one area often results in the relocation of the terrorists elsewhere and a perpetual pursuit of the strategic enemy. Meanwhile, the establishment of more stable governance, which has seen some success in the more politically mature Iraq, cannot easily be transposed to the largely tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, which does not have a strong legacy of governmental authority.

With an eye on understanding that tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, the United States military has employed anthropologists in the war zone to garner a more granular understanding of the complicated social and cultural dynamics of Afghanistan. Anthropologists' command of ethnographic fieldwork may be uniquely positioned to map the complex social structure of the country, ultimately helping the military to draw Afghans away from the Taliban.

Known as the army-funded "Human Terrain System," as discussed in an article published in Time Magazine by Jason Motlagh, the idea has been the source of debate with no consensus on its success. Academia has frowned on anthropologists being actively involved in the war theater. As noted in a report by the American Anthropological Association, because human terrain teams are ultimately oriented toward the objectives of the military mission, there is an ethical question of whether such work is "a legitimate professional exercise of anthropology." Nevertheless, General Petraeus has been reported to be a strong supporter of the human terrain teams, suggesting that they would for the immediate future continue to be part of the broader counterinsurgency strategy.

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That being said, most anthropologists would agree that more than a year of intensive fieldwork is needed before conclusions can be made; thus, the success of human terrain units in Afghanistan would require a longer timeline than currently expected for United States forces to remain "in country."

Financial Cost of the War in Afghanistan --

In late June 2010, legislators in the United States voted to cut almost \$4 billion in aid to the government of Afghanistan. The move was in response to allegations of corruption by the Afghan government, and in the aftermath of a report by the Wall Street Journal that significant funds had been flown out of the airport at Kabul. The report alleged that Afghan officials and their allies were diverting funds earmarked for aid and logistics to financial safe havens outside the country.

Explaining the Congress' decision to make these cuts, Congresswoman Nita Lowey, the chair of the subcommittee responsible for aid appropriations, said, "I do not intend to appropriate one more dime until I have confidence that US taxpayer money is not being abused to line the pockets of corrupt Afghan government officials, drug lords and terrorists." Lowey additionally called for an audit of the billions of dollars already expended in Afghanistan.

While the funding cuts would not directly affect military operations of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, it could very well affect infrastructure projects, which are part of the nation building efforts in Afghanistan. To this end, Congressman Mark Kirk, made note of Kandahar's electrical system; he said that obstacles to its construction, and other such infrastructure projects, could negatively affect the war, which included the effort to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

The issue has evoked questions about the financial costs of the war at large at a time when debt worries plague not only in the United States, but also allied countries with troops operating in Afghanistan, as discussed in the section above.

As NATO countries, including the United States, have been forced to consider austerity measures at home, the financial costs of the war in Afghanistan have taken on added importance. In fact, that significance was apparent on July 1, 2010, when President Barack Obama requested \$33 billion in military funding to support the surge of 30,000 additional troops in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's complicity with Afghan Taliban raises questions about U.S. strategy in region --

Since June 2010, Afghanistan's geopolitical relationship with Pakistan has taken center stage. At issue were revelations that the Pakistani intelligence service, known by the acronym ISI, has been funding, training, and providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. For several years, there have been suspicions about such a clandestine relationship between the two entities, however, the closeness and extensive nature of their ties was something of a revelation. Indeed, in a report issued by the London School of Economics support for the Afghan Taliban was described as "official ISI policy."

As noted by the author of the report, Matt Waldman of Harvard University, "This goes far beyond just limited, or occasional support. This is very significant levels of support being provided by the ISI." Waldman also asserted, "We're also saying this is official policy of that agency, and we're saying that it is very extensive. It is both at an operational level, and at a strategic level, right at the senior leadership of the Taliban movement."

The report also included references to interviews with Taliban field commanders who said that ISI agents attended Taliban council meetings. Shoring up the veracity of this claim was the following citation from the report: "These accounts were corroborated by former Taliban ministers, a Western analyst, and a senior United Nations official based in Kabul, who said the Taliban largely depend on funding from the ISI and groups in Gulf countries." Corroborating evidence was also available from a source unrelated to the LSE report. In an interview with Reuters, the head of Afghan intelligence, Amrullah Saleh, who had just resigned from that position, said the ISI was "part of the landscape of destruction" in Afghanistan and accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban leaders in safe houses.

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Some observers have noted that with the impending exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan expected in 2011, Pakistan's actions may be related to its desire to more deeply influence Afghanistan. However, ISI activities related to Islamic militant extremists are not recent developments in response to the current landscape. Indeed, the ISI has been accused of funding and training Islamic militant extremists in Afghanistan from as far back as the 1979 Soviet invasion. That being said, since the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Pakistan has accepted billions of dollars in aid funding from the United States, supposedly for its support in the fight against terror enclaves like al-Qaida and its Taliban allies. Clearly, a continued relationship between the Pakistani ISI and the Afghan Taliban would run counter to its expressed objectives of helping the United States quell the threat of terrorism emanating from such entities in the Afghan-Pak region. As stated in the LSE report, "Pakistan appears to be playing a double-game of astonishing magnitude."

Update on the war in Afghanistan --

In July 2010, the Iceland-based website, known as Wikileaks, released six years worth of classified United States documents, numbering around 90,000, dealing with the war in Afghanistan. Several news organizations were given access to the documents prior to actual publication, although United States authorities have argued that the dissemination of classified information was a threat to national security, an act of gross irresponsibility, and quite possibly, imbued with illegality. For its part, Wikileaks has defended the release of the documents, noting that it presents an unvarnished view of the war in Afghanistan since 2004.

Regardless of these competing views, the contents of the controversial documents have spurred debate about the United States role in the war in Afghanistan, as well as the conduct of the war itself. To these ends, two Wikileaks revelations could raise questions about the Obama administration's broader "Afghan-Pak" strategy, which considers not only "ground zero" of the war effort -- Afghanistan -- but also Pakistan next door. While the strategy appropriately focuses on the region instead of one country, taking into consideration shared extremist Islamic influences, shared Pashtun culture, and a landscape on the borderland that is a stronghold for Taliban and al-Qaida, two Wikileaks revelations strong doubts on the effectiveness of the strategy.

Firstly, according to the document review by the New York Times, even as Pakistan receives funds from the United States to help combat Islamic extremists militants and the threat of terrorism, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was said to be helping the Taliban, even collaborating with them on terror attacks and assassination plots.

Secondly, the tactic of using drone attacks in the tribal border regions has been lauded by the Obama administration as a means of crushing the enemy and eliminating high value Taliban and al-Qaida targets. However, according the review by Der Spiegel, 38 Predator and Reaper drones crashed while on combat missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, requiring "elaborate -- and dangerous -- salvage operations." On the ground, "in country," there are additional worries about the political costs of the civilian casualties caused by drone attacks.

The civilian costs provide a transition to discuss a third issue revealed by Wikileaks. According to the review by Marc Ambinder of The Atlantic, there were "at least 144 separate incidents" of civilian casualties that led to "cover-ups." Ambinder particularly took note of the unsuccessful attempt to kill Abu Layth Ali Libi, which resulted in the deaths of several civilians and that resulted in a "cover-up" by Afghan officials.

Finally, another key -- and bizarre -- revelation was that Osama Bin Laden -- the lynch pin of the extremist Islamic terror network, al-Qaida, has taken up the practice of gifting insurgents with wives. According to the associated report by The Guardian, an insurgent known to be an expert in radio-controlled improvised explosive devices (IEDs) was presented with an Arab wife by Bin Laden as an expression of thanks for his efforts in plotting terror attacks.

Conclusion --

Taken together, these issues both inform and fuel emerging questions about a timeline for continued engagement in Afghanistan. Indeed, these factors -- from financial costs to the strategic considerations -- have contributed to rising emphasis on a "date certain" exit from Afghanistan in 2011. Of course, on the other side of the equation, counterinsurgency advocates have argued that the objectives of the mission could require an extended timeline

beyond 2011. With no consensus on the matter, the McChrystal fracas has revealed deeper questions about the strategy and mission in Afghanistan. Despite the aforementioned assertions from the Obama administration and military ranks that there would be no change in policy on Afghanistan, there were now emerging questions about the precise nature of that policy itself, which have only been intensified with the Wikileaks revelations. Indeed, can counterinsurgency succeed in Afghanistan? if so, what are the benchmarks for success? Can the United States and its allies afford to fund the mission, given the demands on the domestic front? And is Pakistan -- an apparent ally -- actually undermining the effort to succeed in Afghanistan?

Note that in late 2010, NATO announced its plans to exit Afghanistan and transfer control over the anti-Taliban struggle to Afghan forces by the close of 2014. Afghan President Karzai formalized the agreement by signing a long-term security partnership with NATO. At the heart of the matter was NATO's contention that the Taliban not be allowed to simply wait out the presence of foreign forces. As stated by NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the security bloc would remain committed to security and stability of Afghanistan. He said, "One thing must be very clear - NATO is in this for the long term." The NATO head then continued, "If the enemies of Afghanistan have the idea that they can wait it out until we leave, they have the wrong idea. We will stay as long as it takes to finish our job." For his part, Afghan President Karzai expressed gratitude for NATO's contributions to his country's interest but stated, "I also informed them of the concerns of the Afghan people with regard to civilian casualties, with regard to detentions, with regard to, at times, NATO's posture."

It should be noted that this decision by NATO did not necessarily coincide with an official decision by the United States on the duration of combat operations by its forces in Afghanistan.

On that latter consideration, there was some indication of the direction of the United States in December 2010 when a much-anticipated report dealing with United States President Barack Obama's strategy for the war in Afghanistan surfaced in the public purview. That report concluded that United States forces were on track to begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011, as scheduled in the United States' president's war plan. This conclusion was reached despite the fact there were mixed reports of success in the field. On that matter, the summary of the report said that the United States forces continued to pursue and eliminate al-Qaida leadership figures, was successful in reducing the terror enclave's ability to carry out attacks from the Afghan-Pak region, and had halted the progress of the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the summary noted that those gains were tenuous and could well be reversed in the future.

Special Report: U.S. ends combat operations in Iraq after seven and a half years

In the early hours of Aug. 19, 2010 (Iraq time) the last major combat brigade of United States forces left Iraq and crossed the border into Kuwait. They were protected from above by Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters, and on the ground by both American military and the very Iraqi armed forces that they helped to train. The exit of the United States forces ensued in a phased basis over the course of several days. The final convoy of the United States Army's 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, was carrying 14,000 United States combat forces in Iraq, according to Richard Engel of NBC/MSNBC News, who was embedded with the brigade. A small number of United States combat troops were yet to depart Iraq, and approximately 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq until the end of 2011 in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Indeed, by Aug. 24, 2010, less than 50,000 United States troops were reported to be "in country" -- the very lowest level since the start of the war in 2003.

While violence continued in Iraq -- even in the days after the last American combat brigade left Iraq -- it was apparent that the Obama administration in the United States would not be deterred from the schedule for withdrawal, these fragile and chaotic conditions on the ground in Iraq notwithstanding. This decision has been a source of consternation among some quarters. In fact, a top military official in Iraq has questioned the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq, warning that local security forces were not able to handle the security challenges on their own for at least a decade. Echoing a similar tone, military officials from the United States said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that it was highly unlikely that Iraqi security forces were capable of maintaining Iraq's fragile stability after the exit of United States troops from Iraq in 2010. Nevertheless, the citizenry in the United States was war-weary and concerned over the costs of war at a time of economic hardship, while

President Barack Obama was intent on making good on his promises made while as a candidate and later, as president, to end the war.

The invasion of Iraq -- the defining policy decision of former President W. Bush in 2003 -- resulted in the ousting of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, from office. The invasion of Iraq was criticized as a violation of international law by many, and condemned as ill-conceived foreign policy by others who argued that Iraq had nothing to do with the terror attacks of 2001, and that Iraq was not home to weapons of mass destruction -- the two expressed reasons for going to war in Iraq, according to the Bush administration. Analysts further warned that the unintended deleterious consequence of the war and the ousting of Saddam Hussein would be ethno-sectarian strife and a strengthened Iran. Of course, on the other side of the equation, the Bush administration insisted on the necessity of the war in the interests of national security. These competing viewpoints notwithstanding, the war in Iraq ultimately left more than 4,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

The withdrawal of the last major combat brigade was regarded with great symbolism as an end to the combat mission of the war in Iraq that has gone on for seven and a half years. It also made clear that President Obama was fulfilling his central campaign promise to end the war in Iraq -- a vow that was reiterated in 2009 when President Obama set the deadline for the end of the combat mission in Iraq as Aug. 31, 2010. To this end, President Obama was fulfilling this promise even though Iraq was yet to form a new government several months after its parliamentary elections. It should be noted that the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq was set forth in the Status of Forces agreement signed two years ago. It should also be noted that the Obama administration has emphasized the fact that there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq -- even after the withdrawal of all remaining troops from Iraq in 2011. As well, as stated in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2010 passed by Congress and signed by President Obama on Oct. 28, 2009: "No funds appropriated pursuant to an authorization of appropriations in this Act may be obligated or expended ... to establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq." That being said, Iraq is home to one of the United States' most significant embassies.

President Obama addressed the nation on August 31, 2010 regarding the end of the active phase of United States operations in Iraq. That was the official deadline set by President Obama for the exit of combat forces from Iraq and the end to the war.

In this address to the nation from the Oval Office, President Obama asserted: "Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country." President Obama paid tribute to the military who carried out their mission, saying that he was "awed" by the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform in service of the United States. President Obama additionally noted that the United States itself paid a high price for the Iraq War saying, "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people." The president noted that he disagreed with his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, on the very premise of the war, but urged the nation to "turn the page" on that chapter of recent history. To these ends, he said: "We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home... Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the US and Iraq, we have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

For his part, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki noted that his country was "independent" and said that Iraqi security forces would now confront all the security threats facing the nation. Maliki said in his own address to the nation, "Iraq today is sovereign and independent. Our security forces will take the lead in ensuring security and safeguarding the country and removing all threats that the country has to weather, internally or externally." He also sought to reassure Iraqis that the security forces were "capable and qualified to shoulder the responsibility" of keeping Iraq safe and secure.

Special Report: Restarting the Middle East Peace Process --

In the third week of August 2010, Israeli and Palestinian officials were set to resume direct negotiations for the first time in 20 months and a decade after the last serious final status talks. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas

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had been invited to Washington on Sept. 2, 2010, for the commencement of the talks. Both parties agreed to a one-year timeline on the direct negotiations. Speaking from the State Department, Secretary of State Clinton said that the two leaders had been invited by President Barack Obama to come to the United States to "re-launch direct negotiations to resolve all final status issues, which we believe can be completed within one year."

Certain core issues -- known as "final status issues -- have continuously caused consternation by both sides, but would be taken up during the forthcoming meetings. These core issues included the status of Jerusalem, the construction of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories, the borders of a future Palestinian state, as well as the right of return. Analysts have warned that the prospects of an actual deal arising from the talks were unlikely, given the intensity of these contentious differences. Nonetheless, the movement back to the negotiating table was being viewed as productive.

With an eye on keeping the process moving in a productive direction, Secretary of State Clinton said, "It is important that actions by all sides help to advance our effort, not hinder it." She continued, "There have been difficulties in the past, there will be difficulties ahead. Without a doubt, we will hit more obstacles. But I ask the parties to persevere, to keep moving forward even through difficult times and to continue working to achieve a just and lasting peace in the region."

Also invited to join the talks were the leaders Egypt and Jordan -- two Arab countries with relatively positive ties to Israel. To this end, Secretary of State Clinton said, "President Obama has invited President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan to attend, in view of their critical role in this effort. Their continued leadership and commitment to peace will be essential to our success." Also invited to join the meetings was former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the special representative of the Middle East Peace Quartet, composed of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations." Excluded from the talks was the Islamic extremist group, Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, the United States envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, noted that if the two sides were unable to make progress, then the United States would be prepared to submit bridging proposals. Before such an end could transpire, there was a sense of cautious hope tinged with reality. Indeed, Prime Minister Netanyahu acknowledged, "reaching an agreement is a difficult challenge but is possible." Netanyahu's office issued a statement that read: "We are coming to the talks with a genuine desire to reach a peace agreement between the two peoples that will protect Israel's national security interests." Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said in an interview with the BBC: "I hope that Mr. Netanyahu will be our partner in peace... and we can do it."

Hamas attempts to derail the peace process --

Just ahead of the much anticipated peace talks, four Israelis were shot to death in the West Bank. Two Israeli men and two Israeli women died when their car came under gunfire as it traversed a road between the Palestinian settlement of Bani Naim and the Jewish settlement of Kyriat Arba, located near to the city of Hebron. The militant extremist Palestinian organization, Hamas, which has not been a player in peace negotiations, claimed responsibility for that attack. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak characterized the killings as an act of sabotage, aimed at derailing the peace process, and warned of retribution for those responsible. Then, just as the peace talks were due to begin, another act of violence ensued when two Israelis were shot and wounded at the Rimonim Junction in the West Bank, close to the Jewish settlement of Kochav Hashahar. Again, Hamas claimed responsibility for this attack.

Nevertheless, even in the face of this tragic violence in the West Bank, peace talks commenced in the United States amongst the stakeholders. United States President Barack Obama, the host and main peace broker, encouraged the Israeli and Palestinians leaders to remain on the course of engagement and not allow the opportunity to build a lasting peace "slip away." Promising that the United States would not waver in its commitment to broker peace, President Obama said, "This moment of opportunity may not soon come again." The United States leader also condemned the aforementioned bloodshed in the west Bank at the hands of Hamas.

Commencement of Peace Negotiations --

Political Conditions United-States

On September 1, 2010 -- ahead of the commencement of actual talks -- President Obama convened a meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. As noted above, that meeting was also included former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the special representative of the Middle East Peace Quartet.

President Obama said that the impending negotiations were "intended to resolve all final status issues." The United States president explained that the talks, which were scheduled to last for a year, were aimed at ultimately forging a permanent settlement to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the form of two democratic states -- one Israeli and one Palestinian -- living side by side in peace. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu struck a similar tone saying, "Our goal is to forge a secure and durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians." He continued, "We do not seek a brief interlude between two wars. We do not seek a temporary respite between outbursts of terror. We seek a peace that will end the conflict between us once and for all." For his part, Palestinian President Abbas said, "We will spare no effort and we will work diligently and tirelessly to ensure these negotiations achieve their cause." He also condemned the attacks on Israelis and called for an end to the bloodshed.

On September 2, 2010, the actual negotiations began between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, with United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acting as the main arbiter. Opening the talks, Secretary of State Clinton said, "Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. President, you have the opportunity to end this conflict and the decades of enmity between your peoples once and for all." Secretary of State Clinton asserted that her country had "pledged its full support to these talks," and said, "We will be an active and sustained partner." However, she cautioned that Washington would not impose a solution on the Middle East. Secretary of State Clinton issued the following warning: "The core issues at the center of these negotiations - territory, security, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements and others - will get no easier if we wait, nor will they resolve themselves."

Both Netanyahu and Abbas seemed to be fully cognizant of the challenge of the task at hand. Prime Minister Netanyahu said, "This will not be easy. True peace, a lasting peace, will be achieved only with mutual and painful concessions from both sides." President Abbas said: "We do know how hard are the hurdles and obstacles we face during these negotiations -- negotiations that within a year should result in an agreement that will bring peace."

Meanwhile, the two leaders of Israel and the Palestinian territories appeared to have respectively enjoyed cordial relations during the talks, despite Abbas' insistence that Israel cease its settlement activity in Palestinian territories. At issue has been the expiration of a partial freeze on building homes for Jewish settlers. The matter has been the cause of much consternation with the Israeli saying that they might not renew the freeze, and Palestinians threatening to walk away from the negotiating table if such the settlement activity resumed. But also of equal importance was Israel's demands that (1) any peace deal consider the particular and special security needs of Israel, and (2) that Palestinians recognize the unique identity of Israel as a Jewish state.

Nevertheless, by the close of the first round of talks, the United States deemed the exercise to be constructive. United States envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, characterized private talks between the two leaders -- Netanyahu and Abbas -- as "cordial" and observed that the meeting were conducted in a "constructive and positive mood." Moreover, Mitchell announced that both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas agreed not simply to continue to work toward peace in the abstract, but to meet again in just two weeks in the Middle East. Mitchell said that the next talks would take place in mid-September 2010, with further negotiations to take place on a phased continuing basis every two weeks after that. One of the immediate goals was to arrive at a framework agreement on the contentious "final status" issues, effectively paving the way for a comprehensive peace treaty.

At that meeting in mid-September 2010 in Sharm-el-Sheik in Egypt, which was attended by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Palestinian Authority President Abbas, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and United States envoy George Mitchell, all the relevant parties said that they were committed to the negotiations. Special Envoy Mitchell said that the Israeli and Palestinian leaders held "serious discussions on core issues." He also said that the objective of "two states for two peoples" remained at the heart of the matter, with efforts being expended to achieve a framework for that goal. Secretary of State Clinton noted this end result could not be achieved without ongoing dialogue. "It is a question of how can we work toward making these direct negotiations break

through the clear and difficult obstacles that stand in the way toward achieving a comprehensive peace," she asserted.

The encouraging words aside, there appeared to be little resolution on the outstanding issue of Jewish settlements. Despite Palestinian threats to exit the negotiations in settlement activity resumed, and in the face of Secretary of State Clinton's call for Israel to extend its freeze on West Bank construction, Israel was not promising to extend its moratorium on settlement activity.

Still, Prime Minister Netanyahu appeared to be making some concessions by suggesting that while the ban on all construction would not be renewed at the end of September 2010, the plan for the construction of thousands of houses in the West Bank might not go forward. Chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erakat, however, appeared unimpressed in an interview with the Associated Press. He said that "half solutions" by Israel were unacceptable.

Secretary of State Clinton suggested that the construction freeze -- a highly politicized issue in Israel -- could be made more palatable with assistance from the Palestinians. Moreover, she suggested that there were alternate ways of crossing "the hurdle posed by the expiration of the original moratorium. " In an interview with Agence France Presse, Secretary of State Clinton said: "Remember the goal is to work toward agreement on core issues like borders and territory that would, if agreed upon, eliminate the debate about settlements." Presumably, the United States' top diplomat was suggesting that rather than taking on the settlement issue outright as part of the peace process, the matter could be circumvented by focusing on finding agreement on long-term issues of borders and territory. Whether or not that proposal was feasible was yet to be determined.

Charting the Path for Peace --

The decision by the United States to commence an intensive diplomatic push for Middle East peace may be viewed as ambitious -- especially given the fact that it is a conservative, hardline Israeli government negotiating with the leader of the Palestinian Authority, while Hamas -- which controls Gaza -- has been left out of the equation. In fact, Palestinian President Abbas would be negotiating on behalf of all Palestinians despite the fact that he has held no effective power over Gaza for some time. Making matters more complicated, a conflict that had once been understood predominantly in territorial terms has increasingly taken on a more religious orientation in the current global arena. Clearly, resolving a conflict with religious undercurrents promised to be an even more challenging endeavor.

Indeed, even under theoretically more favorable circumstances, peace has eluded the region. Under the stewardship of former United States President Bill Clinton and then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, a most promising peace deal between the Israelis and Palestinians collapsed at the hands of the Palestinian leader of the time, Yasser Arafat, despite much compromise by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 2000. In fact, the collapse of that deal ushered in a bloody period of violence known as the Intifada.

Now, in 2010, President Obama was trying to revitalize the peace process and find success in an arena that has bedeviled American presidents for generations. But President Obama seemed to be something of a realist amidst the ideals of Middle East peace. Along with the imposition of a deadline on peace talks, President Obama emphasized that success would ultimately be determined by the decision makers of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. He noted that his country -- the United States -- could not want peace more than Israelis and Palestinians. President Obama also warned that the peace process would be subject to the negative machinations of "extremists and rejectionists who, rather than seeking peace, are going to be seeking destruction." Whether the peace process would move in a generative -- rather than destructive -- direction was yet to be determined.

Yemen resurges as emerging base of terrorism

In late October 2010, bombs were found hidden in cargo planes originating in Yemen and bound for Jewish synagogues in the city of Chicago in the United States. The devices containing pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) and plastic explosives mixed with lead azide (used to detonate explosives) were inserted into printer cartridges and mailed via cargo shipment from Yemen.

Political Conditions United-States

In one case, a printer was found on a cargo plane in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates equipped with a circuit board linked to a mobile phone card. In another case, a explosive device was intercepted at the East Midlands Airport in the United Kingdom only after an initial search yielded no results. Authorities in the United Kingdom were then told that the explosives found in Dubai had been hidden in the printer, thus a more thorough secondary search, this time with positive results.

British Prime Minister David Cameron issued the disturbing news that the explosive device was designed to be detonated on the aircraft, although it was not known when it was intended to explode. In practical terms, this meant that it was unknown as to whether the bombs could be detonated remotely while airliners were in flight, or, when the packages were opened at their destinations in the United States. John Brennan, counter-terrorism adviser to United States President Barack Obama, warned that the bombs were "sophisticated" and "self-contained" devices, intended to be detonated by the terrorists according to their chosen schedules. Given the use of the particular explosives within the printer cartridges, it would have been difficult for any bomb-sniffing dogs or x-ray machines to discover them.

Both discoveries were made thanks to intelligence passed on from Saudi Arabian authorities as well as a British M16 agent working in Yemen. The Saudi-based intelligence was linked to a tip received from a repentant al-Qaida member, Jabr al-Faifi, once held at Guantanamo Bay. Blame was quickly placed on al-Qaida in Yemen, which has been known to attempt bomb attacks using PETN. Attention was also focused on a well-known al-Qaida explosives expert, Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, who was believed to be the bomb maker from Saudi Arabia now living in Yemen.

In that country, now regarded as an emerging base of radical jihadist Islamists such as al-Qaida, a female student was arrested in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa on suspicion of dispatching the explosives-laden packages. The woman's location was traced via the telephone number she furnished to the cargo company. Given the threat, local offices of the cargo firms, UPS and FedEx, shut down freight operations in Yemen, while several countries placed a halt on cargo transported from Yemen. Yemeni officials were additionally on the hunt for additional suspects believed to be involved in procuring forged documents and identification cards. Also under suspicion were two language institutions in Yemen believed to be linked with the orchestrator of the mail bomb plot.

Meanwhile, cargo airliners were not the only ones involved in what appeared to be thwarted terror attacks. News reports indicated that at least one of the packages containing a bomb traveled on passenger flights. To that end, one package was transported on a Qatar Airlines flight from Yemen to Qatar, and then transferred to another Qatar Airlines flight onto Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. This revelation raised questions about the safety of global travel, given the transportation of cargo in civilian airliners.

Under fire for yet another terrorist attempt emanating from his country, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh said that his country would keep up its fight against al-Qaida "in co-operation with its partners." However, the Yemeni leader intimated that his country would balk at the notion of intervention by foreign powers saying, "But we do not want anyone to interfere in Yemeni affairs by hunting down al-Qaeda."

It was yet to be seen how foreign powers would respond to this call since in December 2009, a Nigerian national tried to detonate explosives on a flight destined for the American city of Detroit. That plot was thwarted by a vigilant passenger on the same flight but the plot was traced back to al-Qaida in Yemen.

For its part, the Obama administration in the United States was making it clear that it wanted to assist President Saleh in the fight against al-Qaida. Indeed, the United States government was sending inspectors to Yemen to investigate cargo security practices, given the ostensible assumption that further bombs could be transported in the same way as the two currently at issue. The United States was also reiterating its commitment to destroying the terror enclave, al-Qaida.

Domestic Agenda Developments (2010)

Republican snags senate seat held by Democratic Kennedy

Political Conditions United-States

In a warning shot to the ruling Democratic Party in Washington, Republican Scott Brown won the special Senate election for the late Senator Edward Kennedy's seat in Massachusetts, defeating Martha Coakley, who was hoping to keep it in Democratic hands. There were rumblings that the victory for a Republican in a liberal state was a sign of electoral trouble for the Democrats in forthcoming mid-term elections where the party in power usually suffers setbacks. However, polling data of voters indicated that there was a general feeling of frustration about the pace of change and the power of special corporate interests in Washington, which may have aided Brown to highlight his independent-leaning credentials. Regardless of the prospects in November 2010, President Barack Obama and Congressional Democrats would have to deal with more immediate challenges. Now deprived of a filibuster-proof super-majority, health care reform was at risk of collapse and the president's agenda was compromised.

Supreme Court narrowly rules to overturn restrictions on corporate and union contributions

On Jan. 21, 2010, the United States Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to overturn restrictions on corporate and union campaign contributions, effectively transforming the landscape of political financing. The majority, generally viewed to be the conservative wing of the court, found that "restrictions on such expenditures are invalid." Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy noted: "Although the First Amendment provides that 'Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech,' the prohibition on corporate independent expenditures constituted "an outright ban on speech, backed by criminal sanctions. It is a ban notwithstanding the fact that a PAC created by a corporation can still speak, for a PAC is a separate association from the corporation. Because speech is an essential mechanism of democracy -- it is the means to hold officials accountable to the people -- political speech must prevail against laws that would suppress it by design or inadvertence." While the court's four-member liberal bloc signed on to parts of the majority opinion, it dissented on the core ruling on corporate contributions.

White House resets agenda with a focus on job creation, deficit reduction and financial regulation

On January 29, 2010, the White House in the United States made clear that it was resetting its agenda by focusing on job creation, deficit reduction and financial regulation, while keeping its eye on health care reform. White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel explained that President Barack Obama would seek bipartisan support, but ultimately, he would not hesitate to cast Republicans as obstructionists, should they fail to work with Democrats to craft solutions in those spheres. On the other side of the equation, Republicans made clear that they had no intention of being any more cooperative, claiming that they had "better solutions" to those being offered by the Democratic administration and the Democratic counterparts in Congress. Emanuel drew upon a recent en masse vote by Republicans in Congress against a "pay as you go" plan, which passed anyway on a 60-40 vote, warning that there would be a political price to pay for such action. Emanuel said in an interview with the New York Times, "One party was for fiscal discipline, the other party wasn't."

By February 6, 2010, President Obama was indicating that despite Republican intransigence, difficult issues, such as health care reform, energy and banking reform, would not be ignored. In an address to the winter meeting of the Democratic National Committee, the president said of health care reform: "The easiest thing to do right now would be to just say this is too hard; let's just regroup and lick our wounds and try to hang on. We've had a long and difficult debate on health care. And there are some, maybe even the majority in this town, who say perhaps it's time to walk away. Just in case there is any confusion out there. I am not going to walk away from health insurance reform."

Landmark Health Care Reform Revisited: Historic legislation passes into law

Introduction:

Landmark health care reform legislation was on the political agenda in the United States for President Barack Obama as well as the Democratic-ruled bicameral Congress. When the issue of health care reform was first broached in the first months of his administration, President Barack Obama had hoped that legislators in Congress could forge bipartisan concurrence on legislation, aimed at ameliorating the health insurance regime and insuring many Americans not currently covered by health care. This objective faced grave difficulty, given Republicans' resistance to a public health care option (i.e. the concept of a government-run health care exchange to compete with private insurers), which progressive Democrats demanded. The general consensus was that the prospects for

successful passage of health care reform would rise and fall on the willingness of both sides to compromise or the ability and desire of Democrats to pass health care reform without the help of Republicans. But with November 2010 mid-term elections at hand, the ability of Democrats to cobble together the necessary votes from members of Congress in swing districts promised to be a challenge. In the Senate, the by-election of a Republican to the late Edward Kennedy's seat meant that the Democrats in that body no longer had a filibuster-proof majority. Thus, the complicated parliamentary procedures, including reconciliation, were now under consideration as the president aimed to push through his most ambitious domestic policy initiative after close to a year of legislative wrangling. Those efforts ultimately paid off with Democrats garnering enough votes to pass this legislation, and President Obama and House Speaker Pelosi winning a significant political victory. Republican leaders, such as Minority Leader John Boehner, warned of deleterious consequences for Democrats at the polls in November 2010 as a consequence of passing legislation his party deemed to be undesirable for the American people.

Summary on Legislation:

The United States House of Representatives passed its version of health care reform on Nov. 7, 2009. The health care bill -- H.R. 3962, the Affordable Health Care for America Act -- gained just enough votes to pass in the lower house of Congress, given the reservations of moderate Democrats in conservative districts ahead of the 2010 mid-term elections. The final vote was 220-215 with a lone Republican adding his bipartisan support. Passage of this legislation meant that comprehensive health care reform crossed a significant hurdle on the way to finally achieving the most sweeping domestic policy change in decades in the United States. That being said, the House legislation would still have to be reconciled with the Senate version, which itself was expected to face notable obstacles in the upper chamber before passage. To that end, the Senate version of the bill was at risk of being filibustered not by the Republicans, who appeared unified in their opposition, but from conservative members of the Democratic party. Controversial wrangling gained their support. Indeed, the concurrence in the upper legislative chamber had been crafted to keep liberal Democrats on board, while also bringing conservative Democrats into the fold, at the expense of the public option. As such, the bill moved forward in the upper chamber of the United States legislative body with a 60-vote filibuster-proof super-majority and with Republicans united in their opposition to the legislation. On Dec. 24, 2009, the United States Senate passed the historic \$871 billion health care reform bill. The bill passed with the support of every Democrat and Independent in the Senate. The vote was 60-39 and allocated along strict partisan lines, with one Republican missing the vote.

Summary of Recent Developments:

At the close of 2009, health care reform seemed on track for passage. At that time, the passage of health care reform legislation in both chambers of Congress effectively handed President Obama a policy victory on Christmas Eve by actualizing his administration's most significant domestic policy initiative. Following the historic vote, President Obama hailed the development saying, "We are now finally poised to deliver on the promise of real, meaningful health insurance reform that will bring additional security and stability to the American people." But such political ascendancy was short-lived as a result of the realities of the political landscape.

As of 2010, the two chambers were yet to harmonize components of their respective bills in conference committee before the final bill could be passed into law and signed by the president. While the Democrats acknowledged the intrinsic difficulties in completing this process, they were also counting on their filibuster-proof majority in the Senate to meet their objectives. They certainly were not counting on losing that filibuster-proof majority when a centrist Republican, Scott Brown, won the by-election in Massachusetts for the late Senator Edward Kennedy's seat. That political blow to the Democrats placed the passage of health care legislation in grave jeopardy and risked their party being marked by failure ahead of the mid-term elections.

With an eye on the likely pitfalls ahead, President Obama tabled his own health care proposal. A mixture of the House and Senate versions, the president's proposal would mandate health care coverage, provide subsidies in the interests of affordability, establish a competitive insurance market for small businesses and individuals, establish an extended care insurance program, and address the coverage gap in the Medicare prescription benefit. Funding would be provided via a mix of tax increases and savings from Medicare waste.

President Obama also convened a bipartisan health care summit on Feb. 25, 2010, aimed at resurrecting the stalled health care process. There was some speculation that despite its bipartisan billing, the White House harbored no illusions that it would actually garner Republican support for health care reform. Indeed, the conventional wisdom in Washington D.C., was that the president wanted to offer a final overture of bipartisanship towards the Republicans, before blessing the reconciliation process, which would push legislation forward with a simple majority.

Perhaps not surprisingly, despite some areas of agreement, such as "recission" of insurance policyholders, allowing youth to remain on parents' policies for longer periods, and ending limits on benefits, the Republicans at the summit repeated their disapproval of the sweeping health care reform legislation and called for the already-lengthy process to be entirely restarted. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said he doubted one Republican would support the president's endeavor. That being said, a few Republicans intimated the possibility of limited bipartisan support. Notably, Senator John McCain of Arizona said his party would consider working on reform with President Obama, albeit only on a "step-by-step" basis, with a less sweeping changes at stake.

The Republicans also warned that using budgetary reconciliation to advance legislation by simple majority -- and by-passing filibuster-proof parliamentary procedures -- was unprecedented and should be rejected. Of course, this position was not supported by actual facts since the Bush administration, backed by a Republican Congress, used budgetary reconciliation to pass sweeping tax cuts only a few years earlier. As noted by several Democrats in Congress, reconciliation has been used throughout recent political history far more by Republicans than Democrats.

The Democrats in the House and Senate suggested they were ready to end the lengthy and laborious legislative process on health care. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during a news conference that there were "good prospects for passing" health care legislation regardless of Republican participation. She also took the opportunity to take a swipe at the Republicans for "accepting of the status quo" in which American consumers have often suffered at the hands of the health insurance industry. Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, the second-ranking Democrat in the upper chamber signaled that movement of health care reform was imminent, saying, "We are not going to wait."

Days after the health care summit, the White House indicated it was looking for an "up and down vote" on health care reform in a bid to end the endless wrangling, and to facilitate improved health care to Americans. Indeed, the White House seemed intent on pressing forward with or without Republican support. White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said, "We know what happens if we do nothing: more and more people pay more. The president believes we still have to act." An actual statement from the Obama administration remained forthcoming but Gibbs said the president would soon announce "where he sees a path moving forward."

On March 12, 2010, United States President Barack Obama announced he was delaying his scheduled trip to Indonesia and Australia, in order to concentrate on the passage of health care reform legislation. With the fate of health care reform hanging in the balance, the White House decided that the president's time would be best spent placing pressure on the two houses of Congress to pass legislation on this high stakes policy matter. President Obama had originally asked that legislation be passed ahead of March 18, 2010, when he was scheduled to depart on his trip. However, leading Democratic legislators had warned that the March 18, 2010, timeline would be difficult to meet. Now, it was hoped that health care reform legislation could be passed by March 21, 2010 -- the new departure date of the president. But even that date was purged when the White House announced that the president would be cancelling his trip entirely in favor of working toward the passage of historic health care reform.

Cost of Health Care Reform

There was enormous focus on the costs of initiatives ensconced in the health care reform legislation at hand. The White House hoped that the costs should remain in the vicinity of the \$871 billion price tag attached to the Senate version, which was also paid for and was expected to reduce the deficit. These numbers, however, would have to pass the scrutiny of the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO). To that end, the initial findings from the CBO brought good news to Democratic leaders who wished to tout to fiscal benefits of the final bill. Indeed, the CBO said the Democrats' health care plan would cost about \$940 billion over a decade, and reduce the federal

deficit by \$138 billion over that same time horizon of 10 years. The letter from the CBO to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi also noted that the legislation would set the path for the provision of health care coverage to 32 million uninsured people by 2016. That would facilitate almost universal (95 percent) health care coverage in the United States.

Seizing on this news, President Barack Obama declared that the bill represented "the most significant effort to reduce deficits since the Balanced Budget Act in the 1990s," when President Bill Clinton set the federal budget on a pathway to surplus. President Obama continued, "This is but one virtue of a reform that will bring the accountability to the insurance industry and greater economic security to all Americans."

It should be noted that an updated report from the CBO validated the initial scoring, and in fact highlighted even better deficit savings. That new CBO score showed that the federal deficit would be reduced by \$143 billion (ten billion more than the initial score) in the first decade, and cost \$38 billion over a decade (two billion less than the initial estimate).

Final Legislative Process

Members of the House of Representatives were given 72 hours to study the legislation, once the costs of the proposed health care bill were made available. That meant that a likely vote in the House of Representatives would ensue on March 21, 2010, assuming that the Democratic leadership was able to cobble together at least 216 votes in its favor. Of course, as noted by House Republican leader John Boehner, efforts would be made on the other side of the aisle to "do everything that we can do to make sure this bill, never, ever, ever passes."

Typically, the procedure for the passage of bills into law includes the combination of two versions of legislation from both house of Congress into a single bill via conference committee, followed by the signature by the president on the conferenced bill, making it law. However, with the Senate now without the necessary 60th seat to bypass the parliamentary hurdles, such as a possible filibuster by Republicans, Democratic leaders were now looking to pass health care legislation via reconciliation, requiring only simple majority.

At first, the Democratic leadership of the House was considering a procedure known as "deem and consent" in which members of the House of Representatives would vote on a self-executing rule or provision, that would automate the passage of the Senate bill. Technically, this procedure would preclude a direct vote on the health care bill; however, it would still entail an indirect vote tucked into the vote on the rule. Republicans railed against this idea, characterizing it was the passage of a law without a vote and as unconstitutional, irrespective of the fact that such provisions had been used by its own ranks before. Indeed, during the last Republican-controlled Congress, Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier (R-California) used the "deem and pass" rule more than 35 times.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said on the ABC show, Good Morning America, "We are going to have a clean up or down vote on the Senate bill, that will be on the rule. This is a procedure, by the way, that was used almost 100 times under Newt Gingrich and over 100 times by Speaker Hastert, which my friend Mr. Cantor supported most of the time, if not all of the time. So this is not an unusual procedure. We're going to vote on a rule. It's simply like a conference report. Conference report comes back. You vote on it, with amendments." Republican Congressman Eric Cantor concurred, "Yes, Steny is right. The rules of the House allow for this type of deeming provision, it's called a self-executing provision which means that once the bill, the rule for the next bill passes, the Senate bill is automatically is deemed as having passed."

Nevertheless, on the eve of the vote in the House of Representatives, it was revealed that Democrats were abandoning the "deem and pass" procedure for straight up and down vote favored by President Obama. The final stage of the legislative process would commence with the adoption of a rule to provide for the consideration of the reconciliation bill -- essentially a package of reconciliation amendments intended to fix the Senate version of the bill so that it more palatable to the House. There would be two hours of debate on that reconciliation bill preceding a vote. In addition, the health care reform bill passed in the Senate would be presented on the floor of the House for a vote without debate in that case. It was expected there would be enough votes to pass the Senate version in the House, whereupon it would be immediately sent to the president for signature. Meanwhile, the reconciliation bill

would be advanced to the Senate, where Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid promised there were enough votes for it to be passed by via reconciliation. Accordingly, budgetary provisions would allow the bill to be approved by simple majority, rather than exposing the vote to filibuster by Republicans. Then the president would sign the amended bill.

Assuming the Democrats, indeed, had the necessary votes in both houses, this two-pronged process would essentially ensure that the amended version of the Senate bill (i.e. containing the "fixes" desired by the House and advocated by the president) would pass into law.

Latest Developments

In a final push for the passage of health care reform legislation, the Democratic leadership and President Barack Obama addressed all Democratic congressmen and congresswomen to rally support. For his part, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid dismissed complaints by Republicans about legislative procedure, excoriated the insurance industry, and passionately asserted that "the lives and livelihoods of millions" were on the line. He promised that 'the most sweeping changes to Americans' health care will be law in a matter of days.' Reid also announced that he had the commitment of a significant numbers of senators to actualize this objective. House Majority Leader noted that the prospect of health care reform should come as no surprise, and said there was "no illusion about what he [President Obama] would do" when the matter of health care was discussed in the 2008 presidential campaign.

For his part, President Obama acknowledged the difficulty of the health care debate and the legislative process, and observed that the proposed health care bill was a centrist document. He said, "This is a middle of the road bill designed to help the American people," that was tracked with recommendations from former Democratic Senator Tom Daschle as well as former Republican Senator Bob Dole. President Obama also attempted to shore up Democratic support for the legislation by urging lawmakers to act on the side of history rather than with political calculations in mind. To this end, he cited President Abraham Lincoln as he said, "I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have." In a rallying cry to congressional representatives, he said: "Don't do it for the democratic party; do it for the American people." Whether or not his call would be heeded in the form of requisite votes was yet to be seen.

On March 21, 2010, Democrats appeared to be on track to pass historic health care reform. On the eve of the vote, the Democratic leadership seemed to be short a few votes of the requisite 216 needed to pass the bill. However, on the day of the vote, Democratic House Caucus leader John Larson said: "We have the votes. We are going to make history today." Pro-life Democratic Congressman Bart Stupak was able to forge a deal with the Democratic leadership, which would provide for an executive order reifying the existing Hyde Amendment, which prevents federal funding of abortions. Accordingly, Stupak and his pro-life Democratic cohorts announced their support for the bill, virtually ensuring passage of this landmark legislation with enough votes well over the 216 threshold.

In an interview with ABC News, Republican Minority Whip Eric Cantor promised unanimous Republican opposition to the health care reform legislation. He said: "The American people don't want this to pass. The Republicans don't want this to pass. There will be no Republican votes for this bill." That being said, Republican lawmakers appeared resigned to the inevitable and warned they would use the health care legislation against Democrats in the 2010 mid-term election. Republicans have argued that the health care plan was unpopular with the American people and that Democrats would, therefore, pay a price at the polls.

Meanwhile, antagonists to health care reform outside the Capitol demonstrated in Washington D.C., with some protestors reportedly hurling racial and homophobic slurs at Democratic lawmakers. One arrest was made when a protestor spat at a Democratic lawmaker. Even House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was harassed by anti-reform demonstrators as she made her way to the Capitol. However she brushed aside their anger saying: "We are doing this for the American people."

Ahead of the vote, President Obama characterized the potential shift in the American domestic landscape saying it was "the most important piece of social legislation since the Social Security Act passed in the 1930s." Assuming the vote went as hoped, it would be a significant political victory for the president, who was under fire for

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concentrating on this agenda item at a time when the country was also grappling with significant economic challenges, known as "the Great Recession."

Perhaps not surprisingly, those on the other side of the ideological divide held a very different view. Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) warned of an "Armageddon" to come, should the legislation pass. He also said, "this bill will ruin our country." Striking an equally ominous tone, Karl Rove, political adviser to former President George W. Bush, warned of "economic disaster" to come, should the bill pass. Several Republicans also warned that Democrats would pay a political price at the polls later in the year. Notably, Ed Gillespie said there would be "blood on the floor." Regardless of the ultimate outcome, March 21, 2010, was expected to be a significant day in American politics.

The Votes

H.R.3590 Title: "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act" --

H.R. 3590 was a motion to concur with the already-passed Senate bill. It passed with 219 votes in its favor and 212 against it. In this way, H.R.3590 was passed with only Democratic votes, and with all Congressional Republicans voting against it, as expected.

A motion to recommit, intended as a last measure by the Republicans to try to scuttle the bill, would send the legislation back to committee. That motion was defeated with 199 votes in its favor and 232 against it.

H.R.4872 Title: Reconciliation Act of 2010 --

H.R. 4872 was intended to establish the changes or "fixes" to the now-passed health care bill. The reconciliation act was passed with 220 votes in its favor and 211 against it.

These votes essentially brought the Senate-passed bill into law upon signature by President Obama. The reconciliation bill was to be sent to the Senate for approval in that body, with passage establishing the amendments to the legislation.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi lauded the passage of the bill by linking it to laws that authorized earlier federal programs, such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. She also predicted positive effects for millions of Americans as a result of this difficult vote for members of her Democratic caucus saying, "All politics is personal."

Republicans had indicated they were taking their legislative defeat personally. House Minority Leader Republican John Boehner lamented the passage of bill saying, " We have failed to listen to America... This body moves forward against their will. Shame on us." Senator John McCain said "the American people are very angry" and promised to repeal the bill. To that end, several Republican Attorney Generals indicated they would sue the federal government.

Nevertheless, upon passage of landmark health care reform, President Obama's office dispatched a message that read as follows: "For the first time in our nation's history, Congress has passed comprehensive health care reform. America waited a hundred years and fought for decades to reach this moment." In a televised national address, President Obama, flanked by Vice President Biden, said the passage of health care reform legislation was "a victory for the American people" and "a victory for common sense." He noted the bill would "not solve every problem" in the health care system, but that it would "move us in the right direction." President Obama also made the argument for effective governance saying, "We proved that we are still a people capable of doing big things. We proved that this government - a government of the people and by the people - still works for the people." Moreover, he recalled his campaign theme as he characterized the policy victory saying: "This is what change looks like."

On March 23, 2010 -- two days after the passage of H.R. 3590 in the House of Representative -- President Obama, with House Speaker Pelosi standing just behind him, signed the bill into law.

On March 25, 2010, two days after President Obama signed health care reform into law, the Senate completed debate on the package of "fixes" ensconced within the reconciliation bill. Efforts by Republicans to try to derail the process by forcing changes into the reconciliation bill were successful on the basis of technicalities, thus sending it

back to the House for another vote. However, even that stalling tactic accomplished little other than slowing the outcome. The reconciliation bill in the Senate had almost unanimous Democratic support -- 56-43 -- for it to pass before being dispatched once again to the lower chamber. Then, the House picked up the altered reconciliation bill and passed it quickly by a vote of 220-207.

The reconciliation bill would then be signed by President Obama, effectively completing the complicated process. With the narrative switching from one of legislative process to one of effectiveness and accomplishment, public support for health care reform was experiencing a clear uptick in support.

Commentary:

Health care has also been one of the core fault lines of American politics, dividing Democrats and Republicans for decades. For Republicans, health care reform has signaled a government takeover of the system, at the expense of the free enterprise system, which was in this case represented by the insurance industry. For Democrats, health care reform represented a reification of the belief in an activist government to mitigate corporatist forces. In many senses this debate brought into high relief the enduring schism between right and left --i.e. the tensions between markets and states respectively. That being said, for decades, both Republican and Democratic presidents have acknowledged the need for health care reform on the American landscape, notwithstanding the differences on the path leading to that end.

When the fight for health care reform began, the central political calculation was as follows: Would the president finally succeed in advancing the Democrats' marquee domestic policy initiative? Or would health care reform bedevil President Obama as it did President Bill Clinton 16 years earlier? Would the Republicans succeed in derailing the president's agenda ahead of the next mid-term elections? In the early 1990s, Clinton's health care reform plan ended in failure and Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives soon thereafter. In effect, the actual beneficiaries of the failure of health care reform efforts in the 1990s were the Republicans at the polls in congressional races. Throughout, political analysts have argued that the fate of this policy agenda item was inextricably linked with the fate of the Democratic Party in forthcoming mid-term elections set for 2010, as well as the ultimate success of Barack Obama's presidency.

On the issue of the Obama presidency, journalist Ronald Brownstein, asserted that the leader of the United States expended both time and political capital in the interests of health care reform. Brownstein wrote, "Win or lose, Obama has pursued health care reform as tenaciously as any president has pursued any domestic initiative in decades. Health care has now been his presidency's central domestic focus for a full year. That's about as long as it took to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, originally introduced by John F. Kennedy and driven home by Lyndon Johnson. Rarely since World War II has a president devoted so much time, at so much political cost, to shouldering a single priority through Congress." NBC analyst, David Gregory, noted hours before the vote that passage of the legislation would mark a victory to President Obama, who -- as noted by Gregory -- "kept his campaign promise in delivering sweeping health care reform."

Passage of this landmark legislation granted a massive victory to President Barack Obama, ensuring his place in history, and enshrining his policy legacy as the first president to successfully bring about health care reform in half a century. The scale of this victory also effectively rescued the president from a growing narrative that he was a good communicator with no record of results. Significantly, President Obama will have accomplished what his presidential predecessors failed to achieve over the course of fifty years.

Passage of this legislation was also a victory for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who was credited with shepherding the legislative process and actualizing the long-elusive Democratic goal of expanding federal health care guarantees to American citizens by offering health insurance coverage to 30 million more people. Indeed, it would mark the most substantial and transformative policy shift on the domestic landscape in decades -- since the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid almost half a century earlier.

Making history, however, was no guarantee that the Democrats would not suffer at the polls in November 2010. In fact, President Obama, House Speaker Pelosi, and the Democrats garnered a won of historic proportion at a high cost. The process was long, difficult, and victory was won without a single Republican vote.

As discussed above, leading Republicans warned of a host of deleterious consequences to come, not only in terms of the outcome of the forthcoming elections, but also in regards to the very stability of the country. To that end, some extremist anti-health care protestors were aligning to call for radical action against the members of Congress who voted in favor of health care reform. In fact, some Democrats in Congress were the victims of threats or saw their offices vandalized.

The Republicans were not reacting to legislative defeat with a sense of acceptance. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said his party would not give up "until this bill is repealed and replaced with common-sense ideas." But as Republicans threatened to reverse the landmark legislation now passed into law, President Barack Obama took to the road to advocate on its behalf. He traveled to the state where his presidential aspirations began -- Iowa -- where he also derided Republicans threats. Indeed, President Obama dared Republicans to try to repeal his new health care law, urging them to "Go for it" and brave the voters reactions at the polls in November. He said, "Be my guest. If they want to have that fight, we can have it. Because I don't believe the American people are going to put the insurance industry back in the driver's seat." President Obama also appeared to make fun of House Minority Leader Boehner's warning that the passage of health care reform was a harbinger of "Armageddon."

This tone struck by the president appeared to carry with it an element of counter-challenge, given the fact that Republicans were banking on their intransigence to set them on the path to victory in the congressional elections. Such an end seemed more probable before the passage of the health care legislation; however, the president and the Democrats appeared to be buoyed by the legislative victory, and even strengthened by the threats by anti-reform activists, reflected in their more confident stance.

United States says Pakistan Taliban behind New York terror plot; further raids yield arrests

On May 1, 2010, authorities in the United States said that an attempted terror plot had been thwarted in New York. At issue was the case of Faisal Shazhad -- a Pakistani-born citizen of the United States -- who was charged with the attempted bombing in New York's busy Times Square. Vendors in the area of Times Square reported seeing smoke emanate from a vehicle in the vicinity. Explosives were later discovered within the vehicle, which was subsequently traced back to Shazhad. Bomb disposal experts dealt with the vehicle before any harm could take place and were able to garner significant evidence as to the attempted crime. Then, days later, Shazhad was arrested as he attempted to flee the country. Indeed, although Shazhad was on the "no fly" list, he was able to board an Air Emirates flight bound for Dubai, presumably due to the fact that the airline did not check status updates recently enough to flag his identity. However, customs agents were able to intercept the flight as it prepared to taxi down the runway at New York's JFK Airport and take Shazhad into custody.

Several days after the terror plot was uncovered, United States Attorney General Eric Holder said his country had procured evidence showing that the Pakistani Taliban was behind the attempted terror attack. Holder asserted that the Pakistani Taliban facilitated the plot and suggested that they likely helped finance it as well. Speaking on the ABC current affairs show, "This Week," Holder said: "We've now developed evidence that shows that the Pakistani Taliban was behind the attack." He continued, "We know that they helped facilitate it. We know that they probably helped finance it, and that [Shazhad] was working at their direction." White House counter-terrorism adviser, John Brennan, made a similar claim during an interview with CNN. Brennan said: "It looks like he [Shazhad] was working on behalf of the TTP, the Pakistani Taliban. This group is closely allied with al-Qaeda. This is something that we're taking very seriously." These claims constituted something of a reversal of a previously-held position that Shazhad acted alone.

For his part, Shazhad admitted to attending a terror training camp in the Waziristan region of Pakistan, where he received training in making bombs. While Shazhad has said that he acted alone, investigators -- as noted above -- believe that there may be a connection with Pakistani Taliban. Investigators also have indicated the possibility of a link with a Kashmiri Islamist group.

According to prosecutors, Shazhad was waived his legal rights and was reportedly cooperating with investigators. As well, Pakistani authorities were said to be assisting with the investigations by the United States government.

Such cooperation was likely to be scrutinized closely since this was the first time the Pakistani Taliban has been linked to a terrorism plot within the United States.

More than a week after Shazhad was arrested, authorities in the United States arrested another three men during raids. On May 13, 2010, a spokesperson for the Justice Department, Dean Boyd, said the three individuals were being held over alleged immigration violations. Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said it could "confirm that search warrants have been executed in several locations in the north east in connection with the investigation into the attempted Times Square bombing." The FBI also noted: "This search is the product of evidence that has been gathered in the investigation subsequent to the attempted Times Square bombing and [does] not relate to any known immediate threat to the public or active plot against the United States."

U.S.-born Islamic cleric calls for killing of American civilians

On May 23, 2010, an American-born Islamic cleric who, in the past, called for fellow Muslims to kill United States troops, now called for the killing of United States citizens. In a video released by al-Qaida in Yemen, Anwar Al-Awlaki accused the United States of intentionally killing Muslims in the military engagements ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan, noting that many Muslim civilians had died as a result. He therefore justified the killing of American civilians in retaliation saying, "The American people, in general, are taking part in this and they elected this administration and they are financing the war."

Al-Awlaki came to prominence as an al-Qaida recruit with links to the attack at the United States army base in Fort Hood, Texas, an attempted terror attack on a flight headed for Detroit, as well as the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington D.C. United States authorities have regarded him as a target due to these associations, but also because of his influence as an English-speaking radical cleric who could presumably facilitate the radicalization of other young Muslims, even contributing to the growth of home-grown terrorists. Accordingly, the Obama administration placed him on a "hit list" for targeted assassination by the Central Intelligence Agency. Indeed, White House spokesman, Robert Gibbs, has made clear that United States authorities were "actively trying to find" him. Al-Awlaki was believed to be hiding in Yemen. His presence there has contribute to rising anxieties about this new base of Islamic terrorism.

Wall Street Reform: Landmark financial regulatory reform passes House and Senate marking another policy victory for the Democrats and Obama

Background --

On Dec. 11, 2009, the United States House of Representatives passed sweeping financial regulatory reform within its chamber. The legislation, which passed by a vote of 223-202, was intended to address the structural failures in the financial system that led to the 2008 financial crisis. The bill, which was supported by the Democratic-dominated Congress and opposed by every Republican, effectively permits the government to deal with companies that could negatively impact the economy, and also established a new Consumer Financial Protection Agency that would be charged with overseeing consumer banking transactions. The latter provision was strongly opposed by large banks and the United States Chamber of Commerce, which said that the new agency would hurt financial institutions, while the Federal Reserve argued that the new agency would take away consumer protection powers from the central bank. Nevertheless, the Obama administration welcomed the development, with Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner asserting, "House passage of this bill moves us an important step closer to meeting the president's objectives for reform." He continued, "Comprehensive reform must establish clear rules of the road with strong enforcement for our nation's financial institutions and markets; end loopholes that allowed big Wall Street firms to escape supervision; make it clear that no firm is 'too big to fail'; and provide strong consumer and investor protections for American families."

Passage of the bill in the lower house of Congress paved the way for action to move onto the Senate in 2010. The proposed Senate version contained differences with the House version, principally due to the fact that it contained far more stringent banking regulations.

In late January 2010, with strong Wall Street Reform legislation at stake, United States President Barack Obama outlined plans to restrict and regulate the activities of large banking institutions, with an eye on limiting risky trading, and on assuaging an enraged public who have watched banking institutions pay out large bonuses even as taxpayer money was used to find bail-outs aimed at keeping the financial system afloat.

President Obama's proposals aimed for a return to the principles underlying the Glass-Steagall Act. That law, which existed from the 1930s in the aftermath of the Great Depression, divided commercial banking from investment banking, but was abolished in 1999. Accordingly, President Obama's plans could lead to the fragmentation of large banks, essentially ensuring that they may have to be broken up, and warning that the concept of "too big to fail" -- a tenet that guided the government's response to the financial crisis of 2008 -- was now over. President Obama struck a populist tone saying, "Never again will the American taxpayer be held hostage by banks that are too big to fail." He continued, "While the financial system is far stronger today than it was one year ago, it is still operating under the exact same rules that led to its near collapse." The proposals outlined by the president also included a ban on retail banks using their own money in investments (i.e. proprietary trading). Instead, banks could only invest customers' funds.

President Obama named his banking proposals aimed at limiting bank risk "the Volcker rule" after Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve central bank, one of his economic advisors and a strong advocate of such action. Banking industry lobbyists have argued that Obama's adoption of the Volcker rule and increased regulation constituted a return to the past. Indeed, the Financial Services Roundtable called instead for some modernization of the regulatory framework. But the president appeared intent on preserving his populist voice. He said, "If these folks want a fight, it's a fight I'm ready to have."

Months later, the United States Senate on May 20, 2010, passed the most sweeping financial regulatory reform in 80 years. The legislation passed through the upper chamber of congress by 59 votes to 39 and instituted ways to monitor financial risk.

One main component of the bill was the provision for the establishment of a new watchdog agency. As well, it would institute tougher hurdles for establishing credit worthiness by prospective mortgage seekers. The bill includes provisions for reform of complicated derivatives, however, it was not known if that item would withstand the reconciliation process with the House version of the bill, which was itself passed in late 2009. Another key element was the legislation's thrust to regulate large banks more stringently. To that end, while the bill would facilitate the liquidation of large firms shown to be failing, critics have claimed that the bill does not definitively solve the problem of companies deemed "too big to fail." It should be noted that while some believe that the legislation does not go nearly far enough to address the excesses and culture of Wall Street, which led to the financial crisis of 2008, executives at financial firms have deemed the emerging business climate as constraining.

The Senate version of the legislation was to be merged with the version passed in the House of Representatives before it could be signed by the president and signed into law. As indicated above, in fact, the Senate version of the bill contained stricter provisions than the House version. These differences notwithstanding, President Barack Obama hailed the development and asserted that never again would the American people pay "for Wall Street's mistakes." The president also took the opportunity to take aim at Wall Street, noting that its lobbyists had failed to kill the bill. He said, "Today, I think it is fair to say these efforts have failed."

Latest Developments --

In the early hours of June 25, 2010, the members of the House-Senate committee approved a reform package aimed at restricting trading by banks for their own benefit and mandating that banks and parent companies segment derivatives activities into separately capitalized subsidiaries. A final version of what has come to be called the "Volcker Rule," after former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul A. Volcker was approved in final revision, despite strong opposition by banks and financial institutions on Wall Street. Also opposing the Volcker Rule were many Republicans, who have viewed it as an obstacle to reaping profits. There was some accommodation for banks, providing for them to pursue some limited investing and trading activity. Included in the new reform package were limits on banks' investments in hedge funds or private equity funds.

Key provisions include --

- Volcker Rule
- Derivatives Exchanges and Clearing
- Derivatives Spin-Off
- Consumer Protection Agency
- Resolution Fund

At the close of June 2010, the United States House of Representatives approved the landmark bill, intended to radically reform the United States financial system. Lauding the development, Steny Hoyer, the House Majority Leader said, "Never again should Wall Street greed bring such suffering to our country." However, those words were contingent upon the reconciled legislation finding passage in the other legislative chamber. To that end, the bill faced a tougher time in the Senate, where a vote was not expected to take place for two weeks and where there was no guarantee of its successful passage. Ahead of that vote, President Obama said of the legislation: "It will make our financial system more transparent, so that complex transactions that escaped scrutiny in the past will now be done in the light of day."

By the first part of July 2010, the United States Senate had, indeed, approved the regulatory reform bill intended to overhaul the country's financial system by a vote of 60 to 39. Accordingly, the legislation was now set to reach the president's desk for signature. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke lauded its passage, saying : "The financial reform legislation approved by the Congress today represents a welcome and far-reaching step toward preventing a replay of the recent financial crisis." United States Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner characterized the legislation as "the most sweeping set of financial reforms since those that followed the Great Depression."

On July 21, 2010, President Obama signed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act into law in Washington, D.C. President Obama described the provisions of the new legislation as commonsense reforms that would positively affect the daily lives of citizens, from signing contracts to understanding fees and risks. He characterized the reform package as "the strongest consumer protections in history." His statement, "Because of this law, the American people will never again be asked to foot the bill for Wall Street's mistakes," was met with a loud burst of applause from those witnessing the signing ceremony. But Republicans continued to tail against the bill, characterizing it as a burden on small businesses and banks, and an impediment to job growth.

Politics of Wall Street Reform --

The Obama administration was touting this policy success as a political boon for fellow Democrats. In fact, the White House was sanguine on the prospects of the Democrats in forthcoming elections as it pointed to the passage of financial regulatory reform saying, "This will be a vote that Democrats will talk about through November." It was yet to be seen whether or not this policy success would actually translate into victory at the polls in mid-term elections set for later in 2010. While the majority of Americans did, indeed, support stronger regulations for the banking industry, a smaller number of people were aware of the very existence of the legislation itself, in contrast to the more controversial health care reform bill. Indeed, polling numbers showed little effect in favor of the Democrats, as a result of the passage of this legislation, in advance of the mid-term elections.

Regardless of the varying views on its merits, with the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act now signed into law, President Obama would be positioned to make the claim of accomplishment on another landmark piece of legislation. Indeed, coming so soon after the passage of landmark health care reform, the Obama administration could look back on its two years in office with the knowledge that it was achieving significant results on its domestic policy agenda.

British Petroleum oil spill in Gulf of Mexico --

Summary:

An April 2010 explosion aboard Transocean's Deepwater Horizon drilling platform, which was leased by British Petroleum, led to a massive oil leak from the blown-out well in the Gulf of Mexico. It was the worst environmental calamity to befall the United States, with the ecological and economic ramifications forecast to be monumental.⁶⁰ While attempts at containment and plugging the leak have been ongoing since that time, in July 2010, early indications were that a new cap had been successfully fitted over the blown-out well, ceasing the flow of oil for the first time since the time of the explosion. However weather concerns and seepage were emerging as points of concern. A permanent solution in the form of two relief wells was still in the offing.

In Detail:

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 platform workers. The Deepwater Horizon drilling platform was leased by British Petroleum (BP) from its owner, Transocean Limited. A leak in a deepwater oil well belonging to BP at the bottom of the Gulf continued to gush unabated, despite several attempts to end the disaster.

Several initial attempts to cap the massive oil leak, such as a containment dome, followed by a smaller containment mechanism, called the "top hat," failed to bring an end to the spill. Another mechanism was known as the "top kill" and sought to inject cement into the blown out well 5,000 feet underwater, ultimately sealing it off permanently. The "junk shot," was intended to augment the "top kill" approach and involved shooting small rubber balls, golf balls, and rubber scraps into the well to plug a crippled five-story piece of equipment, known as the blowout preventer; in this case, the intent was to prevent the mud from escaping.

Meanwhile, government estimates indicated that the oil spill promised to be more catastrophic than the 1989 Exxon Valdez off Alaska several years prior. Two scientific surveys estimated that the blown oil well was gushing between 500,000 and a million gallons of oil per day, which meant that at least 20 million gallons of oil have been spilled since the Deepwater Horizon explosion on April 20, 2010. By way of comparison, nearly 11 million gallons of oil were spilled in the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster. The deleterious effects to the eco-system of the Gulf, including coastal wetlands, as well as the challenges to the fishing and tourism industries in the Gulf, promised to transform an industry crisis into parallel environmental and economic disasters. Indeed, the general consensus was that the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was very likely the worst ecological calamity to befall the United States.

Jeremy Symons, vice president of the National Wildlife Federation, excoriated BP for allowing such a catastrophe to unfold. He said, "Now we know the true scale of the monster we are fighting in the Gulf." He continued, "BP has unleashed an unstoppable force of appalling proportions."

BP has been the main target of the public's condemnation for allowing the leak to take place, with reports emerging that the oil giant ignored warnings of system failures in the interests of production, ultimately contributing to the oil well blow out and concomitant spill. For its part, BP has maintained that it would take on the responsibility of cleaning up the oil spill, but it stopped short of addressing legal liabilities.

As well, harsh criticisms have been levied against the Mineral Management Services for providing the permit for deep water drilling in the first place. These criticisms were heightened due to findings of the agency's lax oversight, manifest by a propensity for "rubber-stamping" whatever the oil industry desired, as well as scandalous revelations about agency staff receiving elaborate gifts from oil and gas companies, as well as agency staff using official computers to view pornography.

Not surprisingly, there was speculation about measures against BP, such as debarement or removing liability limits. Additionally, MMA's essential structure would be changed to prevent future coziness with the oil industry.

While President Obama and his administration have also come under fire for their perceived timid response to the crisis, in fact, the United States government does not possess submersibles that can function at that depth, essentially leaving the clean-up responsibilities in the hands of the oil industry. Working within his purview, President Obama announced major new restrictions on drilling projects on the eve of another visit to the Gulf of Mexico. These moves included extending a moratorium on new deepwater drilling projects and the cancellation of proposed lease sales in the waters off Alaska, Virginia and the Gulf Coast. As well, he took responsibility for the

crisis brewing in the Gulf saying, "My job right now is just to make sure everybody in the Gulf understands: This is what I wake up to in the morning, and this is what I go to bed at night thinking about. The spill."

By the close of May 2010, it was apparent that the "top kill" approach to plugging the leak in the Gulf of Mexico had ended in failure. While BP said it would try yet another tactic intended to resolve the problem, BP Chief Operations Officer Doug Suttles acknowledged that the new approach might only halt the oil spill, rather than plugging it completely. This new strategy would ideally stem the flow of the oil with the Lower Marine Riser Package (LMRP). The LMRP would entail the use of underwater robots to cut through the damaged pipe, and then make a connection with another pipe, ultimately aimed at capturing the leaking oil. The LMRP plan would require several days of preparation before the commencement of the actual cutting and connection process, meaning that any possible result would not be immediate. It should also be noted that BP COO Suttles also said there was no guarantee of success since this type of operation had never been carried out at the depth of 5,000 feet.

This less than sanguine analysis of the road ahead was reflected in the dour warning by White House Energy Adviser Carol Browner, who cautioned that the United States should be "prepared for the worst scenario," which was that the oil spill might not actually be stopped for two months. That is to say, with or without the aforementioned LMRP process, which was intended to stem the flow of the oil in the Gulf of Mexico, a permanent solution would require even more time -- until August 2010, in fact. That dateline was derived from the belief that it would take a few months to drill a relief well to permanently end the spill.

During a second trip to the Gulf Coast, President Obama on May 28, 2010, promised to triple the number of federal workers trying to contain and clean up the oil spill. But with the news of the failure of "top kill" approach, the president conveyed his anger and outrage at the catastrophe unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico. He declared, "It is as enraging as it is heartbreaking, and we will not relent until this leak is contained, until the waters and shores are cleaned up, and until the people unjustly victimized by this man-made disaster are made whole."

On June 1, 2010, the Obama administration indicated it was opening a criminal probe into the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. While Attorney General Eric Holder refrained from specifying any companies or individuals that might potentially be targeted in such an investigation, he said: "We will closely examine the actions of those involved in the spill. If we find evidence of illegal behavior, we will be extremely forceful in our response."

On June 4, 2010, President Obama made another trip to Louisiana to garner an "on the scene" perspective of the evolving crisis. There, he was scheduled to meet with retired Coast Guard Admiral Allen, who was leading the federal government's response team, and several members of local communities who had been affected by the spill. In an interview with CNN, President Obama made clear that the company at the heart of the disaster, BP, had "felt his anger." He also said that he was "furious at this entire situation." The president reiterated his pledge to stand by the citizens of Louisiana and to ensure that they were "made whole." He also promised that BP would bear the financial costs of the damages at stake. It was subsequently announced that the president had, for the second time, postponed a trip to Australia and Indonesia; in this case, the White House determined that President Obama's focus should be on the oil spill in the Gulf. To that end, the effects of the disaster were expected to spread well beyond Louisiana's coastline with tar globules starting to wash ashore as far as Florida.

Meanwhile, attention was still focused on attempts to stem the flow of the oil. The new plan involved placing a containment cap over the ruptured oil well, followed by the funneling of the oil to the surface. United States Coast Guard Chief Admiral Thad Allen said that roughly 1,000 barrels a day were being captured. While the process was showing some degree of progress, the fact of the matter was that the amount of the oil being captured was a mere fraction of the 19,000 barrels a day believed to be leaking.

In a conference call to investors, BP chief executive officer Tony Hayward said it could take two days before his company could confirm whether or not the process had succeeded. Hayward also expressed "heartbreak" over the loss of life, the effect on the livelihoods of the people of Gulf, as well as the environmental impact in the region. Hayward asserted that BP would seek to restore the public's trust although he acknowledged that the actual cause of the disaster was unknown. To that latter issue, he suggested that there had been an "unprecedented number of failures" and "a lot remains unknown."

By June 6, 2010, the containment cap mechanism appeared to have been optimized since now 10,000 barrels of oil were being funneled a day. The increased momentum meant that now about half of the total amount of oil at stake was being captured. While this was welcome news, as before, there were prevailing anxieties about the oil that was still gushing forth into the Gulf. Admiral Allen gave voice to the displeasure of the federal government declaring that despite the progress being made, there was no reason to celebrate "as long as there's oil in the water." In an interview with CNN, Admiral Allen noted that the oil spill was "an insidious enemy that's attacking our shores."

In response, BP chief executive officer Tony Hayward, explained that his company intended to utilize further mechanisms to increase the containment and capture process. He said, "We have a further containment system to implement in the course of this coming week, which will be in place by next weekend so when those two are in place, we would very much hope to be containing the vast majority of the oil." Hayward also emphatically stated that BP was committed to resolving the oil spill disaster and restoring the affected environment. He said, "We're going to clean up the oil, we're going to remediate any environmental damage and we are going to return the Gulf coast to the position it was in prior to this event. That's an absolute commitment, we will be there long after the media has gone, making good on our promises."

Around June 11, 2010, reports had emerged that the amount of oil spilling into the Gulf of Mexico was even more than originally estimated. The new figures suggested that almost double the amount previously thought was gushing from the well, and therefore, likely to have more devastating and far-reaching effects for the marine ecosystem of the region. Paul Montagna, a marine biologist at Texas A&M University explained the consequences as follows: "Doubling the amount of oil does not have a linear effect, it doesn't double the consequences, it may instead have quadrupled the consequences."

By mid-June 2010, in a national address, President Obama placed pressure on BP to ensure that it could compensate those affected by the oil spill. In response, BP agreed to place \$20 billion in escrow for oil spill claims. The fund would be independently controlled and used to compensate people and businesses negatively affected by the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. While this development was hailed by many as a step in the right direction, during congressional hearings, Republican Congressman Joe Barton characterized President Obama's demand for the \$20 billion claims fund as a "shakedown" and apologized to BP CEO Hayward for its creation.

In those very congressional hearings, BP CEO Hayward was excoriated for "stonewalling" legislators, who were trying to discern the details of the corporation's decision-making process, which led to such catastrophic consequences. Hayward claimed that he was unable to offer relevant details due to Congress' own ongoing investigation into the matter.

Nevertheless, several legislators referenced BP's poor record of safety, and suggested that the company had taken safety shortcuts in the interests of saving money. To this end, Democratic Congressman Henry Waxman said, "BP appears to have made multiple decisions for economic reasons that increased the danger of a catastrophic well failure." For his part, Hayward responded by saying, said: "There is nothing I have seen in the evidence so far that suggests that anyone put cost ahead of safety, if there are then we will take action." He also insisted that he was not personally involved in the decisions that led to the explosion on Deepwater Horizon.

Hayward aside, BP's cause would not be helped by revelations from workers on the rig that the company did not deal with malfunctioning of the blowout preventer -- the very piece of equipment intended to avert disasters of the sort occurring in the Gulf -- despite both BP and Transocean knowing of functionality problems in advance.

By June 21, 2010, a lawsuit had been filed by Hornbeck Offshore Services against the government, calling for the ban on drilling at great depths to be lifted. Following the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion and the ensuing massive Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the Obama administration instituted a six-month moratorium on new deep water drilling projects, with the Interior Department halting the approval on the issuance of new permits for deepwater drilling, and the suspension of drilling at 33 existing exploratory wells in the Gulf of Mexico. Hornbeck Offshore Services of Covington, Louisiana, argued that the federal government imposed the moratorium without any proof that the operations posed a threat, and that the action could have a deleterious economic effect on the state. But the Interior Department noted that more time was needed to examine the risks of drilling to extreme depths, in order to

identify ways to improve safety. The Interior Department also made the claim that the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion and the resulting Gulf of Mexico oil spill illustrated the inherent risk drilling to such depths in the ocean. The district court judge ruled on June 22, 2010, to lift the moratorium and subsequently rejected the White House's move for a stay of the ruling. The White House stated it would immediately appeal the ruling, and further judgments were expected at the federal appeals court level.

In other developments, construction on the relief wells, intended to permanently stem the flow of the oil, was ongoing. Also ongoing was the oil spill itself, although the containment cap was reportedly decreasing the amount flowing into the Gulf. That flow increased temporarily in the third week of June 2010 when a mishap involving a robot bumping equipment forced the removal of the cap for a limited period.

By the first week of July 2010, there were reports that the oil leak could potentially be fully contained, pending the successful fitting of a new cap over the blown-out well. The new cap decreased the amount of crude oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, but it had not completely prevented some oil from escaping. The new cap would ideally fit precisely over the cut in the well pipe, ensuring proper containment. In order to accomplish this end, remote-controlled submarines were being used to exchange the existing cap with the new and tighter cap. The process was aided by good weather and calm seas. However, for a short time, while the new and tighter cap was being installed, there would be a limited period of about 48 hours in which the oil would freely gush forth into the already-affected waters. Nevertheless, news of the new cap's installation process marked the most positive development since the disaster unfolded more than two months prior.

BP conveyed cautious optimism over the new containment process, taking particular care to only say that progress was being made, and that an evaluation would come by mid-July 2010. Indeed, the effectiveness of the procedure was yet to be determined. As well, retired Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, who was overseeing the oil spill response on behalf of the federal government, was quick to note that containment of the oil spill was not synonymous with bringing the spill to a complete halt. He said, "I use the word contained. Stop is when we put the plug in down below."

By mid-July 2010, BP said the containment cap had been successfully fitted over the blow-out well and that the flow of oil in the Gulf of Mexico -- for the time being -- had been staunched. It was the first time the oil had ceased flowing into the Gulf since the April 2010 explosion on Deepwater Horizon. BP said integrity testing would ensue for approximately 48 hours. At issue was the pressure level since low or falling pressure levels would indicate that oil might be escaping further down the well, while higher pressure levels could pave the way for the well to remain shut.

Pressure tests were delayed at first, but by July 16, 2010, the readings were rendering less than ideal findings. In a conference call with the media, retired Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen said the testing showed that pressure levels were insufficiently high, thus indicating either a risk of other undiscovered leaks in the well, or, that oil had been depleted from the reservoir following three months of constant gushing into the Gulf. He noted that further testing would follow before a fresh assessment would be made as to next course of action. Indeed, the assessment would guide the government's decision to either keep the well shut, or, re-open the well and use shipping vessels to pipe oil to the surface.

During a night-time news conference on July 16, 2010, BP executive Kent Wells said that despite the perplexing low pressure readings, there was no indication of oil seeping from the well. He said, "No news is good news, I guess that's how I'd say it." His statement was based on the results of a seismic probe of the surrounding sea floor, which showed no evidence of a leak underground. As before, continued testing and fresh assessment were anticipated before a decision could be made about the course of action to be taken, as noted above. The scenario was complicated by revelations about hydrocarbon seepage in the seabed a short distance from the well head. There were reports of BP not being willing to comply with the government's demand for further testing.

By the third week of July 2010, efforts were underway to dispel fears that the aforementioned seepage indicated that the capped oil well was structurally compromised from the pressure. Should the capped well in fact have ruptured under the pressure, the containment cap would likely have to be removed, due to the risk of further

damage. However, experts were suggesting that the detected seepage was sourced in an older well that was no longer in production. For his part, Retired Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen noted that while several leaks were found around the well machinery, they were small in size. Therefore, he allowed BP to have a succession of 24-hour extensions to keep the cap in place, but demanded that the process be vigilantly monitored.

The success of the containment cap aside, there was still a need for a permanent solution. To that end, two relief wells were being drilled below the floor of the sea, for the purpose of intercepting the blown-out well and sealing it permanently with cement and mud. This process had been forecast to be completed in mid-August 2010, but now news was emerging that construction on the relief wells was proceeding ahead of schedule. While that revelation was broadly welcomed, the massive restoration effort to the seas and coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico would continue for a long time into the future, with the ecological and economic ramifications forecast to be monumental. That scenario was not helped by the impending arrival of a tropical storm in the region, which temporarily halted work going on in the Gulf.

In early August 2010, British Petroleum (BP) pumped cement into the top of the damaged oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. The measure was part of what is called the "static kill" procedure. The cementing of the oil well was intended to stop further oil leaking into the Gulf of Mexico and was part of the permanent "relief well" solution to the calamity. Constructed to intersect with the damaged well, the intent was to "kill" or seal the spill with cement and mud.

Around the same period, it was announced that close to 75 percent of the oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico had been cleaned up, dispersed using chemicals, or dissipated due to natural forces. According to a government report compiled by 25 government and independent scientists, only about one quarter of the the oil from the BP well was left, and that amount was undergoing rapid degradation.

NOAA administrator, Dr. Jane Lubchenco, said that the degraded oil was no longer a threat. She explained that "When it [the oil] is biodegraded, it ends up being water and carbon dioxide so if it has been biodegraded, if it is gone, then it is not a threat." While this news was regarded positively, the massive restoration effort to the seas and coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico would continue for a long time into the future, with the ecological and economic ramifications yet to be seen.

To this end, United States President Barack Obama said that he was glad that the operation in the Gulf was "finally close to coming to an end," but warned that the recovery efforts would have to continue. He said, "We have to reverse the damage that's been done."

Meanwhile, even with the fallout of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico casting BP in negative light, the energy giant was dealing with political damage. A congressional committee was looking into whether or not BP should be banned from offshore drilling for seven years. BP was not alone in the domain of scandal. At a hearing in New Orleans, one of Deepwater Horizon's drilling supervisors told Coast Guard investigators that the rig's crew neither ceased drilling, nor notified regulators upon the discovery of the hydraulic leak in blowout preventer ahead of the explosion. Exacerbating the situation was a subsequent revelation before a panel of federal government investigators that the emergency alarm on the Deepwater Horizon was not fully activated the day the oil rig exploded. Transocean, which leased the rig to BP, reacted by asserting that the inactive alarm did not constitute a safety oversight. But a confidential audit, the contents of which were reviewed by the New York Times, indicated a long list of repairs, some of them deemed "high priority," that Transocean had left unattended by the day of the rig explosion.

Judge places most controversial parts of Arizona immigration law on hold --

On July 28, 2010, a federal judge placed an injunction on the most controversial parts of a new Arizona immigration law. United States District Judge Susan Bolton, a Clinton appointee who was charged with ruling on a

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number of lawsuits filed against SB 1070, placed several aspects of the law on hold until the courts could fully resolve the legal actions taken in response to the state of Arizona's immigration measures.

At issue have been key provisions of SB 1070, such as the requirement of police officers to check the immigration status of individuals deemed to look suspiciously like immigrants. Some police have argued that this requirement places an undue burden on them as they attempt to enforce other laws. Critics have also argued that SB 1070 -- a state law -- encroaches unduly on federal authority, which entails regulating immigration and preserving homeland security. Moreover, civil liberties advocates have pointed out that the very notion of checking the immigration status of persons based on appearance veers too close to racial profiling and would violate the rights of some legal aliens and citizens. On the other side of the equation, the state government of Arizona has said that it was compelled to craft and activate the law in response to the constant and unregulated influx of illegal immigrants from Mexico; the state government said that the law was a reaction to the federal government's perceived failure to address this problem. Indeed, Arizona has the distinction of being the busiest gateway into the United States for illegal immigrants.

In court, lawyers for the state argued that SB 1070 was an attempt by Arizona to assist federal immigration agents in dealing with a broken immigration system, and to allay the costs of educating, jailing and providing health care for illegal immigrants. Meanwhile, the plaintiffs, who included the United States Justice Department, civil rights groups and a Phoenix police officer, based their argument on the claim the Arizona immigration law improperly pre-empts federal law and compromises the rights of legal aliens and minority citizens. That argument appeared to have found resonance with Judge Bolton who blocked police officers from making warrantless arrests of suspected illegal immigrants for crimes that could potentially result in deportation. To this particular end, Judge Bolton wrote: "Requiring Arizona law enforcement officials and agencies to determine the immigration status of every person who is arrested burdens lawfully present aliens because their liberty will be restricted while their status is checked."

Judge Bolton also noted that the interests of Arizona were in sync with those of the federal government; however, she said that it was up to the

federal government to take the lead on deciding how immigration laws should be enforced.

The sections of SB 1070 barred from being enforced included:

- Requiring a police officer to make a reasonable attempt to check the immigration status of those they have stopped;
- Making it a violation of Arizona law for anyone not a citizen to fail to carry documentation;
- Creating a new state crime for trying to secure work while not a legal resident;
- Allowing police to make warrantless arrests if there is a belief the person has committed an offense that allows them to be removed from the United States.

The sections of SB 1070 left unchallenged included:

- Requiring state officials to work with the federal government regarding illegal immigrants;
- Allowing Arizona residents to file suit against any agency official, city or county for adopting policies that restrict the ability of workers to enforce federal immigration law ``to less than the full extent permitted by federal law.'

While the ruling by Judge Bolton did not prevent Arizona's new immigration law from taking effect, it did so without the force of the provisions deemed to be most offensive by opponents. In this way, the ruling was a key -- albeit temporary -- victory for antagonists of the legislation. Indeed, many celebrated Judge Bolton's ruling. But conservative Governor Jan Brewer characterized it as merely "a bump in the road" and promised to appeal the ruling. In fact, an appeal would chart the path for a lengthy battle that would like take the legal process through the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, where the state government of Arizona would call for Judge Bolton's injunction to be lifted, before ultimately arriving at the Supreme Court of the United States.

There, it would be seen if a recent trend in Supreme Court rulings to reify the authority of the federal government during the Bush years would be extended to the Obama administration, or, if the conservative justices' penchant for states rights would take hold. Judge Bolton appeared to carefully craft her ruling to withstand scrutiny in the future, effectively bolstering the federal government's chance of success.

President Obama's nomination and ensuing confirmation process of Solicitor General Elena Kagan for Supreme Court --

On Aug. 7, 2010, Elena Kagan was sworn in as the Supreme Court's 112th justice. Kagan was now only the fourth woman to sit on the bench of the United States highest court. Accordingly, Kagan at the Supreme Court represented a political success for President Obama who would have the historic distinction of placing two women on the bench within his first two years in office. Kagan's presence in addition to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and another Obama nominee, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the Supreme Court of the United States would now be populated with the highest proportion of women ever before in history.

On May 9, 2010, news reports emerged that United States President Barack Obama would name Solicitor General Elena Kagan as his choice to succeed retiring Justice John Paul Stevens for the Supreme Court. The news that Kagan -- long believed to be one of the frontrunners for the nomination -- had been selected came about a month after Justice Steven announced his retirement.

Kagan -- a 50-year old lawyer from New York -- earned degrees from esteemed universities including Princeton, Oxford and Harvard Law School. She was the first woman to hold the position of Dean of the Harvard Law School and most recently served as President Obama's solicitor general. If confirmed, Kagan would be the first justice in almost 40 years without prior judicial experience. She would also be only the fourth woman to ever sit on the country's highest court. Her confirmation would also give President Obama the distinction of being the only president to effect the presence of two women on the highest court of the United States. His previous nomination to the court was Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

For his part, the president noted he was searching for a candidate who would rule in the mold of retiring Stevens -- a stance interpreted by analysts that he sought to preserve the liberal-conservative balance of the court. The president also indicated that his preference would be a candidate from outside the so-called "judicial monastery," with "real world" experience, who would advocate on behalf of the people. With no judicial experience, although certainly with much experience in the realm of jurisprudence, Kagan appeared to have fit those stated requirements.

It was believed that lack of bench experience could leave her vulnerable to criticism about her credentials during Senate confirmation hearings. Indeed, some opponents had already leveled claims that the nomination of Kagan was similar to former President George W. Bush's nomination of Harriet Miers. In that case, Miers was criticized for a lack of qualifications, and no demonstrable commitment to a particular judicial philosophy. On the other hand, the lack of a lengthy judicial record could actually work in her favor by foreclosing criticism from opponents, effectively paving the way for an easier confirmation process. As well, the credentials question could be answered by delving into her academic writings, which were generally regarded as dense and technical, thusly illustrative of her particular acumen.

Kagan would also likely be helped by a prevailing reputation as one willing to engage with conservatives, as well as her support for executive power. However, these features were just as likely to leave liberals suspicious of her ideological underpinnings. That being said, Kagan's background as a clerk for liberal Justice Thurgood Marshall, and her work as White House lawyer and domestic policy aide under President Bill Clinton, would likely quell fears from the activist base of the Democratic Party. So too would her support for barring military recruiters from a university campus on the basis that the "don't ask, don't tell" policy of the military violated the anti-discrimination policy of that university. Of course, that very position was expected to fuel opposition from the political right.

In considering the nomination of Kagan, some analysts surmised that President Obama was not seeking to make a political statement by selecting a standpoint liberal to the bench. Instead, as has been the hallmark stance of the Obama administration, the president was making a pragmatic choice. He was seeking a candidate who could potentially persuade the sometime-swing vote of Justice Anthony Kennedy, thus influencing the rightward bent of the court under the aegis of Chief Justice John Roberts.

Of particular significance was the recent ruling by the Supreme Court in the case of Citizens United, which reversed restrictions on corporate spending in elections on the basis of free speech. The president was a vociferous critic of this 5-4 ruling, with Kennedy joining the majority. But this very case also placed Kagan herself at the core as a central player. In her capacity as solicitor general, Kagan unsuccessfully argued the government's case before the very bench of the Supreme Court where she was now hoping to sit. In that case, she parried directly with conservative Justice Antonin Scalia as well as Chief Justice John Roberts, even earning rebuke for her particular style. In this regard, the selection of Kagan may provide some suggestion that beneath the pragmatic penchant of the president resided some small element of ideological inclination.

On May 10, 2010, President Obama formally announced Kagan as his nominee to replace Justice Stevens at the Supreme Court, saying: "I have selected a nominee who embodies an excellence in independence, integrity and passion for the law -- our solicitor general and my friend, Elena Kagan."

Again drawing upon his desire to place an advocate of the people on the country's highest court, President Obama emphasized Kagan's background as solicitor general, saying that it represented "the American people's interest in the Supreme Court." He also sought to tamp down criticism about her credentials noting, "Elena is widely regarded as one of *nation*'s foremost legal minds ... with a firm grasp of the nexus between our three branches" of government. President Obama also noted that Kagan had a reputation of being open to a "broad array of viewpoints," having a consensus-oriented temperament, and gaining admiration "across the ideological spectrum."

For her part, Kagan said she was honored by the nomination. Kagan noted that she held a "longstanding appreciation of the Supreme Court's role" in the lives of Americans, which had only grown "deeper and richer" during her service as solicitor general.

Senate confirmation hearings began on June 28, 2010, in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. In her opening remarks in front of the committee, Kagan promised "to consider every case impartially modestly, with commitment to principle and in accordance with law" and said that she would judge each case with "even-handedness." The hearings were not expected to be an easy process, based on some of the remarks made by Republican senators. At issue for some Republicans were her lack of bench experience (as discussed above), as well as her views on the presence of the military recruiters at university campuses -- an issue that emerged when she served at Harvard Law School. The ranking Republican on the committee, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, went so far as to refer to Kagan as "a dangerous nominee."

As the proceedings continued, Kagan was challenged by Republicans on controversial issues from gays in the military to abortion and gun rights. Republicans also cast her past experience as a clerk for Justice Thurgood Marshall in negative light, suggesting that it could portend "activist" inclinations. The disparagement of Justice Marshall -- whose name is inextricable linked to the landmark case of Brown versus the Board of Education -- was viewed as a politically perplexing move by judicial watchers. For her part, Kagan made clear her intent to be an independent and impartial judge.

Ultimately, Kagan appeared to emerge from the confirmation process unscathed, with Senate Judicial Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy saying, "Solicitor General Kagan will be confirmed." Even Republican Senator John Cornyn appeared to agree that was the likely outcome. Asked if Kagan would be the successor to retiring Justice John Paul Stevens, Cornyn replied, "I assume she will be."

On July 20, 2010, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted 13-6 to endorse Supreme Court nominee Kagan's confirmation, effectively sending her on to face a vote before the full Senate. The vote broke along mainly on partisan lines with all 12 Democrats on the committee voting for Kagan, and six of the seven Republicans voting

against her. The lone Republican voting against Kagan in committee was Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who had voted in favor of the president's previous Supreme Court nominee, Sonia Sotomayor.

Speaking of his decision to endorse Kagan at the committee level, Senator Graham said that although he would not have selected a justice who had a political ideology similar to that of Kagan, he believed that President Obama had a mandate from the voters to choose his desired nominee. "I'm going to vote for her because I believe this last election had consequences," he said. Conversely, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee, described Kagan as "Truly a person of the political left — now they call themselves progressives — one who has a history of working to advance the values of the left wing of the Democratic Party, and whose philosophy of judging allows a judge to utilize the power of their office to advance their vision for what America should be." This commentary was understood as a clear indication that Sessions, who once characterized the president's nominee as "dangerous," would not be voting in her favor.

Ultimately, Senator Graham was one of several Republicans, including the two female Republican Senators from Maine -- Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, who voted to confirm Kagan on Aug. 5, 2010, in the full vote of the upper chamber. The other Republicans joining the Democrats in confirming Kagan were Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana and Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire. Notably, moderate Republican Senator Scott Brown of Massachusetts opposed Kagan's confirmation, citing a lack of judicial experience. Clearly, the judicial experience factor was not a concern for the vast majority of the members of the Senate since the final vote was 63-37.

On Aug. 7, 2010, Kagan was sworn as the Supreme Court's 112th justice. Chief Justice John Roberts administered the oath to Kagan. As the replacement for retiring Justice John Paul Stevens, the ideological balance of the court would remain unaltered. That being said, Kagan was now only the fourth woman to sit on the bench of the United States highest court. Accordingly, Kagan at the Supreme Court represented a political success for President Obama who would have the historic distinction of placing two women on the bench within his first two years in office. As noted above. Indeed, with Kagan's presence in addition to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and another Obama nominee, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the Supreme Court of the United States would now be populated with the highest proportion of women ever before in history.

Changes to the Obama Administration --

On Oct. 1, 2010, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel officially announced plans to resign from his post. While he did not state his reasons for resigning during his speech, it was widely-known that Emanuel wanted to register in November 2010 to contest the upcoming mayoral race in his home city of Chicago. In a room filled with White House personnel, media and cabinet secretaries, President Barack Obama paid homage to his White House Chief of Staff. He said, "We are all very excited for Rahm, but we're also losing an incomparable leader of our staff." He continued, "It's fair to say that we could not have accomplished what we've accomplished without Rahm's leadership." The president also noted that landmark policy accomplishments, such as health care and financial reform would not have been accomplished without the work of Emanuel. Soon thereafter, Emanuel bid the president an emotional goodbye, thanking him for the opportunity to serve the country, and paying tribute to the president. Speaking directly to President Obama, Emanuel said, "I want to thank you for being the toughest leader any country could ask for." For his part, President Obama announced that his senior adviser, Peter Rouse, would now take on the role of interim White House Chief of Staff.

The departure of Emanuel was one among a list of several resignations from the Obama White House. Indeed, halfway through the first term has typically been a period in which such changes take place. In July 2010, Peter Orszag, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, resigned; he was to be replaced by Jack Lew. In early September 2010, it was announced that White House Economic Adviser Austan Goolsbee would succeed outgoing Christina Romer as chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. By late September 2010, it was announced that Larry Summers, director of the White House National Economic Council (NEC), was also stepping down. The likely candidates to replace him included former Xerox Corp. chief executive Anne Mulcahy, former Council of Economic Advisors Chairwoman Laura Tyson, former Young and Rubicam chief executive Ann Fudge, and NEC Deputy Director Diana Farrell. In early October 2010, National Security Adviser James Jones was reported to be leaving his post and President Obama named Tom Donilon as his replacement.

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Note also that in veteran United States diplomat Richard Holbrooke died on Dec. 13, 2010. Holbrooke, who was most recently serving as United States President Barack Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, had helped to broker the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the Bosnia war. Known as "the Bulldozer" for his particular style, Holbrooke was known to be a pragmatist with no reservations about negotiating with unsavory or immoral characters, so long as it served the interests of peace.

Paying tribute to Holbrooke's service to the United States and the cause of peace, President Obama characterized the seasoned diplomat as a "true giant of American foreign policy." President Obama characterized Holbrooke further as follows: "He was a truly unique figure who will be remembered for his tireless diplomacy, love of country, and pursuit of peace." Afghan President Hamid Karzai as well as Pakistani leader Asif Ali Zardari expressed great sadness at the news of Holbrooke's death. British Prime Minister David Cameron said Holbrooke's "force of personality and his negotiating skill combined to drive through the Dayton peace agreement and put a halt to the fighting" in Bosnia. Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, who served as an envoy to Bosnia in the early 1990s, praised Holbrooke as "one of the best and the brightest" diplomats. Baroness Ashton, the European Union's foreign policy chief, lauded Holbrooke as a "champion of peace and reconciliation." Nato Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said, "He knew that history is unpredictable; that we sometimes have to defend our security by facing conflicts in distant places." Holbrooke's own antagonists found kind words for him. Former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, on trial for war crimes at The Hague, issued a statement expressing "sadness and regret."

2010 Mid-term Congressional elections in United States

Bicameral Congress:

Consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives

Senate:

Consists of 100 members, elected for six-year terms in dual-seat constituencies, with one-third of the seats being contested every two years. Ahead of the 2010 elections, Democrats controlled 59 seats in the Senate while the Republicans had 41 seats.

House of Representatives:

Consists of 435 members, elected for two-year terms in single-seat constituencies. Currently, 255 seats are held by Democrats and 178 seats are held by Republicans while two seats (Indiana-03 and New York -29) are open following the resignation of their representatives.

Leadership of Congress:

Going into the election, Democrat Harry Reid was the Senate Majority Leader; with Richard Durbin holding the second-in-command position for the Democrats. Mitch McConnell (Republican) was the Senate Minority Leader. Democrat Nancy Pelosi made history becoming the country's first female Speaker of the House in 2006 and was third in line for the Presidency. Democrat Steny Hoyer was the House Majority Leader for the Democrats. John Boehner was the House Minority Leader for the Republicans.

Pre-election Commentary:

Republicans in the United States were counting on right-wing outrage over the policy agenda of President Barack Obama and the Democratic-dominated bicameral Congress to regain the reins of legislative power. Angry about what they perceived as a leftward slant to policies, such as health care reform and financial reform, both couched under the rhetorical rubric of "government takeover," and buoyed by the rise of the Republican-aligned "Tea Party" movement, Republicans were expected to go to the polls in droves, aimed with the goal of ousting Democrats from office.

The Republicans would likely be helped in this regard by a lack of enthusiasm by Democratic and Independent voters. Among Democratic voters, there was a sense that the Democrats had not gone far enough in advancing

progressive change, along with an unreliable youth vote that was less likely to show up at the polls in an election year without a presidential contender on the ballot. Among Independents, there was a mixture of anxiety about government spending, matched with a somewhat contradictory frustration that the economy had not rebounded as desired. These two constituencies were, in essence, upset that the change promised by Candidate Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress has not come as they had expected.

Polling data ahead of the elections generally showed a notable Republican advantage, although occasional surveys have shown Democrats moving into a more competitive range. On balance though, the vast majority of pollsters have shown through their "likely voter" screens a far more conservative mid-term electorate, with voting preferences that favor right-wing candidates on the ballot. The main question, according to the United States mainstream media and political pundits, was just how large the anticipated Republican wave would be on Nov. 2, 2010. Would Republicans run the proverbial table and seize control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives? Or would the Democrats be able to hold onto the Senate? Almost no one expected the Democrats to be able to hold onto the House where pollsters and analysts were predicting a net gain of about 50 seats, effectively propelling the Republicans to a big victory in that chamber.

Polling data on the eve of the election made it apparent that the Republicans were almost certain to dominate the polls in terms of numbers. Noteworthy was Gallup's "likely model" poll showing Republicans with a double-digit lead on the generic ballot against Democrats. Stated in other terms, should the polling data turn out to be accurate, not only would the voters at the polls be more likely to identify as Republicans, they would also be more likely to support Republicans running for office. The conventional wisdom at the time of writing was that the House would, indeed, shift to Republican rule. The main question concerned the degree to which the Republicans would enjoy victory. Would it be a slight advantage? Or would the Republicans rout the Democrats?

With prospects for the House anticipated, the main battle was expected to center on the Senate, here is a short briefing on the current "state of the race" --

The following were Democratic Senate seats expected to remain in Democratic hands --

Maryland (Mikulski-D)

New York (Gillibrand-D)

New York (Schumer-D)

Hawaii (Inouye-D)

Oregon (Wyden-D)

Delaware (currently held by Kaufman-D; expected to be won by Coons-D against O'Donnell-R)

Vermont (Leahy-D)

The following seats were held by Democrats going into the election; they were regarded as competitive seats on the Republican target list although they leaned slightly Democratic --

Connecticut (Blumenthal-D hoping to succeed Dodd; expected to beat McMahon-R)

West Virginia (Manchin-D hoping to succeed Byrd; advantage in race against Palin-backed Raese-R)

Washington (Incumbent Murray-D expected to narrowly hold off Rossi-R)

California (Incumbent Boxer-D expected to beat Fiorina-R)

The following were Republican Senate seats going into the election and were expected to remain in Republican hands --

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South Carolina (DeMint-R)

Alabama (Shelby-R)

Louisiana (Vitter-R)

Arizona (McCain-R)

Georgia (Isakson-R)

Iowa (Grassley-R)

Idaho (Crapo-R)

Utah (currently held by Bennett-R who lost GOP primary to Lee-R)

Kansas (Moran-R)

Oklahoma (Coburn-R)

S. Dakota (Thune-R)

The following seats were held by Republicans; although they were regarded as competitive seats, they leaned Republican and expected to stay in GOP hands --

Missouri (Blunt-R expected to beat Carnahan-D)

New Hampshire (Ayotte-R to beat Hodes-D)

Ohio (Portman-R to beat Fisher-D)

North Carolina (Burr-R favored against Marshall-D despite a short-term surge by Marshall)

Kentucky (Paul-R expected to win this seat against Conway-D despite short-term surge by Conway)

The following seats were held by Democrats going into the election; they were regarded as highly likely (indeed, almost guaranteed) "pick up" seats for Republicans --

North Dakota (Hoeven-R expected to win seat held by retiring Dorgan-D)

Arkansas (Boozman-R expected to win seat held by Lincoln-D)

Indiana (Coats-R expected to win seat held by retiring Bayh-D)

The following seats were held by Democrats going into the election and were regarded as clear "toss up" seats that could go either way; it was this cadre of Senate seats that would determine the control of the Senate --

Nevada (Senate Majority Leader Reid-D hoped to hang on for victory against Tea Party-backed Angle-R)

Colorado (Bennett-D hopes to hold off Tea Party-backed Buck-R)

Illinois (Giannoulis-D was hoping to hold onto seat once held by President Obama against Kirk-R)

Pennsylvania (Sestak-D was hoping to hold Specter seat against "Club for Growth"-endorsed Toomey-R)

Wisconsin (Incumbent Feingold-D hoped to have last minute surge against Johnson-R)

The following was a three-way race that leaned Republican due to vote splitting --

Florida (Rubio-R will win this race if moderate-progressive vote split between Crist-I and Meek-D)

The following in a three-way "wild card" race that --

Alaska (Miller-R was expected to win this race but Murkowski-R, who lost to Miller in the primary, decided to stay in race as write in candidate. While Murkowski and Miller were quickly ensconced in a dead heat, scandalous revelations for Miller resulted in a precipitous drop in his polling numbers. The race quickly became a closer than expected match between Miller, Murkowski, and McAdams-D, with the moderate voters likely to decide this race.

Results in Brief : --

Republicans won control of the House of Representatives in a decisive victory. While final results were not available at the time of writing, preliminary returns suggested a shift in fortune in the lower chamber of Congress with Republicans now in control of approximately 243 seats and Democrats falling to 192 seats. The result constituted something of a rout by Republicans. Several leading and well-known Democratic members of Congress fell to Republicans. Moderate "Blue Dog" Democrats in Republican-leaning districts were the main victims, essentially decimating their ranks and resulting in Democrats in the minority, now with the Progressive Caucus as the largest segment of the party in the House. Meanwhile, John Boehner was positioned to become the new House Speaker succeeding outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Despite the strong performance of the Republicans in the lower chamber, the upper chamber was a different story with Democrats managing to hold onto power. With one race called but not yet officially certified (Alaska), Democrats were nonetheless positioned to hold onto power in the Senate. As expected, all the races favored or considered to be "leaning" in one direction ended as forecast. Also as expected, North Dakota, Arkansas and Indiana constituted "pick up" victories for the Republicans. Among the "toss up" races where five Democratic seats were under fire, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin all went narrowly Republican adding to the Republican share. However, Democrats successfully defended seats in the West -- Colorado and Nevada. Significantly, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada held onto power despite an unfavorable election environment in which his approval ratings were low and the economy of his state was in shambles. His was a shockingly comfortable victory, given the fact that public polling showed him trailing Palin- and Tea Party-backed Angle.

Including two Independents allied with Democrats (neither of whom was up for re-election), Democrats now controlled 53 seats in the Senate. Republicans came up short in winning the upper chamber and now controlled 46 seats.

In Alaska, the results were not expected to be made official immediately since technically, "write-in candidates" won the most votes, with Miller in second place. Those "write-in" votes had to be examined to ensure that they were indeed intended for Murkowski before she could be declared the winner. The count showed Murkowski to be the winner, however, it was possible that Miller could delay the formalization of the election outcome with legal procedures. Murkowski has indicated that she might caucus with the Republicans but an ugly legal battle could sour her goodwill against a party that abandoned her.

Should that race end as expected, the final count for the Senate was expected to be 53 seats for the Democrats and 47 seats for the Republicans. The Democrats would control the upper chamber, potentially acting as a firewall against legislation passed in the now ultra-conservative dominated House of Representatives. There, complex power dynamics were expected to be manifest as establishment Republicans engage with insurgent Tea Party-backed Republicans. Cooperation with fellow Democrats and, indeed, the executive branch of government, was expected to be extremely limited, if existent at all.

Post-election Developments: --

On Nov. 3, 2010, President Barack Obama held a news conference focused on the new composition of the Congress, with an incoming Republican-dominated House of Representatives. The president attributed his party's election performance to the mood of the American voters who were frustrated at the pace of economic recovery. To that end, President Obama said, "I've got to take direct responsibility for the fact that we have not made as much

progress as we needed to make." President Obama said he would try to find common ground with Republicans on certain issues, and noted that cooperation was needed to address the matter of employment, the wider economy, and security. To that end, however, the president acknowledged that cooperation would be a difficult task. He said, "I'm not suggesting this will be easy. I won't pretend that we'll be able to bridge every difference or solve every disagreement." But he warned that without cooperation, Washington would be the site of gridlock saying, "What is absolutely true is that without any Republican support on anything it's going to be hard to get things done."

For their part, empowered Republicans said they intended to repeal the health care reforms passed by the outgoing Congress and signed into law by the president. That effort, though, could prove to be almost impossible since any legislation aimed at achieving such an end would have to pass the Senate, which remained in Democratic control, and a presidential veto. Moreover, the numbers were simply not in the Republicans favor to override a presidential veto. Republicans also emphasized that their other priorities included cutting spending to attend to the debt, and extending the Bush era tax cuts for wealthiest Americans. Political analysts, however, wasted no time in pointing out that these two latter priorities were actually on a collision course with one another. That is to say, it would be impossible to extend the Bush era tax cuts for the country's wealthiest Americans while also reducing the debt. Furthermore, there were questions about how exactly cuts to spending would ensue, short of unspecified earmarks which were unlikely to make a dent in the actual debt load. With the lion's share of the federal budget going to entitlement programs and defense, would Republicans be willing to propose slashing Social Security and Medicare? Or would they be looking to reductions in defense spending? Meanwhile, with the economy being the main concern of voters, how would this policy agenda affect the economic situation in the United States and would it alleviate the problem of unemployment? The answers to these questions were yet to be determined.

Post-election Commentary on the 2010 Electorate-

Why did Democrats in the House of Representatives suffer such a rout at the polls?

As discussed above, Democratic losses were expected on Nov. 2, 2010. With rare exceptions, the party in power has suffered at the polls in the mid-terms after a general (presidential) election. Accordingly, one could argue that purely on the grounds of precedent, this result was an expected one. As well, in an unfavorable economic landscape, again, the party in power was likely to be punished. While these two items partially explain the Democrats' fate on election day, they do not explain the sheer scope of their defeat in the House of Representatives. To this end, one must reconsider the so-called "enthusiasm gap." Anger has been a strong motivator in past mid-term elections. In 2006, Democrats were the beneficiaries of voter anger over the Bush administration's foreign policy, the ongoing wars, the state of the economy, and the handling of Hurricane Katrina, ultimately resulting in that "wave" election. Now, in 2010, the tables had turned and Republicans were the beneficiaries of a country just emerging from one of the worst economic downturns since the Great Depression and the slowness of recovery under the two years of full Democratic rule.

It should be noted that there are increasing suggestions that mid-term elections and general elections simply need to be understood as two different "events" of sorts. To understand the differences, one must look at the electorates in these two "events." Whereas Election 2008 yielded record turnout, with an unprecedented youth vote, and first time voters, Election 2010 was an older, less culturally diverse, but more conservative and traditional, electorate.

In part, these differences may be attributed to the very nature of the two "events." The presidential election event is something akin to a serial drama. It has "stars" of sorts on the national stage -- indeed, on the international stage -- who participate in this ongoing political drama, with the twists and turns recorded on the 24-hour cable news channels. This ongoing political drama continues for a duration of more than a year -- longer than any other country's election cycle. The nature of this "event" draws in a wider array of players including voters that pollsters might very well classify as "unlikely" in their modeling formulations. In contrast, the mid-term elections is not focused on rival stars vying for the presidency, but on several faceless players (legislators up for election) known only to the voters via names, advertising messages, and party affiliation. Consequently, mid-term elections do not have the same kind of mass appeal as presidential elections, attracting instead the so-called "party faithful" and the most motivated voters -- usually driven to the polls by fear or frustration.

Significant also is the fact that the fate of most elections reside with Independents and Moderates. While the two main parties have their own bases of support and depending on their "ground game" or turnout ability, they can get the party faithful to the polls, neither party can win an election with only base support; hence the need for independent support and support from the political center. On these two matters, exit poll data can be instructive.

Whereas Independents -- typically a disengaged grouping -- opted for Democrats overwhelmingly in 2008 with the hopes that President Obama would overcome partisanship and "fix Washington," two years later, they may have been frustrated by the ugly machinations of legislating and the slow pace of change. Polling data suggests that Independents were particularly concerned about the debt (see above for reference on this matter) -- hence their bid to move towards the Republicans in the 2010 election. Although there are more registered Democrats than Republicans in the United States, the same percent of both major parties went to the polls in 2010; specifically, the electorate was 36 percent Democratic, 36 percent Republican, and 28 percent Independent. Because Independents broke disproportionately for the Republicans, that party won the day.

On the matter of moderates, it should be noted that this is not a group that necessarily shifts from election to election in the same manner as Independents. Instead, this is a more stable group that over generations may move in one direction or the other. They may have voted for Republicans in past decades when centrist or moderate Republicans were more prevalent. However, as the Republican Party has moved more right-ward, moderates have tended to vote for Democrats in recent election cycles. The result has been Democratic reliance on self-described moderates, many of whom may or may not apply the Democratic Party label to themselves. In 2008, the liberal-moderate-conservative breakdown was 22 percent, 44 percent and 34 percent. In 2010, it was 20 percent, 39 percent and 41 percent -- denoting a far more conservative electorate than in previous years. The corollary was not that Americans have become more conservative in two years; it was more likely the case that conservatives were the most motivated to make it to the polls in 2010 as compared with their other ideological cohorts.

Demographics may have also been an issue. In 2008, the electorate was 74 percent white, 13 percent black, and nine percent Latino. The electorate in 2010 was 78 percent white, 10 percent black, and eight percent Latino. The result was a less ethnically diverse voting public in 2010. The survey data showed that Republicans won whites by a 22 percent margin (60 percent to 38 percent) -- a clear advantage when one considers that in the last major Republican "wave" election in 1994, Republicans won whites by a lower margin of 16 percentage points (58 percent to 42 percent). Likewise, in terms of age, in 2008, 18-to-29-year-olds made up 18 percent of the electorate while those 65-plus made up 16 percent of the electorate. In 2010, the shift was sharp -- the youth age group was reduced to 11 percent while seniors made up 23 percent of the electorate -- more than double the youth vote. As before, survey data has shown in several election cycles that youth voters favor Democratic candidates disproportionately, with senior voters increasingly swaying in the Republican direction. The result was -- as noted above -- an older, less culturally diverse, and more conservative electorate, which favors the Republicans more than the Democrats.

The final nail in the proverbial coffin for the Democrats was that turnout overall in 2010 was much lower than in 2008. Notably, one of the unexpected winners of the night was Harry Reid who outperformed the polls and embodied the exception to the turnout rule of 2010 by drawing upon union and Latino voting blocs -- reliable bases of the Democratic Party.

President Obama ends 2010 with productive "lame duck" session:

Summary:

In the first part of 2010, efforts by United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Russian counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to move forward with efforts to finalize a new arms reduction treaty. At issue was a new treaty to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expired on Dec. 5, 2009. By the close of 2010, United States President Barack Obama was urging the Senate to ratify the new treaty forged and signed months earlier by both his country and Russia. President Obama's efforts were rewarded with a significant political victory when the new nuclear arms control treaty with Russia was ratified in the Senate with

bipartisan support. Earlier, President Obama was also successful in finally garnering the repeal of the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy that prevented gay and lesbian individuals from openly serving in the United States military.

President Obama had been a vocal critic of the policy, but advocated its repeal ensue via the legislative process. With both these accomplishments at hand, President Obama ended the year on a high note, having signed off on a litany of policy accomplishments, pushed through by the outgoing Democratic-dominated Congress.

1. Nuclear arms treaty with Russia ratified:

In March 2010, the United States and Russia announced they had arrived at a breakthrough agreement that would pave the way for the establishment of a new START. Titled "Measures to Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms," the new agreement was a milestone in the decades-long thrust to decrease the chances of nuclearized warfare. Indeed, it could arguably be characterized as one of the most important treaties forged in a generation.

Both President Obama and his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev, were expected to sign the landmark accord, which provides for the reduction of long-range nuclear weapons on both sides, and sets the path for further disarmament in the future. The accord was illustrative of the new texture of bilateral relations, marked by an increased level of cooperation and trust between the United States and Russia in the last two years. "Measures to Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms" was expected to be signed on April 8, 2010, in the Czech capital of Prague, symbolically marking President Barack Obama's call for a world without nuclear weapons in that very city a year earlier. The timing would also ensure that both the United States and Russia would be able to enter the forthcoming Summit on Nuclear Security with a joint claim of accomplishment. They would also have the moral high ground in their efforts to pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Lauding the treaty as the most comprehensive weapons control accord in two decades, President Obama declared: "With this agreement, the United States and Russia - the two largest nuclear powers in the world - also send a clear signal that we intend to lead." He continued, "By upholding our own commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, we strengthen our global efforts to stop the spread of these weapons, and to ensure that other nations meet their own responsibilities." Via his spokesperson, President Medvedev said the treaty "reflects the balance of interests of both nations." As well, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the treaty marked a "new level of trust" between the two countries.

On April 8, 2010, President Obama and President Medvedev held private talks at Prague Castle ahead of the signing ceremony. Later, both leaders signed their names on the new document that would significantly reduce the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by their respective countries. The two leaders of the countries controlling 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons made it clear that membership in the global nuclear club came with extraordinary responsibility, and a vision of non-proliferation. President Obama said, "This day demonstrates the determination of the United States and Russia... to pursue responsible global leadership. Together, we are keeping our commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which must be the foundation of global non-proliferation." Meanwhile, President Medvedev said: "This is a win-win situation. No one stands to lose in this agreement. Both parties won ... the entire world community won." In effect, the fact that the two countries were able to find consensus on such a complex matter, and the two leaders were able to sign one of the most important treaties in decades, signaled the anticipated "re-setting" of United States-Russian relations sought by the Obama administration in the United States when it came to power.

The difficult process of forging and signing such a bilateral agreement would be followed by the equally challenging process of ratification in the United States Senate. With an eye on this process, President Obama met in the Oval Office with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) and the ranking republican, Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana) to discuss this imperative. To the end, Senator Kerry said, "A well-designed treaty will send an important message to the rest of the world that America is prepared to lead efforts with key stakeholders to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons." It should be noted that the new START would also have to be ratified by the Russian Duma. Nevertheless, ahead of a global security summit scheduled to

take place in Washington, Russia and the United States would be able to claim the high ground on leadership and responsibility among nuclear-armed nation states.

In November 2010, President Obama was calling on the United States Senate to ratify the treaty. He characterized the need to do so as "a national security imperative" on Nov. 18, 2010, demanding that the upper chamber of Congress act affirmatively before departing at the close of the year. Bringing as much pressure to bear, President Obama drew upon support from former secretaries of states and secretaries of defense from both political parties in the United States -- Republican and Democratic -- to emphasize the urgency in ratifying the treaty. Speaking in the Roosevelt Room in the White House, the United States president said, "This is not a Democratic concept. This is not a Republican concept. This is a concept of American national security that has been promoted by Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and now my administration. We've taken the time to do this right." President Obama noted that his country would not "afford to gamble" with the matter. He emphasized that the United States could not risk alienating Russia, whose support would be needed in pressuring Iran, given that country's suspected program of nuclear proliferation. He continued, "This is not about politics. It's about national security. This is not a matter than can be delayed."

But delay was on the mind of Republican Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona who rejected the president's call for a review process during the Senate's lame duck session of the outgoing Senate. At least eight Republican votes would be needed by the outgoing Senate for ratification; in the newly-elected Senate, Democrats would have a tougher hill to climb as they would need the support of at least 14 Republicans. Recently re-elected Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat of Nevada, expressed support for rapid action on the treaty, and said that he was "puzzled" by Kyl's desire to slow down action on a national security priority. Speaking to this issue, President Obama said: "Every month that goes by without a treaty means that we are not able to verify what's going on on the ground in Russia. And if we delay indefinitely, American leadership on nonproliferation and America's national security will be weakened." The president's stance had support from the other side of the aisle in the form of Senator Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana, who said: "This is a situation of some national security peril."

In December 2010, ahead of the Senate vote on the treaty, the minority leader of the Senate, Republican Mitch McConnell, said he intended to vote against the deal, saying it would limit the United States missile defense options. This view, however, was in direct contrast to the bill at hand, which as President Obama noted, placed no restrictions on missile defense. Also joining the "no" vote chorus was Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona who has steadfastly voted against most of President Obama's agenda. The lack of support from the likes of McConnell and McCain notwithstanding, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid made clear that a vote would be scheduled for Dec. 21, 2010. He said, "It is time to move forward on a treaty that will help reverse nuclear proliferation and make it harder for terrorists to get their hands on a nuclear weapon." Reid continued that it would "come down to a simple choice: you either want to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists, or you don't."

On Dec. 21, 2010, eleven Republicans joined the Democrats and Independents who caucus with the Democrats to end debate on the matter. The cloture was 67-28 and indicated that President Obama had overcome Republican opposition to secure overwhelming support for the new arms control treaty with Russia. As expected, Republicans such as McConnell, McCain, and Kyl, did not support the proxy vote; however, several Republicans broke ranks with the party leadership to do so.

A final vote on the bill was set for Dec. 22, 2010. Vice President Joe Biden presided over the Senate vote while Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton observed the procedure from the floor of the upper chamber of Congress. Speaking ahead of the final vote, Foreign Relations Senate Committee Chairman John Kerry of Massachusetts said, "The question is whether we move the world a little out of the dark shadow of nuclear nightmare." Not surprisingly, that final vote ended in overwhelming bipartisan support for the nuclear arms control treaty. Indeed, the final cote was 71-26, and the "yes" contingent included 13 Republicans (again breaking ranks with the party leadership), two Independents who caucus with the Democrats, and Democratic Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon who participated in the vote only two days after having cancer surgery.

The result was ratification of the new treaty to replace START -- and a significant foreign policy victory for President Obama. Lauding the bipartisan vote, President Obama characterized the treaty as the most important arms control pact in nearly two decades. At a news conference at the White House, he said: "This treaty will enhance our leadership to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and seek the peace of a world without them."

2. Controversial "Don't ask, don't tell" military policy repealed

In May, 2010, the United States House of Representatives voted in favor of President Barack Obama's proposal to repeal the so called "don't ask, don't tell" policy preventing gays and lesbians from openly serving in the military. The vote was 234-194 and demonstrated a growing consensus that sexual orientation should not stand in the way of serving the country. Indeed, polling data in recent times has shown that most Americans support the repeal. The chief sponsor of the amendment, Representative Patrick Murphy, a Democrat from Pennsylvania who served in the Iraq War, said of his own combat experience: "My teams did not care whether a fellow soldier was straight or gay if they could fire their assault rifle or run a convoy down ambush alley and do their job so everyone would come home safely." That being said, Republicans overwhelmingly voted against it, with many of them saying that their objections were due to statements by some military figures calling for more time to study the implications of the change. However, Democrats have emphasized the fact that the legislation would ensure that the repeal could go into effect only after the publication of a Pentagon report detailing effects on service members and their families, followed by certification by the president, the defense secretary, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Earlier, in the fall of 2009, at an address to the Human Rights Campaign --the United States largest pro-gay rights group -- United States President Barack Obama made clear that he would not renege on his campaign promise to repeal the ban on gay people serving openly in the military. These moves occurred in the face of increasing criticism that the White House has not been aggressive in acting in favor of gay marriage and in repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" military policy. Addressing these very complaints, President Obama, "I appreciate that many of you don't believe progress has come fast enough. Do not doubt the direction we are heading and the destination we will reach." President Obama also said that the military could not afford to lose skilled soldiers who happened to be gay or lesbian, saying, "We should not be punishing patriotic Americans who have stepped forward to serve the country. We should be celebrating their willingness to step forward and show such courage."

The next step was a similar vote in the Senate. To that end, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted to end the "don't ask, don't tell" policy and allow gays to serve openly in military by a vote of 16-12. The panel vote in the Senate moved the legislation along to a full vote in that chamber, where it was expected to face tougher resistance than in the house. In fact, Republicans were promising the filibuster the legislation. There, the legislation was not soon advanced due to lack of support from Republicans.

Nevertheless, gay rights groups applauded the developments in both chambers of the Democrat-led Congress, indicating that they were a step in the right direction. Joe Solmonese, president of the gay rights organization, Human Rights Campaign, said, "This is the beginning of the end of a shameful ban on open service by lesbian and gay troops that has weakened our national security."

On Oct. 12, 2010, a federal judge dismissed the ban preventing gays and lesbians from openly serving in the military, effectively setting a legal battle in motion. Although President Obama has consistently expressed his opposition to the policy, the Justice Department was prepared to move forward with an appeal and called on United States District Judge Virginia Phillips to stay her ruling while the government prepared its case. The Pentagon offered a hazy depiction of how it would handle the landscape of legal limbo, saying that that the military "will of course obey the law," while also noting that it would halt enforcement of the policy while the case was still being determined. That haziness continued as the military said that it would accept openly gay recruits for the first time in United States history, even though legal standing was still being determined. To that end, the Justice Department called for a stay of the judge's order, and even if the judge ultimately ruled to reject the government's call, it was likely to launch an appeal, effectively continuing the state of legal limbo for openly-gay recruits to the military ranks of the United States.

Meanwhile, President Obama appeared to endorse the idea of the Senate moving forward with the repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy during an impending "lame duck" session of the upper chamber following the November 2010 mid-term elections. During a media interview, President Obama said, "Congress explicitly passed a law that took away the power of the executive branch to end this policy." He continued, "We have, I believe, enough votes in the Senate to go ahead and remove this constraint on me. Anybody should be able to serve — and they shouldn't have to lie about who they are in order to serve." To this end, in the third week of December 2010, after the aforementioned Pentagon report was released suggesting little resistance to the policy, the bill was advanced by cloture vote in the Senate. Hours later on by a Vote of 65 to 31, the Senate voted to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," effectively ending the policy that prevented gays and lesbians from openly serving in the United States military.

See below for information pertaining to the official end of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in mid-2011.

National Spotlight in 2011

Boehner takes gavel as new Speaker of House of Representatives

On Jan. 5, 2011, a new legislative session began in Washington D.C. with the incoming Republican-dominated lower house of Congress. Republican John Boehner took the gavel and became the new Speaker of House of Representatives, replacing Democrat Nancy Pelosi. High on the agenda for Republicans are issues such as cutting the size of government, cutting spending, and repealing the newly-passed health care plan. Boehner and the Republicans, though, would still have to deal with a Democratic Senate in the passage of any legislation hoping to reach President Barack Obama's desk for signature. There, the Democratic president would have the power of veto on policies he deems objectionable. The scenario augured a landscape in which policy showdowns were likely.

Changes afoot in President Obama's White House

On Jan. 7, 2011, President Barack Obama appointed Gene Sperling as his new director of the National Economic Council (NEC). A well-known Washington insider with bipartisan credentials, Sperling has served recently as counselor to Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and was the director of the NEC during the Clinton administration. In that earlier role as NEC director, Sperling played a vital role in crafting the 1993 deficit reduction bill and was instrumental in putting together the 1997 balanced budget agreement. It should be noted that on the very day of Sperling's appointment, the December jobs report was released showing that the unemployment rate had dropped to 9.4 percent -- its lowest level in almost two years. Even so, job growth has been slow, indicating that the economy continues to be a serious burden for the administration.

On Jan. 6, 2011, President Barack Obama named William Daley to become the new White House Chief of Staff, replacing Rahm Emanuel who resigned in 2010 to run for mayor of Chicago. Until President Obama named Daley to the role of White House Chief of Staff, Peter Rouse had functioned in an interim capacity. Daley -- the brother of outgoing Chicago Mayor Richard Daley -- has been at the helm of major corporations and served as commerce secretary under former President Bill Clinton. Thus, it was believed that the selection of William Daley signaled the Obama administration's intent to rebuild its relationship with big business at a time of economic challenge.

A day earlier, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs announced that he intended to exit his role at the end of February 2011. Gibbs was expected to continue on in an informal advisory role but would be concentrating on President Obama's 2012 re-election bid along with adviser David Axelrod (also expected to exit his current role as White House advisor) and Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina.

U.S. Defense Secretary Gates announces military budget cuts

On Jan. 6, 2011, United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced military budget cuts totaling \$78 billion. The cuts were part of a five-year spending plan for the Department of Defense and were separate from the plan to reduce spending by \$100 billion via internal savings and reduced administrative costs. This military budget reduction was partially dependent on the decision to abandon funding for a \$14 billion amphibious fighting vehicle, as well as the end of an Army surface-to-air missile program.

Political Conditions United-States

Republican-dominated House of Representatives moves to repeal health care legislation

On Jan. 19, 2011, the Republican-dominated United States House of Representatives passed legislation repealing signature health care reform, which had passed into law the previous year. The vote was 245-189 and was clearly split along party lines.

Republicans had insisted that health care reform would increase spending, raise taxes, and eliminate jobs, even though the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office reported that a repeal of health care reform would adversely affect the deficit.

The repeal was being regarded as a symbolic measure with little hope of immediately impacting the political landscape since it would not be taken up in the Senate, which remained under Democratic control. Moreover, no bill repealing comprehensive health care reform would ever be signed into law by President Barack Obama; instead, such legislation -- in the unlikely event it was ever passed in the Senate -- would be subject to guaranteed veto by the president.

Attempted assassination of Democratic Congresswoman Giffords; six dead including federal judge and a child

On Jan. 8, 2011, while she was hosting a community meeting with her constituents at the local supermarket in Tucson, Arizona, United States Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, a Democrat, was shot at point blank range in the head. Giffords -- a three-term congresswoman -- was elected first in 2006 to the 8th district of Arizona during the 2006 Democratic wave. She has the distinction of being only the third woman in Arizona's history to be elected to Congress. She was elected again in 2008 -- the year Barack Obama became president. Giffords narrowly won a difficult re-election race against a Tea Party-backed Republican candidate, Jesse Kelly, in the 2010 mid-term elections -- a year regarded as extremely tough for Democrats. Giffords -- a so called "Blue Dog" Democrat -- gained a reputation for working well on both sides of the political aisle, and has a largely moderate voting record.

Giffords was not the only victim. The shooter, later identified as 22-year old Jared Loughner, shot his Glock semi-automatic pistol at others gathered in the crowd. As Loughner emptied his magazine and stopped to reload, Patricia Maisch -- a woman who was herself shot -- was able to grab the magazine from him with the help of two other witnesses and subdue the assassin. In the end, twenty people were shot at the scene. Six people were killed including a federal judge, John Roll, who stopped at the supermarket to greet Giffords after attending Catholic mass, Christine Taylor Green, a nine-year old child who had been elected to student council and wanted to meet Giffords, and Giffords' own aide, Gabriel Zimmerman. Three other people -- Dorwan Stoddard, Phyllis Schneck and Dorothy Morris -- were also killed at the scene.

For her part, Giffords was flown to the University Medical Center and taken immediately into surgery. She was operated on by trauma surgeon Peter Rhee, a former military doctor who served in Afghanistan. Despite expectations that a gunshot victim who endured a bullet to the brain would not survive, Giffords defied the odds and was reported to be in a critical condition after surgery with surgeons expressing cautious optimism that she might pull through. Giffords' fortune appeared to be due to the entry location of the bullet. At first, doctors said that the bullet entered at the back of her skull and then exited in the same hemisphere of the brain in her forehead. Days later, they said that the entry point was at the forehead. Regardless, the central point was that the trajectory of the bullet remained in the same hemisphere with a clean entry and exit point, minimizing the possibility that the bullet would explode in her brain. Giffords' survival was also credited to a young intern on the scene, Daniel Hernandez, who checked the pulses of several victims, and after determining that she was still alive, placed pressure on her wounds to staunch the bleeding, holding her upright in his arms so that she would not choke. After surgery, doctors reported that Giffords was responsive to simple commands although she would remain in a medically-induced coma to rest her brain, and would likely be subject to some brain swelling.

Hours after the shooting, United States President Barack Obama gave a brief news address in which he described the violent massacre as a "tragedy for our entire country" and called on Americans to "come together and support each other." Meanwhile, newly-elected House Speaker John Boehner released a statement in which he said he

was "horrified" by the events that transpired, and said that an attack on one member of Congress was an attack on all.

The shooter, Loughner, was in federal custody and was transported to Phoenix. On Jan. 9, 2011, Loughner was indicted on five federal counts in the United States District Court for Arizona. Among the charges were the attempted assassination of Giffords, the attempted murder of staff members of Giffords, Pamela Simon and Ron Barber (identified as federal employees), the killing of United States District Court Chief Judge John Roll, and the killing of the head of Giffords' community outreach, Gabriel Zimmerman. Apparently, the murders and attempted murders of the other victims would be prosecuted in state court due to jurisdictional issues. Authorities have been very clear about the fact that Giffords was the intended target of assassination by Loughner, given the evidence and paraphernalia found at his home. They have also asserted that Loughner acted alone.

While Loughner's motivation for the massacre was unknown at the time of writing, YouTube videos by the assassin suggested that he may have been mentally unstable, and influenced by a plethora of ideas ranging from anti-governmental notions, to paranoid fears of mind control, an ultra-libertarian desire to return to the Gold Standard (re: currency), and a deep resentment of individuals he described as "illiterate" and who comprise Giffords' congressional district. His reading preferences included works such as Mein Kampf and the Communist Manifesto. A strict atheist, Loughner apparently tried to join the military but his application was rejected due to admissions of extensive marijuana usage. Fox News also reported that Loughner had a troubled past with law enforcement and may have been influenced by publications by the American Renaissance. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes the American Renaissance group as "white nationalist" with an anti-government ideology and an anti-immigration and an anti-Semitic orientation. Jared Taylor, the founder of the group, said that there was no evidence that Loughner had any subscriptions to American Renaissance publications.

In the backdrop of these developments has been a brewing debate about whether the polarized political climate in the United States, characterized by vituperative rhetoric and stark imagery played a part in the national tragedy. Giffords' office was vandalized after the heated health care debate in the United States in the first part of 2010. Then several months later, ahead of the 2010 mid-term elections, Giffords' opponent, Jesse Kelly, featured a campaign photograph of himself holding his weapon with the headline that read: "Get on Target for Victory in November. Help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office. Shoot a fully automatic M16 with Jesse Kelly."

Also of particular note was the fact that former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin placed 20 Democratic members of the House of Representatives on what she herself dubbed "a bullseye hit list." That list targeted 20 Democrats who voted in favor of the health care bill for defeat in the forthcoming November 2010 mid-term elections. Some critics pointed to Palin's use of gun imagery of crosshairs on the 20 congressional districts, along with her political lexicon that has often invoked violent tropes, such as "don't retreat, reload." While Palin has said that she was not calling for actual violence, in a strange and eerie twist of fate, Giffords herself was interviewed on MSNBC in March 2010 expressing opposition to Palin's tactics as follows: "We're on Sarah Palin's targeted list, but the thing is, that the way that she has it depicted has the crosshairs of a gun sight over our district. When people do that, they have to realize that there are consequences to that action."

It should be emphasized that there was no evidence that Loughner was actually influenced by Palin, who expressed a statement of condolences to the victims and their families. Nevertheless, Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik invoked the overall atmosphere of political vitriol in the state of Arizona in his discussion of the attempted assassination of Giffords. He said, "The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. And unfortunately, Arizona, I think, has become the capital. We have become the Mecca for prejudice and bigotry." Dupnick acknowledged that Loughner was very likely mentally unstable, but he was unwilling to attribute derangement as the only cause of the massacre. Dupnick instead intimated that pervasive violent rhetoric used by talk show hosts and politicians in the United States has been used to inflame the public already ensconced in a cauldron of fiery divisiveness. He warned that such virulent rhetoric could very well influence unstable minds.

President Barack Obama offered words of condolence to fellow citizens at a nationally-televised memorial service for the victims on Jan. 12, 2011. Paying tribute to the victims of the horror that unfolded in Tucson, President Obama said that while he could not "fill the hole" torn in the hearts of his fellow, grief-filled citizens, all Americans

could honor the victims through unity. Along that vein, President Obama urged Americans to elevate political debate saying, "But at a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarised - at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do - it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds." The highlight of the president's speech included an announcement that Giffords had opened her eyes for the first time that night.

Note that on Jan. 16, 2011, Giffords' condition was changed from "critical" to "serious" given the fact that she was now breathing on her own, without the aid of a ventilator. Then, a day later, Giffords' husband reported that the congresswoman was smiling and able to move her arms pro-actively. By Jan. 21, 2011, Giffords was transported to the Texas Medical Center in Houston for intensive physical therapy, aimed at maximizing her recovery from her brain injuries.

President Obama gives his 2011 State of the Union address

On Jan. 25, 2011, United States President Barack Obama offered his annual State of the Union address. President Obama commenced his speech by noting the absence of Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, the victim of a failed assassination bid weeks earlier who was now recovering and undergoing rehabilitation in a Houston hospital. He said the brutal act of violence, that left six people dead including a federal judge and a child, served to remind all Americans that they "share common hopes and a common creed."

The president then used the annual address to urge bipartisan efforts in addressing the pressing challenge of joblessness in the United States. That bipartisan spirit was evident in the chamber, as several Democrats and Republicans sat together, instead of the traditional division of seating by party.

President Obama acknowledged the dangerous debt level in the United States and the need for difficult reductions in expenditures, therefore calling for a freeze on discretionary spending for a five-year period. He also noted that the all sectors of the economy would have to cut their spending, including the defense department. President Obama, nonetheless, advocated the need for investing in education and energy technologies of the future. He said, "We'll invest in biomedical research, information technology, and especially clean energy technology -- an investment that will strengthen our security, protect our planet, and create countless new jobs for our people." Indeed, the future factored highly saying, "We are poised for progress" following "the worst recession most of us have ever known." Other elements covered in the address included the pressing need to deal with illegal immigration, health care reform, which he said would not be re-litigated, but which could be improved. The president also called for large-scale improvements in infrastructure -- both physical and in terms of wireless internet penetration. While President Obama reminded the American people that combat operations in Iraq were over and troops were on track for withdrawal from Afghanistan, there was little emphasis on foreign policy in this address, which was, in a sense, an ode to America and the American people. Noteworthy was his repeated references to the diverse makeup of the American citizenry, including gays now being allowed to serve openly in the military.

The over-arching theme of the speech appeared to be a look to the future, as the president opted for a tone of optimism and American "exceptionalism," reminiscent of Reagan and Kennedy respectively. Indeed, the resounding claim "We [Americans] do big things" appeared to be not only a clarion call to respond to the contemporary challenges with creative innovation, exemplified by the advance of the American space program after the Soviets launched Sputnik, but also a measure of state craft or nation-building. The president made mention of the rise of developing countries such as India and China, and warned that it should be a priority on the national agenda not to be eclipsed by these burgeoning powers.

Following the Democratic president's speech, the Republican response was given by Congressman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. Known as a rising star within the Republican Party, Ryan offered a nuts and bold address in which he outlined a traditional conservative view of the role of government as limited, and with a focus on austere cuts aimed at reducing the debt. In many senses, the foreboding tone of Ryan's speech, peppered with phrases such as, "If government's growth is left unchecked and unchallenged, America's best century will be considered our past century," appeared to be a sharp contrast to the optimistic and future-focused theme of President Obama's speech.

That being said, a day after the State of the Union, the Republicans remained focused on their policy agenda and said they would reject any increased spending and were focused on addressing the "crushing burden of debt."

For his part, President Obama would be helped by post speech polling and analysis that clearly indicated his words had positively resonated with the American people who watched the State of the Union address. Both CBS and CNN showed that viewers polled had an overwhelmingly positive response to the president's speech and his plans for the country and the future. Analysts noted that it may well be regarded as the unofficial commencement of President Obama's re-election campaign.

Union busting measure passes in Wisconsin; labor protests expand to other states

In late February 2011, a wave of mass action by labor unions desperate to hold onto their rights ensued in Wisconsin but soon spread to other states including Indiana and Ohio. At issue was the decision by the newly-elected Republican governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, to move decisively to curtail state workers' rights and abolish the right to collective bargaining in what he said was an attempt to address the state's budget crisis. Labor unions railed against this move, emphasizing the fact that they would have willingly negotiated reforms aimed at helping bringing down costs, however, they were completely shut out of talks. They also drew attention to the collective bargaining provision of the proposed legislation, noting that a primary objective seemed not be the matter of balancing the budget; instead, they charged it was a politically-motivated move to crush the labor union movement, in a move known colloquially as "union busting." Traditionally, Unions have been more aligned with Democrats than Republicans.

Accordingly, labor unions mobilized and took to the legislative center in the city of Madison in numbers at times exceeding 25,000 to demand that their rights be respected. Meanwhile, they were helped by the exit of the Democrats in the state Senate from the scene, effectively denying that legislative body a quorum, and thus, a vote on the matter. Walker appeared undeterred by the mass action and held firm to his agenda. He also promised to send state security forces after the Democrats to force them to attend session and end the delay on the voting. This effort was not successful as the Democrats sought safe haven across state lines in union-friendly Illinois.

Protests soon spread to Indiana and Ohio -- also states with Republican governors -- where a similar legislative agenda aimed at curbing union strength was in the offing. In Ohio, the legislation aimed to restrict the collective bargaining rights of the public employees; in Indiana, the bill was oriented toward private sector unions. In that state (Indiana), Democrats followed the lead of their party compatriots in Wisconsin and fled the state, effectively stalling votes on the labor legislation.

The situation was moving toward something of a showdown with the protest movement gaining strength in various states, and with the Wisconsin governor making it clear that he would not withdraw his plan or look toward a negotiated resolution. Indeed, Walker threatened to commence layoffs of state workers if Democrats continued to prevent the vote. However, Walker's political cause was not helped when his cohorts in Indiana, Florida, and Michigan, all distanced themselves from such hard line tactics. All three Republican governors indicated that they would look toward a softer touch with the labor unions, and would not pursue the option of ending collective bargaining rights. Still, by March 2011, Michigan's Republican-controlled Senate passed a bill enhancing the Republican Governor's ability to declare financial emergencies in municipalities and appoint an Emergency Financial Manager (EFM). This EFM would be enshrined with the authority to suspend contracts with unions and even fire elected officials from their posts. In Florida, the Tea Party-backed Governor Rick Scott said he was cutting taxes on businesses by several billion dollars, while at the same time implementing austerity measures. Chief among those measures was a reduction on teachers' salaries. The governor also said that he was rejecting federal funds to develop high-speed rail. In Ohio, the Republican Governor Kasich was expected to follow in the footsteps of Wisconsin's Governor Walker by pursuing legislation aimed at removing the right for unions to collective bargaining.

Meanwhile, in Wisconsin, March 9, 2011, was a "red letter" day of sorts as Republicans in the state senate approved the plan to strip public-sector unions of most of their collective bargaining rights. The legislation passed 18-1 with only Republicans voting since Democrats were still out of the state. The Republicans utilized a procedural

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move to push for the vote on the measure in a special conference committee instead of in the midst of a full hearing, with the full senate present. Ironically, to enact this measure without a quorum, the bill had to be entirely stripped of any of its financial measures aimed at balancing the budget, leaving it purely legislation aimed at curtailing union rights to collectively bargain. Despite the protests of the Democratic leader from the state assembly who railed against the measure as being potentially illegal, and amidst shouts from the crowds of protesters screaming, "Shame, shame, shame!" and "Cowards!" -- the vote went forward. Across the border in Illinois, state Democrats angrily said that the Republicans' tactics made it clear that the legislation was never about the budget and purely a matter of politics -- specifically, "union busting." Democratic senate minority leader, Mark Miller, excoriated Republicans for showing gross disrespect for the people of Wisconsin. He said, "Tonight, 18 senate Republicans conspired to take government away from the people." Governor Walker remained undaunted and unmoved by any of these criticisms; he issued a statement that read: "I applaud the legislature's action today to stand up to the status quo and take a step in the right direction to balance the budget and reform government."

After tense budget negotiations, deal made government "shutdown" averted

Government funding was at issue in April 2011 as Republicans in Congress were unable to make progress in negotiations with their Democratic cohorts and President Barack Obama in the White House. Without consensus on funding, the government could well be subject to a "shutdown," reminiscent of the 1990s when Republicans in Congress were unable -- and/or unwilling -- to forge a compromise with then-Democratic President Bill Clinton. Discussions between President Obama and Republican House Speaker ended in failure after successive attempts to reach a deal.

Both sides have viewed the matter through their own lenses. President Obama, attending a rare news conference, insisted that both sides had originally come to the table with an agreement on the amount of budget cuts to implement (i.e. cuts amounting to \$33 billion), which was now being changed by the Republicans (to \$40 billion) at the behest of the hard-line "Tea Party" wing of that party. The president also reminded the Republicans that in all political matters, compromise was essential and no one side could have everything desired. Boehner claimed that there was no agreement on the number associated with budget cuts and also claimed there was no agreement on policy. Meanwhile, a leading Republican, Mike Pence, addressed a group of "Tea Party" members of Congress, urging little or no compromise, and warning that without an agreement a government "shutdown" was likely. His comments were met by cheers by Republicans in attendance.

Still, on a more promising note, as of April 7, 2011, even after repeated failed meetings between government leadership wings, Democratic Majority Leader in the Senate, Harry Reid, indicated that negotiations had not ended and that a new round of talks would ensue that night. Likewise, Boehner indicated that all parties involved believed that an agreement could ultimately be reached. President Obama offered no comment at that time; he had earlier warned that public employees, including the military, were at risk of non-payment if a deal did not soon come to fruition.

Boehner indicated that he would introduce a stopgap measure intended to fund the government for another week, include \$12 billion in cuts, and ensure Pentagon funding through September. He and the Republicans suggested that failing to go along with the stopgap measure would be akin to failing to guarantee payment to troops. For his part, President Obama -- who had himself earlier warned about the perils of failing to act on the budget -- warned that the proposal would be vetoed since it failed to fully address the problem of full-year funding of the government. Indeed, the president had already signed two stopgap bills, in order to give further time for spending negotiations.

In other developments, Democrats railed against Republicans for including riders in a House budget bill (with \$61 billion in cuts) that would de-fund Planned Parenthood and the Environmental Protection Agency. The Democrats accused the Republicans of using the budget issue to push forth their own social and philosophical agenda. To this end, Senate Majority Leader Reid said, "The issue is ideology, not numbers." He continued, "These matters have no place on a budget bill."

Ultimately, though, a last-minute budget deal was forged between Democrats and Republicans, and the feared government "shutdown" was averted. Central to the agreement was a stop-gap pending bill to allow government

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functions to continue while the actual budget plan could be finalized. In that final plan, both parties agreed to slash about \$38 billion in funding.

President Obama hailed the agreement and said that the respective parties made difficult decisions and compromised on important issues. He said, "Some of the cuts we agreed to will be painful. Programs people rely on will be cut back. Needed infrastructure projects will be delayed. And I would not have made these cuts in better circumstances." But the president also emphasized the political and economic success of the agreement, which he said would result in "the biggest annual spending cut in history." Yet to be funded, however, would be the larger budget battle for 2012 funding of the government, as well as the matter of raising the debt ceiling, and tackling the deficit in the longer term.

President Obama announces changes to national security team

On April 28, 2011, United states President Barack Obama announced a change in his national security team. Of significance was his decision to replace retiring Defense Secretary Robert Gates (a Bush-era holdover) with Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta, while

replacing Panetta at the intelligence agency with General David Petraeus, the well-regarded commander of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to some analyst, these moves seemed to underline President Obama's intention to eventually draw down the wars in those two countries, while concentrating on the intelligence elements of the country's defense and counter-terrorism strategies going forward. Still, with many of the same players on the landscape in key roles -- Panetta and Petraeus -- it was apparent that the national security team was marked by continuity.

President Obama calls for pre-1967 boundaries as basis for two state solution in Middle East; Palestinians prepare unilateral bid for recognition at United Nations

Background

On May 19, 2011, during a speech at the United States Department of State outlining United States policy and the Middle East, President Barack Obama said that a future Palestinian state would be based on the 1967 borders.

The United States president said, "The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states." Although a long-standing tenet of Middle East negotiations (as discussed below), President Obama's statement yielded rebuke from hardliners who claimed he was abandoning Israel, and tensions with the Netanyahu administration. The controversy -- false though it might be -- over President Obama's policy stance on Middle East Peace was expected to carry over for several days. The president was scheduled to offer a speech at an American pro-Israel lobbying entity, AIPAC, at its annual conference. As well, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was in the United States for a visit and was scheduled to a joint session of the United States Congress.

Summary --

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has sought full membership for a Palestinian state within the United Nations. He said that full status and recognition at the United Nations was a legitimate right for the Palestinian people, and that this cause would be taken up at the meeting of the United Nations. Of course, the unilateral measure has been opposed by Israel, which has cast the move as divisive and unlikely to help the peace process, which aims to achieve a two-state solution with an independent Israel and an independent Palestine living side by side in peace and security. For its part, the United States has echoed Israel's concerns and urged a return to the peace process and the negotiating table as the only legitimate path to achieving the two-state solution. The United States also warned the Palestinians that it would use its veto power at the United Nations Security Council to quell the Palestinians' unilateral bid for recognition. The unilateral bid for recognition at the United Nations by

the Palestinians was expected to open the metaphoric "Pandora's box" of diplomatic tensions, with countries in the global community forced to take sides.

Political Background --

A key issue has been the Palestinians' call for recognition of a state consistent with the 1967 borders, which encompasses the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. This terrain has been occupied by Israel since 1967 and has been a keystone issue in all discussions and peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. A peace plan advanced by United States President Barack Obama in May 2011 had called for pre-1967 boundaries (with swaps) as the basis for two-state solution in Middle East. The plan evoked anxiety on the part of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, despite the fact that this has been the foundation for previous peace initiatives.

Indeed, the pre-1967 boundaries refers to the borders that existed before the six-day Middle East war in 1967 that extended Israeli control into the West Bank and Gaza with predominantly Palestinian populations. That terrain has constituted the literal and figurative grounds of contestation in Israel and the Palestinian territories since some 300,000 Israeli Jews have constructed settlements on the outlying areas. Settlement activity has raised the ire of Palestinians who believe that the encroachment will curtail their own rights to land for a future Palestinian state. The matter has been one of great consternation, and has resided at the heart of peace negotiations with Palestinians demanding a halt to settlement activity, always alongside Israelis' demands for an end to attacks by Palestinian militants.

To be precise, peace initiatives on the Middle East over the years have often rested on the notion of resorting to pre-1967 borders -- at the very least as a point from which to begin negotiations. Stated another way, while brokers of peace in the Middle East may not have overtly foregrounded the pre-1967 borders in the forthright manner of President Obama, the same principle has been cast as a "jumping off point" of sorts (and not the ultimate destination) of peace negotiations for decades. It is well known that Israel will not accept the wholesale notion of the pre-1967 borders, however, trade offs for other priority issues have always been part of the terms of peace negotiations. In this respect, President Obama's stance has differed little from predecessors in orientation, especially as he emphasized the notion of "mutually agreed swaps" of terrain for the creation of "a viable Palestine, and a secure Israel."

Nevertheless, President Obama's peace initiative earlier in the year set off a firestorm at home and abroad among right-leaning and hard line politicians. Republicans at home accused him of abandoning Israel, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was quick to note that the borders that existed prior to the 1967 war were "indefensible." The Israeli head of government was referring to settlements such as those in Judea and Samaria that would be left undefended beyond those territorial lines. Prime Minister Netanyahu also said that he appreciated President Obama's "commitment to peace" but that for peace to endure, "the viability of a Palestinian state cannot come at the expense of the viability of the one and only Jewish state." Prime Minister Netanyahu, therefore, called for President Obama to affirm the United States' 2004 commitment to Israel, in which then-President George W. Bush said that Israel would be able to hold on to substantial settlements as part of a future peace deal.

It should be noted that despite this sudden controversy erupting from President Obama's plan, in fact, a 2002 "land for peace" deal tabled by Saudi Arabia contained the very same "withdrawal to pre-1967 borders" provision and was seriously considered by Israel at the time.

Central to the Saudi "land for peace" plan was pan-Arab recognition of Israel in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from Arab lands captured in 1967 -- the West Bank, Gaza Strip, east Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. During its own tenure at the helm of government in the United States, the Bush administration appeared to entertain the Saudi "land for peace" plan as a worthy companion to its own "roadmap for peace" in the early 2000s. Moreover, by 2008, Israel -- then under the control of the centrist Kadima Party -- reportedly was reconsidering the dormant "land for peace" deal, albeit with reservations. Palestinian negotiators encouraged Israel to pursue this track at the

time. That being said, members of the conservative Likud Party of Netanyahu rejected this proposal as a non-starter due to the aforementioned matter of leaving Jewish settlements vulnerable. Now in power, Prime Minister Netanyahu was unlikely to soften his position since he was in an uneasy alliance with the hard line party, Yisrael Beiteinu, which strenuously rejects any halt to settlement activity. Given the need to massage the interests of his coalition partner, the domestic political scene in Israel would underline Netanyahu's imperative to reject the 2008 "land for peace" deal and the 2011 position, as articulated by President Obama.

It should also be noted that foreign policy analysts could not interpret President Obama's speech as anything less than a strong affirmation of the United States' enduring relationship with Israel. Notably, President Obama offered Israel an exit strategy from peace negotiations with the Palestinians -- for the moment, unified in governance among Fatah and Hamas factions. Specifically, in pointing to Hamas' refusal to recognize the Jewish State of Israel, President Obama noted that it would be ludicrous for Israel to pursue serious talks with an entity that would not even acknowledge existential and geopolitical realities. Moreover, President Obama signaled that the United States would be siding with Israel should the Palestinians petition the United Nations for statehood and recognition later in 2011 without resolving the outstanding territorial issues.

The Scene Ahead of the Palestinians' Bid for Statehood --

At the start of August 2011, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was prepared to discuss a peace plan with the Palestinians, based on United States President Obama's borders proposition. Netanyahu's announcement to Middle East power brokers appeared aimed at reinvigorating stalled peace talks. Months earlier in May 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu excoriated President Obama for advancing a plan that called for pre-1967 boundaries as a basis for two-state solution in Middle East. Then, in August 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu appeared to be accepting the pre-1967 borders as a starting point for discussions, although the prime minister's office refused to admit that it was reversing its earlier-stated objections to the terms put forth by President Obama. Prime Minister Netanyahu's office, though, said that any peace agreement would be contingent upon the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state -- a stance that has not found acceptance among Palestinian quarters.

It should also be noted that amid these moves by Israel was the impending decision by the Palestinian Authority to present its application for international recognition of statehood to the United Nations in September 2011.

The Palestinian Authority has made the claim that it does not wish to wait for independence via peace negotiations with Israel, thus the thrust to vitiate the peace process. However, with the United States -- an ally of Israel -- on the United Nations Security Council, it was inevitable that the Palestinian Authority's unilateral declaration of independence would be subject to veto. As noted above, United States President Barack Obama had already warned of such an outcome months earlier when he re-introduced the aforementioned terms of the peace process. Nonetheless, the Palestinian Authority was hoping that affirmative votes at the United Nations (United States excluded) would strengthen its hand in trying to achieve independence.

At the start of September 2011, in a last-ditch effort to avert a diplomatic showdown at the United Nations, the Obama administration in the United States circulated a proposal aimed at restarting peace talks. The proposal included a provision for the Palestinians to abandon the membership and recognition vote in the United Nations General Assembly, which was expected to take place on Sept. 20, 2011.

As Israel's closest ally, the United States had been hoping to shift the momentum, while realizing that it could not easily coalesce enough support from individual countries to block ratification of the Palestinians' aspirations at the United Nations General Assembly. Accordingly, it had advanced the aforementioned proposal aimed at restarting the peace process. Clearly, the United States was hoping to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to the table -- to traverse the course of the peace process. The United States was also hoping that by providing an alternate pathway (i.e. distinct from the unilateral and inevitably controversial membership and recognition vote in the United Nations), several individual countries would opt to support the peace process option at a vote in the General Assembly.

As noted above, the Palestinians were hoping to bypass the peace process, and if not outright achieve independence via a vote at the United Nations, at least garner significant political power for the cause. Should the

Palestinians ultimately decide to pursue this path at the United Nations, the United States warned the Palestinians that it would use its veto power at the United Nations Security Council to quell the Palestinians' unilateral bid for recognition.

Palestinians Bid for full UN membership --

On Sept. 16, 2011, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said he would seek full membership for a Palestinian state at the anticipated meeting of the United Nations in New York, set to take place within days. As of 2011, Palestinians held permanent observer status at the United Nations and were represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This move to pursue full membership could be understood as the desire to seek an upgrade in status, of sorts.

Abbas, who spoke from the Palestinian Authority headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah, said that full status and recognition at the United Nations was a legitimate right for the Palestinian people, and that this cause would be taken up at the meeting of the United Nations Security Council.

Note that this strategy involved a modest shift from the initial plan to pursue ratification at the United Nations General Assembly. Now, Abbas was opting to seek full membership at the United Nations Security Council. Speaking of this impending effort, Abbas said: "We are going to the United Nations to request our legitimate right, obtaining full membership for Palestine in this organization." He added, "We take with us all the suffering and hope of our people to achieve this objective." Abbas also noted that more than 100 countries already recognized Palestine as a state and that the patience of the Palestinian people had been exhausted.

It should be noted that while Abbas was speaking on behalf of the collective Palestinian people, the extremist militant Islamist entity, Hamas, which controls Gaza, was not on board with the decision of the Palestinian Authority president. Instead, Hamas has said that the venture into the United Nation was a "risky" endeavor. Of course, Hamas has never endorsed the notion of a two-state solution since it does not recognize the right of existence for the Jewish state of Israel.

The unilateral measure by the Palestinians for statehood and United Nations membership has been strenuously opposed by Israel, which has cast the move as both divisive and provocative. Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon observed in dire terms, "A unilateral declaration by the Palestinians of independence or any UN decision will actually be a vote for friction and conflict over co-operation and reconciliation and I think that would be deplorable for many years."

Israel has further said it would undermine the peace process, which aims to achieve a two-state solution, characterized by an independent Israel and an independent Palestine living in peace and security beside one another. Israeli government spokesperson Mark Regev declined to offer an official response to Abbas' speech. That being said, Regev warned that the Palestinians' move would deleteriously affect the prospects for peace; he also emphasized that the two state solution would only be reached via direct negotiations in Ramallah and Jerusalem, rather than through the United Nations.

Israel has additionally accused the Palestinians of attempting to undermine its legitimacy in pursuing this path at the United Nations. In response, Abbas struck a somewhat more diplomatic tone, saying, "We are not heading there to de-legitimize Israel, no one can do this, it is a state with full membership at the UN. We want to de-legitimize the Israeli occupation and its measures on our territories." This stated objective notwithstanding, in fact, the vote would do nothing to end Israeli jurisdiction in certain spheres of control over the West Bank and Gaza.

For its part, the United States has echoed Israel's concerns and urged a return to the peace process and the negotiating table as the only legitimate path to achieving the two-state solution. While the United States was not keen to go down the path of halting the independence aspirations of the Palestinian people at a time of instability in the wider Middle East region, it was, nonetheless, maintaining its veto threat. Indeed, the Obama administration has made it very clear that if the Palestinians went through with their pursuit of full recognition and membership

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vote, the United States intended to wield its veto power at the United Nation Security Council. A veto by the United States would effectively render the membership and recognition aspirations of the Palestinians null and void.

Striking a diplomatic course, French President Nicolas Sarkozy was calling for a compromise in the form of enhanced status (as a non-member state) for the Palestinians at the General Assembly, with a timetable for negotiations on the road to a definitive agreement.

The French leader was anxious to see a showdown at the Security Council averted. But it seemed that this compromise found little resonance among the Palestinian leadership. Indeed, Palestinian Authority President Abbas asserted that he was pressing forward with that move.

Leaving no doubt of his course of action to be undertaken, President Obama reportedly told the Palestinian leader (Abbas) on Sept. 22, 2011 that he would veto his bid for United Nations membership. In an address to the United Nations, President Obama reiterated the United States' stance, emphasizing that a sovereign Palestinian state could only be achieved through direct negotiations with Israel. He said, of the road to achieving the two-state solution: "There is no short cut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades."

On the other side of the equation, Abbas was apparently crafting his written application, which would be submitted to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Sept. 23, 2011. Pending approval by the Ban Ki-moon, the application would then be taken up by the Security Council and would require nine affirmative votes of the 15 members, and no vetoes, to pass. That vote, though, was not expected for several weeks. Of course, with a guaranteed veto by the United States in the offing, the application was on the road to nowhere. That being said, Palestinians were claiming imminent victory, suggesting that they had successfully brought the matter of Palestinian independence onto the national agenda.

At the same time, the Netanyahu government in Israel -- not exactly an entity that has enjoyed warm relations with the Obama White House -- was praising President Obama for his country's stalwart support. President Netanyahu declared that the American president deserved a "badge of honor" for his defense of Israel. Indeed, Israel's friends and allies on this subject were limited in the context of the global community.

On Sept. 23, 2011, Palestinian Authority President Abbas formally requested full United Nations membership as a path toward statehood. Abbas conveyed the written request to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and then delivered a speech to the annual gathering of the General Assembly. Following protocol, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon then passed on Abbas' request to the Security Council. A vote on the matter was not expected for several weeks.

Regardless of the outcome, it was clear that the Palestinian independence move was likely to metaphorically open a "Pandora's box" of diplomatic tensions with countries in the global community forced to take sides. Moreover, it could well inflame passions in the region of the Middle East, which was already experiencing historic upheaval, ever since the "season of unrest" began to sweep across the Arab world at the start of 2011.

President Obama makes history as first U.S. president to address British parliament

On May 25, 2011, United States President Barack Obama made history by becoming the first United States president to address the British parliament at Westminster Hall. In that speech, President Obama emphasized the strong and enduring bond between the two countries -- the United States and the United Kingdom -- characterizing the trans-Atlantic relationship as "one of the oldest and strongest alliances the world has ever known." President Obama also noted that the primacy of the West -- of the United states and allied European countries -- would be "indispensable" in the 21st century, given the ascendancy of new world powers, and the spread of democracy. Linking these two themes, President Obama said, "There are few nations that stand firmer, speak louder and fight harder to defend democratic values around the world than the United States and the United Kingdom."

British Prime Minister David Cameron, as well as former Prime Minister Tony Blair, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and Sir John Major, were in attendance for President Obama's address at Westminster Hall. The reception by British members of parliament and peers to President Obama was extraordinarily warm, with the United States

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leader receiving extended standing ovations at the start and at the close of the address respectively. The prior night, President Obama and Mrs. Obama were guests of the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, and her consort, Prince Phillip, at an official state dinner.

President Obama officially repeals military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy

On July 22, 2011, United States President Barack Obama announced the repeal of the military's controversial "don't ask, don't tell" policy, opening the door for gays to serve openly in the country's armed services.

This development came after more than a year of legislative moves aimed at this result. In May 2010, the United States House of Representatives voted in favor of President Barack Obama's proposal to repeal the so called "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The vote was 234-194 but included almost no Republican support. Nevertheless, the vote outcome demonstrated a growing consensus that sexual orientation should not stand in the way of serving the country.

Subsequently, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted to end the policy by a vote of 16-12. The panel vote in the Senate moved the legislation along to a full vote in that chamber, where it was expected to face tougher resistance than in the house. In fact, Republicans were promising the filibuster the legislation. There, the legislation was not soon advanced due to lack of support from Republicans.

Finally, in the third week of December 2010, after a Pentagon report was released suggesting little resistance to the policy or repeal, the bill was advanced by cloture vote in the Senate. Hours later, by a Vote of 65 to 31, the Senate voted to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," effectively ending the policy that prevented gays and lesbians from openly serving in the United States military.

Now in mid-2011, following a process that required the policy to remain in place until the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, certified that the repeal would not harm military readiness, the controversial policy was finally over.

In a statement, the president said: "Today, we have taken the final major step toward ending the discriminatory 'don't ask, don't tell' law that undermines our military readiness and violates American principles of fairness and equality." He continued, "In accordance with the legislation that I signed into law last December, I have certified and notified Congress that the requirements for repeal have been met."

Note: The policy was officially set to end on Sept. 20, 2011.

Special Report

Osama Bin Laden killed in targeted attack in Pakistan; U.S. President Obama says world "now a safer and better place"

On May 1, 2011, following a highly orchestrated operation ordered by United States President Barack Obama, it was announced that notorious global terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, was killed by United States special forces during a raid on a highly-fortified compound in Pakistan.

United States forces from the elite Navy Seal Team Six launched an attack on Bin Laden's mansion in Abbottabad, located about 60 miles to the northeast of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. United States officials said that while Bin Laden could have been taken into custody alive by United States commandos, the terrorist leader was shot to death after resisting detainment and an ensuing gun battle. It was later revealed that Osama Bin Laden was not actually armed at the time of his shooting.

Four other individuals -- one of Bin Laden's sons, two couriers, and a woman -- were killed in the raid, according to United States officials. There was some confusion as to whether the woman killed in the raid was one of Bin Laden's wives or a human shield (voluntarily placed there or otherwise). Subsequent reports indicated that the woman killed was a wife of one of the two couriers living in the compound. One of Bin Laden's wives was shot but

not killed; she and two more of Bin Laden's wives were taken into custody by Pakistani authorities after the raid was complete and Bin Laden was dead.

United States President Barack Obama said that the death of the leader of the Islamic Jihadist terror enclave, al-Qaida, meant the world was now a safer and a better place. He said, "I think we can all agree this is a good day for America. Our country has kept its commitment to see that justice is done. The world is safer; it is a better place because of the death of Osama bin Laden."

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the successful special operation to kill or capture Bin Laden delivered a message to al-Qaida as well as the Taliban in the Afghan-Pak region. She issued a direct warning to the Taliban as follows: "You cannot wait us out, you cannot defeat us, but you can make the choice to abandon al-Qaida and participate in a peaceful political process." It should be emphasized that the Obama-Biden administration has dealt with the Taliban and remnants of al-Qaida in the region by addressing the matter as part of a broader Afghan-Pak strategy. Clearly, that strategy was now bearing fruit.

In an unprecedented statement praising the unilateral military action of a member state, the United Nations Security Council hailed the elimination of Bin Laden as a positive development for global security. The Security Council released the following statement: "The Security Council recognizes this critical development and other accomplishments made in the fight against terrorism and urges all states to remain vigilant and intensify their efforts in the fight against terrorism."

But the entire global community was not so sanguine about the news of Bin Laden's demise. In Pakistan, after the news broke of Bin Laden's death, about 100 people protested in the city of Quetta, burning United States flags and expressing anti-American views.

Not surprisingly, it was a different scene at home in the United States where thousands of people gathered outside the White House in Washington D.C., and at Ground Zero in New York, to celebrate what could well be characterized as a victory in the war on terrorism. These were boisterous gatherings with those present chanting "USA! USA! USA!" and singing the national anthem.

Former United States President George W. Bush issued his congratulations to President Obama and United States special forces as follows: "I congratulated him [President Obama] and the men and women of our military and intelligence community." Bush continued, "The fight against terror goes on but tonight the American people sent a message that no matter how long it takes, justice will be done. "

While President Obama gained praise from certain other Republicans, including former Vice President Dick Cheney, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, he was also subject to attacks by the far left and the far right activist wings.

Elements of the political far right refused to attribute credit to President Obama and his national security team, and denounced President Obama's decision to end the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques," which they asserted were crucial in the interests of national security. Of course, the information that contributed to President Obama's decision to carry out the raid on the Pakistani compound was not actually gathered as a result of enhanced interrogation techniques championed by the Bush administration in the years immediately after the 2001 terror attacks. Instead, the intelligence on the identity of Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti -- the al-Qaida courier who led to the location of Bin Laden -- was obtained through standard and non-coercive means. This point was emphasized by Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) -- a rival of President Obama in the 2008 presidential race in the United States.

On the other side of the equation, those of the political far left railed against the killing of Bin Laden, even questioning the legality of such action. This view was echoed by the sons of Bin Laden who claimed that their father's death was a violation of international law. It should be noted that since Osama Bin Laden -- the commander of al-Qaida, an enemy force -- declared war on the United States in the 1990s, his elimination cannot properly be classified as an assassination; instead, it is to be legally understood as the targeting of an enemy of the state during wartime. As noted by United States Attorney General Eric Holder in an interview with BBC News, the killing of the al-Qaida leader was "not an assassination." Holder said that the operation was legal under international law,

which allows for the targeting of enemy commanders. Holder also emphasized the priority of acting under the aegis of jurisprudence saying, "I actually think that the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's is what separates the United States, the United Kingdom, our allies, from those who we are fighting."

United States officials have asserted that DNA tests confirm that one of the persons shot at the Pakistani compound was, indeed, Osama Bin Laden. The body of the man listed as the "most wanted man" in the world was given an Islamic funeral on the aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, in the northern Arabian Sea, according to the Pentagon, and then disposed of at sea. This line of action was apparently undertaken to prevent Bin Laden's body being placed in a location that could later become a shrine to be revered by extremist militants. It should be noted, though, that some Islamic clerics have decried the disposal of Bin Laden's body at sea saying that it ran counter to principles of Islamic law.

Politically, the successful elimination of Osama Bin Laden could hardly be interpreted as anything but a boon for President Obama. His predecessor, George W. Bush, staked his presidency on the anti-terrorism theme, even arguing that a war in Iraq was necessary in the effort against global terrorism. However, Bush was never able to apprehend Bin Laden. Bush was criticized by his political opponents for allowing Bin Laden to escape capture at Tora Bora in Afghanistan and for using questionable tactics -- including torture and extraordinary rendition -- to try to find and eliminate al-Qaida terrorists. Earlier efforts by former President Bill Clinton to target Bin Laden also ended in failure. Consequently, for years since his earliest forays into global terrorism, including the East Africa embassy bombings of the 1990s, Bin Laden evaded capture. In fact, he raised the ire of many in the world by regularly releasing taped messages encouraging attacks on the United States, Western interests, Western allies, and even fellow Muslims deemed to be enemies of his extremist doctrine.

Now, in 2011, President Obama had made good on a promise he made while a candidate -- to move immediately on actionable intelligence to either kill or capture Osama Bin Laden. Indeed, having received the intelligence that Bin Laden may have been hiding out in the aforementioned mansion in Pakistan, President Obama opted not for a drone attack; instead, he ordered a surgical strike, carried out by special forces, and left open the possibility of taking Bin Laden alive. It was a high risk calculation that could have ended in disaster. Instead, the operation ended with the world's most notorious terrorist dead, no deaths to Americans participating in the operation, no civilian casualties, and five deaths in total (as discussed above). Striking a patriotic tone, President Obama hailed the outcome saying, "Today we are reminded that as a nation there is nothing we can't do."

As more information surfaced over the week following Bin Laden's death, it became clear that the raid on Bin Laden's secret Pakistani compound was the culmination of years of painstaking intelligence and ended in a strategic and operational success.

A long period of coalescing intelligence related to a trusted courier of Bin Laden resulted in the discovery of the compound outside of the Pakistani capital. The elaborate nature of the house with high windows and limited entrances, and the secure surrounding compound with 12 foot high walls and a heavily fortified perimeter hinted toward inhabitants more important than a courier, and led to speculation that it housed Bin Laden or another high value terror target. Several months of assessment followed, which included highly technical intelligence analysis. Then, the Obama administration was able to determine with a high degree of probability that Bin Laden -- the man who claimed responsibility for ordering the 2011 terror attacks in the United States that left more than 3,000 people dead, as well as many other bloody and violent acts of terrorism -- was living secretly in that particular compound and not hiding in the harsh mountainous region bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, as was the common myth.

The national security team of the Obama White House then discussed possible measures to be taken. President Obama was confronted with great disagreement, given the risks associated with either a raid or a drone bombing of the target. John Brennan, the United States chief counter-terrorism official, explained that there was no overt consensus among the United States national security team on which course of action to take. Still, in the end, President Obama opted for this targeted strike. Brennan said of President Obama's decision-making: "One of the ... gutsiest calls of any president in recent memory."

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Eventually, the decision made by President Obama to pursue the raid option, which would be carried out by the United States military but under the aegis of Central Intelligence Agency legal command, due to the United States' relationship with Pakistan (a country with which the United States is not at war). With the decision made by the president to go down this path, the elite Navy Seal special forces team were subject to extensive and laborious training exercises to practice the operation and be prepared for contingencies.

As recounted by President Obama himself in an interview on the CBS show, "60 Minutes," the risks were outweighed by the possibility of finally apprehending the world's most wanted man. He said, "But ultimately, I had so much confidence in the capacity of our guys to carry out the mission that I felt that the risks were outweighed by the potential benefit of finally getting our man." President Obama characterized the 40 minute raid by the elite Navy Seal unit on the Bin Laden compound in Pakistan as "the longest 40 minutes of my life." Throughout, President Obama said that he and his national security team were able to monitor the commando operation from the White House Situation Room but did not have clear information about what was taking place inside the compound.

As further details about the operation emerged, it was revealed that the assault team deployed to Pakistan was large enough to fight its way out of Pakistan, if confronted by hostile local police and security forces. Clearly, the Obama administration was willing to compromise its relationship with the United States' so-called ally, Pakistan, in order to kill or capture Bin Laden.

Senior Obama administration officials also said there were two teams of adjunct specialists on standby -- one to organize the burial of Bin Laden if he was killed during the operation, and another one made up of translators, interrogators and lawyers, should Bin Laden be captured alive. This revelation underlined the Obama administration's assertion that the commandos were under instruction to either kill or capture the terror leader. As noted by United States Attorney General Eric Holder in an interview with BBC News, Bin Laden was the subject of a "kill or capture mission" and United States commandos handled the raid "in an appropriate way." He said of the potential capture of Bin Laden, "If the possibility had existed, if there was the possibility of a feasible surrender, that would have occurred."

It should also be noted that documents uncovered during the raid by United States elite special forces on the Bin Laden compound revealed plans for further large scale attacks on the United States homeland, possibly due to take place on the 10th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. The documents further showed that Bin Laden was far more than a spiritual leader or symbolic figurehead of al-Qaida but instead was an active participant -- even an orchestrator -- of terror attacks. As noted by National Security Adviser Donilon in an interview on ABC News, "I think the principal thing to take away is that he was engaged not just in being a symbolic leader of al-Qaida, but he was involved in the strategic and operational leadership."

Given the fact that Bin Laden was living in an elaborate mansion on a fortified compound in Pakistan, as discussed above, questions were therefore resting on the Pakistani authorities. How was it that Bin Laden could have been safely residing in a facility in a major Pakistani city -- in close proximity to the Pakistan Military Academy -- for all this time? How could the specially-designed mansion have been constructed in the neighborhood of the military academy without drawing the attention of all around?

To these ends, President Obama indicated that he would not rest in the effort against allies of Bin Laden, saying, "We're going to pursue all leads to find out exactly what type of support system and benefactors that Bin Laden might have had." Echoing a similar sentiment, chief counter-terrorism official John Brennan, said that it was "inconceivable" that Bin Laden was without a support system in Pakistan. A week after Bin Laden's capture, on NBC's "Meet the Press" television show, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon said of the Pakistani authorities, "I don't have any information that would indicate foreknowledge by the political, military or intelligence leadership." But he continued, "These questions are being raised quite aggressively." Weeks after the strike on Bin Laden's compound, Defense Secretary Robert Gates indicated that while the Pakistani leadership did not appear to have known of the terrorist leader's presence within the country's borders, it was likely that others leading Pakistanis -- perhaps former members of the military -- may have been "in the know."

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It should be noted that weeks prior to the strike on the Bin Laden compound, the United States top military officer Admiral Mike Mullen accused Pakistani's spy agency -- the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) -- of having links with extremist militants. While Pakistan maintains that there is no connection between its intelligence service and militants, the record appears to show a very different story. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Pakistani ISI was known to have fundraised for Islamic militants, as reported by international defense analysts as well as Pakistani military officials at home. More recently in mid-2010, Pakistan's reputation as a serious player in the efforts against global terrorism was severely hurt by revelations that ISI was funding, training, and providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. For several years, there have been suspicions about such a clandestine relationship between the two entities, however, the closeness and extensive nature of their ties was something of a revelation. In a report issued by the London School of Economics (LSE), support for the Afghan Taliban was described as "official ISI policy."

Since the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Pakistan has accepted billions of dollars in aid funding from the United States, supposedly for its support in the fight against terror enclaves like al-Qaida and its Taliban allies. Clearly, a continued relationship between the Pakistani ISI and extremist militants would run counter to its expressed objectives of helping the United States quell the threat of terrorism emanating from such entities in the Afghan-Pak region. Yet to be determined was the matter of the role of Pakistani authorities in the operation to eliminate Bin Laden. Already, it was known that Pakistan was notified of the operation to capture or kill Bin Laden only after United States forces had departed Pakistani airspace.

Certain Pakistani quarters were quick to assert that the country's sovereignty had been violated in the United States operation to kill or capture Bin Laden. Accordingly, there were expectations that relations with the United States promised to become more tense. On the other hand, such claims were not likely to derail the prevailing questions about the culpability of Pakistani authorities over the presence of the world's most notorious terrorist on Pakistani soil. Husain Haqqani, the Pakistani ambassador to the United States, denied his country acted to protect bin Laden. He said of an impending investigation into the matter: "Heads will roll, once the investigation has been completed. Now, if those heads are rolled on account of incompetence, we will share that information with you. And if, God forbid, somebody's complicity is discovered, there will be zero tolerance for that, as well." Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani offered a less diplomatic explanation of the Bin Laden's presence on Pakistani soil. In an interview with Time Magazine, Gilani said that while there was certainly an intelligence failure at play, Bin Laden was not his responsibility as prime minister of Pakistan.

It was yet to be seen if the United States would easily accept this stance. Already, members of the United States Congress were calling for a reassessment of the country's relationship with Pakistan and a possible halt of United States aid to that country. Indeed, on May 17, 2011, Congressional Republicans and Democrats warned Pakistan that American aid could be curtailed, if not entirely cut, should Islamabad fail to intensify its offensive against Islamist extremist terrorists operating from within its borders deep inside Pakistan.

That being said, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator John Kerry (D-Mass), the ranking member, Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana), and President Obama himself have respectively expressed more reticence about such measures, perhaps with a broader eye on geopolitical stability. That is to say, even given the frustrations with the Pakistani authorities, a relationship with the power brokers would be preferable to no relationship at all with a nuclear power at the heart of Jihadist Islamic extremist movement.

Meanwhile, with al-Qaida possibly primed to carry out retaliatory attacks for the death of Bin Laden, the United States Department of State issued a worldwide travel warning for its citizens overseas, and put its embassies around the world on alert. The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Leon Panetta, warned that al-Qaida would "almost certainly" seek revenge over the death of Bin Laden. At the same, the chief counter-terrorism official in the United States, John Brennan, warned that although Bin Laden's death would weaken the global Jihadist movement, al-Qaida, was still a danger to international security. He said, "It [al-Qaida] may be a mortally wounded tiger but it still has some life in it."

In a related development, with a rising threat against United States forces in the wake of Bin Laden's death, the Obama administration was working to increase security for the elite Navy Seal unit that carried out the raid on the

Bin Laden compound. Threats by al-Shabab, the terror enclave of Somalia aligned with al-Qaida, were issued against President Obama's step-grandmother, Sarah Obama, in Kenya. Given Kenya's unhappy history as the target of a terror attack by al-Qaida in the 1990s, concerns were high and led to increased security by Kenyan authorities for the relative of the United States president.

Then, in mid-May 2011, suicide bombers attacked a Pakistani military academy in the northwestern town of Charsadda, killing at least 80 people, most of whom were military recruits. The Taliban in Pakistan quickly claimed responsibility for the attack and characterized it as part of the mission to avenge the death of Bin Laden, at the hands of elite United States forces. Ehsanullah Ehsan, a spokesperson for the Taliban, warned that this was only the initial attack in a mission of vengeance, saying: "There will be more." Terrorism analysts observed that typically, most Taliban attacks in recent years have had an internal ideological purpose (i.e. the undermining and toppling of the Western-backed government), rather than being of global Jihadist orientation. A revenge agenda on behalf of Bin Laden would cast the Taliban in Pakistan as having widened its objectives; however, it was not an inconceivable move given the militant Islamist Taliban's close ties with the notorious terror enclave, al-Qaida.

This attack coincided with the decision by a Pakistani cabinet defense committee to review cooperation on counter-terrorism with the United States. It was not known if this move was being made in response to United States President Barack Obama's decision to launch a raid on Pakistani soil to kill or capture Bin Laden. Regardless, a shift in counter-terrorism efforts between the two countries could have potential geopolitical ramifications. In the United States, though, the Obama administration made clear that it had no intention of scaling back its drone attacks in Pakistan's northwest region, which is a known hotbed of extremist Islamic militants.

By July 2011, given the growing outcry by United States policy-makers over Pakistan's questionable behavior in anti-terrorism efforts, the United States moved to withhold \$800m of military aid to Pakistan. At issue was about a third of the annual United States security aid package to Pakistan and thus, the decision to limit aid to that country constituted a serious message from the Obama administration in the United States. Speaking on the news network, ABC, White House Chief of Staff, Bill Daley, explained that in recent times, Pakistan had "taken some steps that have given us reason to pause on some of the aid." Explaining the Obama administration's position, Daley also said, "It's a complicated relationship in a very difficult, complicated part of the world. Obviously, there's still a lot of pain that the political system in Pakistan is feeling by virtue of the raid that we did to get Osama Bin Laden, something that the president felt strongly about and we have no regrets over." He continued, "Until we get through these difficulties, we will hold back some of the money." Nevertheless, Daley did not foreclose a continuing relationship with Pakistan saying that bilateral ties "must be made to work over time."

Update on fight against al-Qaida --

At the start of June 2011, a United States missile strike appeared to have killed one of the most notorious leaders of the terror enclave, al Qaida, in Pakistan. Several other people were killed in the strike in the tribal region of South Waziristan. While Pakistani authorities expressed confidence that the United States strike had reached its intended target, the death of Ilyas Kashmiri remained cloaked in a minor amount of doubt due to the fact that the drone strike made it impossible for a body to be retrieved. Still, there were hopes that some DNA or photographic evidence might provide confirmation. To that end, as reported by the BBC, a photograph of what was identified as Kashmiri's body was released by a militant group, Harakat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, while faxed statements confirming Kashmiri's death were sent to Pakistani journalists. The statement by the group's infamous "313 Brigade," noted that Kashmiri was martyred and promised that revenge attacks would rain down on the United States.

According to United States officials, Kashmiri was al-Qaida's military operations chief in Pakistan, and has been linked with the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai (India); he was also suspected of orchestrating terror plots against Western interests, even being named a defendant in the plot to attack a Danish newspaper that entered the public purview years earlier when it published cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

On Aug. 27, 2011, it was reported that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, the suspected operations chief of the Jihadist Islamist terror enclave, al-Qaida, was killed in Pakistan. According to international news media, Atiyah Abd al-

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Rahman actually died days earlier on Aug. 22, 2011, in the volatile Pakistani tribal region of Waziristan. The actual circumstances of his death were not immediately publicized by either Pakistani or United States authorities. However, the New York Times was soon reporting that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman was apparently killed in a drone attack by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. It should be noted that such drone attacks have been the preferred mode of the Obama administration in the United States in going after al-Qaida operatives.

Senior United States officials were asserting that the death of Atiyah Abd al-Rahman was a clear blow to al-Qaida since he had played an integral role in the orchestration and activation of terrorist activities of al-Qaida. The many documents discovered at the Pakistan compound of now-deceased al-Qaida overlord and mastermind, Osama Bin Laden, clearly showed that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman had been deeply involved in al-Qaida's operations over the years.

Indeed, he was believed to have brokered the alliance with the Algerian Salafists who morphed into al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Moreover, since the elimination of Bin Laden by United States special forces, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman had been playing a key support role to the new al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

A week after the elimination of Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, news reports emerged that another major al-Qaida figure had been detained along with two accomplices. Younis al-Mauritani was apparently arrested along with two aides, Abdul Ghaffar al-Shami and Messara al-Shami, in the suburbs of the Pakistani city of Quetta.

According to Pakistani authorities, Younis al-Mauritani was a significant player in al-Qaida's terror plots and reportedly orchestrated international operations. A statement released by Pakistani authorities read as follows: "Mauritani was tasked personally by Osama Bin Laden to focus on hitting targets of economical importance in United States of America, Europe and Australia."

The arrests of Mauritani and the other two individuals were the result of a joint operation between the intelligence agencies of Pakistan and the United States.

The news suggested somewhat improved relations between the two countries in the aftermath of the raid on the Bin Laden compound in Abbottabad months earlier. At the time, the United States looked with suspicion on Pakistani intelligence since the world's most notorious terrorist was living in relative luxury in a fortified compound close to the Pakistani military. But on the other side of the equation, Pakistan was angered over the invasion of its sovereignty by the United States in carrying out that operation. The successful conclusion to this joint operation (with Mauritani as the target) was being hailed as a small step in a more positive direction for already-damaged United States-Pakistani bilateral relations.

Special Report: U.S. Policy on Afghanistan

U.S. President Obama unveils withdrawal plan for troops serving in Afghanistan

Summary

This Special Report details the withdrawal and exit strategy plan for United States troops from Afghanistan. The Special Report includes an inquiry into counter-insurgency strategy for fighting the Taliban and al-Qaida. The report additionally considers accusations of the Pakistani intelligence agency's complicity with the Afghan Taliban. Also considered in this report are the politically-driven financial constraints at home in the United States related to the funding of the war effort. These issues collectively have influenced emerging questions about the United States' policy in Afghanistan and the timeline for continued engagement there. Finally, this report looks at the Afghanistan exit strategy as a jumping off point to consider the Obama doctrine of foreign policy.

Background

Almost exactly a year earlier in June 2010, United States President Barack Obama announced that General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of United States forces in Afghanistan, was relieved of his duties. The president also announced the nomination of General David Petraeus, commander of United States Central Command, to take over command of the war in Afghanistan against the resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida. President Obama explained that he had decided to replace Gen McChrystal "with considerable regret." The president explained that McChrystal failed to "meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general." At issue were controversial statements by McChrystal that were recorded in a recent Rolling Stone article. The politics of the situation demanded that President Obama dismiss McChrystal, or, risk being viewed as a weak commander in chief. A week after the announcement about the dismissal of McChrystal, Petraeus was unanimously confirmed as the new commander of the Afghanistan war with a vote of 99-0 in the Senate. Petraeus, as expected, garnered praise from both Republicans and Democrats, irrespective of their core disagreements on the policy toward Afghanistan. Indeed, Petraeus was known as a celebrated military figure, thanks to his stewardship of the "surge" in Iraq, as well as his notoriety as one of the key authors of United States modern counterinsurgency strategy in war zones.

During confirmation hearings, Petraeus painted a grim picture of the war effort in Afghanistan, noting that an "industrial-strength insurgency" by the Taliban and al-Qaida elements were in the offing. As well, Petraeus warned that the fighting and violence would "get more intense in the next few months." That being said, he indicated that it was part of the counterinsurgency process. He said, "My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it may get more intense in the next few months. As we take away the enemy's safe havens and reduce the enemy's freedom of action, the insurgents will fight back." Additionally, Petraeus did not foreclose the possibility of recommending that President Barack Obama extend United States troops engagement in Afghanistan beyond the August 2011 timeline to begin redeployment.

Costs and complications of counterinsurgency strategy and human terrain units --

It should be noted that the Afghan war strategy -- to fight resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida, improve security in Afghanistan, and develop governing stability in that country as an alternative to a culture of warfare -- is founded on the principles of counterinsurgency (COIN). The long-term objectives of COIN entail not only the clearing the field of insurgents by the military, but also political imperative of replacing the insurgent power base with more stable governance. Effective counterinsurgency strategies, therefore, require close collaboration of the military, political, economic and diplomatic spheres in the conflict zone. While a respected strategy, with an exit timeline expected to be completed in 2014, there has been increased skepticism about the ongoing involvement in Afghanistan as the war has gone on for a decade.

One particularly key reason for a sense of skepticism about the war strategy and its associated timeline were matters of financial costs of the war, and the timeline attached to the Afghanistan strategy. That is to say, when President Obama first outlined his plan to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, he also noted that the United States would begin a redeployment of those troops by 2011. With debt worries prevalent in the United States and other NATO countries (as discussed below), questions arose as to whether or not the continued war effort in Afghanistan was a financially feasible endeavor. That is to say, the war and counterinsurgency mission requires a substantial outlay of resources that few governments (including the United States) could realistically commit to for the long term.

Complicating matters further has been the rising death toll of NATO forces in a war that has continued for close to a decade. That increased death toll has contributed to decreasing support for the Afghanistan war effort.

Moreover, analysts have pointed to the fact that COIN involves the idea of clearing the landscape of insurgents, followed by the establishment of a government as an alternative to the war culture. But clearance in one area often results in the relocation of the terrorists elsewhere and a perpetual pursuit of the strategic enemy. Meanwhile, the establishment of more stable governance, which has seen some success in the more politically mature Iraq, cannot easily be transposed to the largely tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, which does not have a strong legacy of governmental authority.

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With an eye on understanding that tribal cultural orientation of Afghanistan, the United States military has employed anthropologists in the war zone to garner a more granular understanding of the complicated social and cultural dynamics of Afghanistan. Anthropologists' command of ethnographic fieldwork may be uniquely positioned to map the complex social structure of the country, ultimately helping the military to draw Afghans away from the Taliban.

Known as the army-funded "Human Terrain System," as discussed in an article published in Time Magazine by Jason Motlagh, the idea has been the source of debate with no consensus on its success. Academia has frowned on anthropologists being actively involved in the war theater. As noted in a report by the American Anthropological Association, because human terrain teams are ultimately oriented toward the objectives of the military mission, there is an ethical question of whether such work is "a legitimate professional exercise of anthropology." Nevertheless, General Petraeus has been reported to be a strong supporter of the human terrain teams, suggesting that they would for the immediate future continue to be part of the broader counterinsurgency strategy.

That being said, most anthropologists would agree that more than a year of intensive fieldwork is needed before conclusions can be made; thus, the success of human terrain units in Afghanistan would require a longer timeline than currently expected for United States forces to remain "in country."

Financial Cost of the War in Afghanistan --

In late June 2010, legislators in the United States voted to cut almost \$4 billion in aid to the government of Afghanistan. The move was in response to allegations of corruption by the Afghan government, and in the aftermath of a report by the Wall Street Journal that significant funds had been flown out of the airport at Kabul. The report alleged that Afghan officials and their allies were diverting funds earmarked for aid and logistics to financial safe havens outside the country.

Explaining the Congress' decision to make these cuts, Congresswoman Nita Lowey, the chair of the subcommittee responsible for aid appropriations, said, "I do not intend to appropriate one more dime until I have confidence that US taxpayer money is not being abused to line the pockets of corrupt Afghan government officials, drug lords and terrorists." Lowey additionally called for an audit of the billions of dollars already expended in Afghanistan.

While the funding cuts would not directly affect military operations of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, it could very well affect infrastructure projects, which are part of the nation building efforts in Afghanistan. To this end, Congressman Mark Kirk, made note of Kandahar's electrical system; he said that obstacles to its construction, and other such infrastructure projects, could negatively affect the war, which included the effort to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

The issue has evoked questions about the financial costs of the war at large at a time when debt worries plague not only the United States, but also allied countries with troops operating in Afghanistan, as discussed in the section above.

As NATO countries, including the United States, have been forced to consider austerity measures at home, the financial costs of the war in Afghanistan have taken on added importance. In fact, that significance was apparent on July 1, 2010, when President Barack Obama requested \$33 billion in military funding to support the surge of 30,000 additional troops in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's complicity with Afghan Taliban raises questions about U.S. strategy in region --

Since June 2010, Afghanistan's geopolitical relationship with Pakistan has taken center stage. At issue were revelations that the Pakistani intelligence service, known by the acronym ISI, has been funding, training, and providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. For several years, there have been suspicions about such a clandestine relationship between the two entities, however, the closeness and extensive nature of their ties was something of a revelation. Indeed, in a report issued by the London School of Economics support for the Afghan Taliban was described as "official ISI policy."

As noted by the author of the report, Matt Waldman of Harvard University, "This goes far beyond just limited, or occasional support. This is very significant levels of support being provided by the ISI." Waldman also asserted, "We're also saying this is official policy of that agency, and we're saying that it is very extensive. It is both at an operational level, and at a strategic level, right at the senior leadership of the Taliban movement."

The report also included references to interviews with Taliban field commanders who said that ISI agents attended Taliban council meetings. Shoring up the veracity of this claim was the following citation from the report: "These accounts were corroborated by former Taliban ministers, a Western analyst, and a senior United Nations official based in Kabul, who said the Taliban largely depend on funding from the ISI and groups in Gulf countries." Corroborating evidence was also available from a source unrelated to the LSE report. In an interview with Reuters, the head of Afghan intelligence, Amrullah Saleh, who had just resigned from that position, said the ISI was "part of the landscape of destruction" in Afghanistan and accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban leaders in safe houses.

Some observers have noted that with the impending exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan expected in 2011, Pakistan's actions may be related to its desire to more deeply influence Afghanistan. However, ISI activities related to Islamic militant extremists are not recent developments in response to the current landscape. Indeed, the ISI has been accused of funding and training Islamic militant extremists in Afghanistan from as far back as the 1979 Soviet invasion. That being said, since the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Pakistan has accepted billions of dollars in aid funding from the United States, supposedly for its support in the fight against terror enclaves like al-Qaida and its Taliban allies. Clearly, a continued relationship between the Pakistani ISI and the Afghan Taliban would run counter to its expressed objectives of helping the United States quell the threat of terrorism emanating from such entities in the Afghan-Pak region. As stated in the LSE report, "Pakistan appears to be playing a double-game of astonishing magnitude."

Developments in 2010 on the war in Afghanistan --

In July 2010, the Iceland-based website, known as Wikileaks, released six years worth of classified United States documents, numbering around 90,000, dealing with the war in Afghanistan. Several news organizations were given access to the documents prior to actual publication, although United States authorities have argued that the dissemination of classified information was a threat to national security, an act of gross irresponsibility, and quite possibly, imbued with illegality. From Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai charged that the release of Wikileaks documents have endangered the lives of Afghan citizens who worked with NATO-led international forces. The Afghan leader said that the disclosure of the names of Afghans who cooperated with the NATO-led forces was "shocking" and "irresponsible." For its part, Wikileaks has defended the release of the documents, noting that it presented an unvarnished view of the war in Afghanistan since 2004.

Regardless of these competing views, the contents of the controversial documents have spurred debate about the United States' role in the war in Afghanistan, as well as the conduct of the war itself. To these ends, two Wikileaks revelations could raise questions about the Obama administration's broader "Afghan-Pak" strategy, which considers not only "ground zero" of the war effort -- Afghanistan -- but also Pakistan next door. While the strategy appropriately focuses on the region instead of one country, taking into consideration shared extremist Islamic influences, shared Pashtun culture, and a landscape on the borderland that is a stronghold for Taliban and al-Qaida, two Wikileaks revelations strong doubts on the effectiveness of the strategy.

Firstly, according to the document review by the New York Times, even as Pakistan receives funds from the United States to help combat Islamic extremists militants and the threat of terrorism, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was said to be helping the Taliban, even collaborating with them on terror attacks and assassination plots.

Secondly, the tactic of using drone attacks in the tribal border regions has been lauded by the Obama administration as a means of crushing the enemy and eliminating high value Taliban and al-Qaida targets. However, according to the review by Der Spiegel, 38 Predator and Reaper drones crashed while on combat missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, requiring "elaborate -- and dangerous -- salvage operations." On the ground, "in country," there are additional worries about the political costs of the civilian casualties caused by drone attacks.

The civilian costs provide a transition to discuss a third issue revealed by Wikileaks. According to the review by Marc Ambinder of The Atlantic, there were "at least 144 separate incidents" of civilian casualties that led to "cover-ups." Ambinder particularly took note of the unsuccessful attempt to kill Abu Layth Ali Libi, which resulted in the deaths of several civilians and that resulted in a "cover-up" by Afghan officials.

Analysis of Afghan Strategy by late 2010 --

Taken together, these issues both inform and fuel emerging questions about a timeline for continued engagement in Afghanistan. Indeed, these factors -- from financial costs to the strategic considerations -- have contributed to rising emphasis on a "date certain" exit from Afghanistan, starting in 2011 and to end in 2014. Of course, on the other side of the equation, counterinsurgency advocates have argued that the objectives of the mission could require an extended timeline.

There were also been emerging questions about the precise nature of that policy itself, which have only been intensified with the Wikileaks revelations. Indeed, can counterinsurgency succeed in Afghanistan? If so, what are the benchmarks for success? Can the United States and its allies afford to fund the mission, given the demands on the domestic front? And is Pakistan -- an apparent ally -- actually undermining the effort to succeed in Afghanistan?

Note that in late 2010, NATO announced its plans to exit Afghanistan and transfer control over the anti-Taliban struggle to Afghan forces by the close of 2014. Afghan President Karzai formalized the agreement by signing a long-term security partnership with NATO. At the heart of the matter was NATO's contention that the Taliban not be allowed to simply wait out the presence of foreign forces. As stated by NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the security bloc would remain committed to security and stability of Afghanistan. He said, "One thing must be very clear - NATO is in this for the long term." The NATO head then continued, "If the enemies of Afghanistan have the idea that they can wait it out until we leave, they have the wrong idea. We will stay as long as it takes to finish our job." For his part, Afghan President Karzai expressed gratitude for NATO's contributions to his country's interest but stated, "I also informed them of the concerns of the Afghan people with regard to civilian casualties, with regard to detentions, with regard to, at times, NATO's posture."

It should be noted that this decision by NATO did not necessarily coincide with an official decision by the United States on the duration of combat operations by its forces in Afghanistan.

On that latter consideration, there was some indication of the direction of the United States in December 2010 when a much-anticipated report dealing with United States President Barack Obama's strategy for the war in Afghanistan surfaced in the public purview. That report concluded that United States forces were on track to begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011, as scheduled in the United States president's war plan. This conclusion was reached despite the fact there were mixed reports of success in the field. On that matter, the summary of the report said that the United States forces continued to pursue and eliminate al-Qaida leadership figures, was successful in reducing the terror enclave's ability to carry out attacks from the Afghan-Pak region, and had halted the progress of the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the summary noted that those gains were tenuous and could well be reversed in the future.

June 2011 Update: President Obama unveils Afghan exit strategy

On June 22, 2011, President Barack Obama was scheduled to unveil his exit strategy from Afghanistan. At issue was the number of United States troops expected to leave Afghanistan and the associated pace of withdrawal from that country.

Ahead of the president's much-anticipated address regarding the Afghanistan exit strategy, speculation abounded about whether or not the more hawkish advisers in government would prevail, and only a nominal number of troops would be withdrawn, along with a vague exit date. They pointed to the need for enough forces on the ground as the region entered its summer fighting season. As well, many military commanders argued that a premature withdrawal would result in a reversal of the fragile military gains made against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

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Among these elements advocating only a modest "draw down" of forces, and at a slow pace of withdrawal, were outgoing Defense Secretary William Gates and the United States commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, who was expected to soon come home to the United States to take the position of the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Outgoing CIA director, Leon Panetta, was to take on the defense portfolio in the wake of Gates; it was not known if this shift in personnel was imbued with a hint of a shift in strategy.

At the other end of the philosophical spectrum was a cadre of advisers who were against the initial surge strategy in Afghanistan, favoring instead targeted attacks in the Afghan-Pak region. This camp, led by vice President Joseph Biden, has been lobbying for a significant "draw down" of the troops from Afghanistan as early as mid-2011, with a steady ongoing withdrawal from that point, culminating in a date-certain exit, preferably by a 2014 deadline.

The Biden-led camp has argued that the security gains in Afghanistan to date, in combination with the disruption of the al-Qaida network in that country, and the death of Osama bin Laden in neighboring Pakistan at the hands of United States special forces in May 2011, collectively pave the way for the United States to declare victory and begin the process of ending the war.

It should be noted that the American citizenry was war-weary after a decade of combat operations across the world. Indeed, a recent survey by the Pew Institute showed that as many as 56 percent of respondents favored an end to the war in Afghanistan as soon as possible. Even outgoing Defense Secretary Gates, who has stood on the side of the generals in favoring only a modest withdrawal of Afghanistan, was cognizant of the public support conundrum.

To that end, Gates acknowledged during a new conference to the State Department that President Obama would have to consider the concerns of the American people in his decision regarding the war in Afghanistan. Gate said, "It goes without saying that there are a lot of reservations in the Congress about the war in Afghanistan and our level of commitment. There are concerns among the American people who are tired of a decade of war."

The United States Congress was itself growing increasingly anxious about the costs of constant warfare at a time when debt concerns dominated the domestic political spectrum. A bipartisan group of United States senators dispatched a letter to President Obama calling for a shift in the Afghanistan war strategy and advocating a substantial withdrawal of United States troops from that country. The letter included the following statement: "Given our successes, it is the right moment to initiate a sizable and sustained reduction in forces, with the goal of steadily redeploying all regular combat troops. The costs of prolonging the war far outweigh the benefits."

That being said, there was an equally vocal coterie of senators expressing the opposite view, urging instead that the president heed the generals and hold steady in Afghanistan. Of note was Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona who was President Obama's rival in the 2008 presidential election. McCain said during an interview with ABC News' "Good Morning America," that his views lined up with Gates in calling for only a modest "draw down" since he did not want to see a reversal of the fragile gains already made. McCain also suggested that a continued full throttle effort could potentially end in success saying, "I believe that one more fighting season and we can get this thing pretty well wrapped up."

Ahead of the June 22, 2011 national address, White House spokesperson, Jay Carney, confirmed that President Obama had made a decision on the withdrawal plan and was in the process of informing the national security team. Without disclosing the details, Carney noted that the "draw down" of the troops would commence in July 2011, on a phased basis, with a complete withdrawal by 2014. While the president himself has been on the record saying that he would favor a "significant" withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan, the actual meaning of the term "significant" was yet a matter of interpretation.

To be clear, since coming to office, President Obama tripled the number of United States forces operating in Afghanistan, for a total of about 100,000 troops "in country." Included in this 100,000 number were the 30,000

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troops that were added as part of the "surge" aimed at providing reinforcements in the mission to reverse the Taliban's battlefield momentum. At the time, President Obama had said that he would begin to redeploy United States forces in mid-July 2011. Carney's aforementioned statement indicated that the president intended to abide with the promised timeline; the main question rested on the number of troops to be withdrawn along with the actual pace.

On June 22, 2011, in keeping with his pledge made in late 2009, President Obama unveiled a plan to redeploy United States troops from Afghanistan and effectively end its commitments in that country that had now lasted a decade. Explaining that al-Qaida was under pressure, with as much as half of the al-Qaida leadership, including Bin Laden killed, and serious losses inflicted upon the Taliban, the United States was well-positioned to begin to close out the war in Afghanistan.

To that end, President Obama ordered the withdrawal of 10,000 United States troops from Afghanistan in 2011, with another 23,000 troops to be redeployed the following year. This "draw down" of 33,000 United States forces from Afghanistan would essentially end the aforementioned surge by the summer of 2012. Remaining "in country" would be the rest of the troops -- about 67,000 in total -- which would themselves undergo a steady pace of phased withdrawal to end by a final deadline of 2014. It was expected that commanders on the ground in Afghanistan would be given the autonomy to sort out the "battlefield geometry" and decide on what types of troops would be needed in certain capacities from special forces, to trainers, intelligence officers, and combat troops.

President Obama explained that the withdrawal plan would take time, saying, "This is the beginning -- but not the end -- of our effort to wind down this war." That being said, President Obama told the American people that they should take comfort in knowing that the tide of war was receding. To that end, he noted that combat operations were over in Iraq, and "light was to be seen in distance" in Afghanistan.

According to the president, the specific mission in Afghanistan going forward was to be: "No safe-haven from which al-Qaida or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland, or our allies. We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government, which must step up its ability to protect its people."

In this way, the president was not only putting the Afghan authorities on notice that they had to take responsibility for their own country, he was simultaneously emphasizing a circumscribed role for the United States in Afghanistan. With an eye on handing over security control in Afghanistan, President Obama announced that the United States would play host to a summit in 2012, which would include NATO allies, and would focus on transitioning Afghanistan to a new future. The president noted that a peaceful future for Afghanistan would entail a political solution and accordingly, the United States would "join initiatives that reconcile the Afghan people, including the Taliban." In this way, the president -- for the first time -- appeared to back the notion of talks with the Taliban, pending that group's renunciation of violence and separation from al-Qaida.

All told, the new mission would transition from that of comprehensive counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy to a focused and targeted counter-terrorism strategy, aimed at capturing and killing terrorists and insurgents. There would also be a clear "date-certain" exit deadline. Borrowing from the experience in Iraq, the Obama administration believed that it was vital that the Afghan government be pressured towards taking full responsibility for the country's security, and the United States Congress needed to have clear targets to be used as mileposts for evaluation.

This plan would fall within the parameters of the Biden camp as the troop reductions were deeper than initially anticipated; it also included a faster redeployment schedule than recommended by the military advisers. According to the New York Times, the plan was a validation of Vice President Biden's position. As expected, the plan was not easily endorsed by General Petraeus, who wanted to see United States forces remain in place for a longer time horizon. The president was expected to draw attention to the success of a more limited counter-terrorism strategy, as exemplified by the capture and killing of Bin Laden.

At a broader level, President Obama used the exit strategy from Afghanistan to craft his own vision of United States foreign policy. Indeed, the president said that while the United States would not retreat from its role as a global power, the country had to chart a new pragmatic and strategic course as regards international engagement.

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President Obama said, "Already this decade of war has caused many to question the nature of America's engagement around the world. Some would have America retreat from our responsibility as an anchor of global security, and embrace an isolation that ignores the very real threats that we face. Others would have America over-extend ourselves, confronting every evil that can be found abroad."

Rather than selecting from this dyad, President Obama opted for a third way, which he characterized as "a more centered course." He said, "Like generations before, we must embrace America's singular role in the course of human events. But we must be as pragmatic as we are passionate; as strategic as we are resolute. When threatened, we must respond with force — but when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies overseas. When innocents are being slaughtered and global security endangered, we don't have to choose between standing idly by or acting on our own. Instead, we must rally international action, which we are doing in Libya, where we do not have a single soldier on the ground, but are supporting allies in protecting the Libyan people and giving them the chance to determine their destiny."

In this one paragraph, one finds something of an Obama doctrine that embraces: (1) strategic pragmatism, reliant more on intelligence and targeted operations than excessive boots on the ground, (2) multilateralism, in which an engaged United States of America works within an international framework to solve global problems; and (3) fidelity to democratic ideals, in which the United States would support self-determination of freedom-seeking people, while eschewing the notion of American hegemony and empire.

President Obama ended his address to the nation by stating that the time had come for the United States to concentrate on nation building in the domestic sphere, emphasizing that the costs of war had been high, and the time had come to focus on the plight of the American people at home. Clearly, the president was responding to the political climate at home, which was growing increasingly frustrated with economic strife at home and its concomitant link to the heavy price tag of war abroad.

Reaction --

President Obama's plan found conflicting resonance among political quarters. Liberal members of the president's Democratic Party, such as Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi were pleased that the war was finally ending, but disappointed that the process would not be immediate. She said, "Tonight, President Obama made it clear: we are now beginning the process of bringing our troops home and ending the war in Afghanistan. It has been the hope of many in Congress and across the country that the fulldraw-down of U.S. forces would happen sooner than the President laid out — and we will continue to press for a better outcome." There was something of a Republican split. House Speaker John Boehner warned that Congress would pressure the Obama administration against a withdrawal, if there was a security risk. He said, "It is my hope that the President will continue to listen to our commanders on the ground as we move forward. Congress will hold the Administration accountable for ensuring that the pace and scope of the draw-down does not undermine the progress we've made thus far." A potential 2012 Obama rival for the presidency, Mitt Romney, expressed displeasure with the president's "date certain" exit schedule saying, "We all want our troops to come home as soon as possible, but we shouldn't adhere to an arbitrary timetable on the withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan."

Update --

On Aug. 7, 2011, an apparent rocket-propelled grenade attack by the Taliban on a Chinook helicopter in Afghanistan, left 30 United States troops and eight Afghan commandos dead. Several of the American troops who died in the incident were members of the vaunted elite Seal Team Six, which carried out the raid into Pakistan, which eliminated al-Qaida leader, Osama Bin Laden. United States authorities said that the attack did not demonstrate gains for the Taliban and would not affect ongoing policy on Afghanistan.

On Sept. 10, 2011, a suicide truck bomb targeted United states troops at a military base in the eastern Wardak province of Afghanistan. Two Afghan civilians died as a result of the attack, while 80 United States troops were injured. The day also saw a United States base in Bagram attacked by rockets. Both attacks coincided with the 10th anniversary of the terror attacks by al-Qaida in the United States a decade earlier on Sept. 11, 2001.

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The Taliban quickly claimed responsibility and said that they were seeking revenge for the continued presence of United States troops in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Taliban accused the United States of using the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks as justification for invading Afghanistan. Of course, it was those terror attacks, and the alliance between the Afghanistan-based Taliban and al-Qaida, which had spurred the war in Afghanistan.

Ousted from power as a result of the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban has been carrying out an insurgency for years, aimed at repelling international forces and ending rule by the new government.

For their part, United States forces have stayed in Afghanistan to fight the resurgent Taliban despite decreased popularity among both Afghans and Americans for the long-running war. Speaking to this issue, United States Ambassador Ryan Crocker said the United States troops needed to remain in Afghanistan to prevent extremists from using Afghan territory to plan another catastrophic terror attack. In an interview with Agence France Presse, he said, "We're here so there is never again another 9/11 coming from Afghanistan's soil."

While these attacks were also linked with the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States, according to NATO, they were also aimed at derailing the effort to handover security to Afghan-led forces during a phased withdrawal schedule beginning in the next year. Indeed, 2011 has seen the most bloodshed in Afghanistan since December 2011 when United States-led forces toppled the rule of the Taliban in that country. Nevertheless, NATO appeared undeterred by this latest bout of violence and asserted its intent to stay the course. As noted by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "We have confidence in the Afghan authorities' ability to deal with this situation. Transition is on track and it will continue."

Islamic militants carried out a complicated siege of the Afghan capital of Kabul on Sept. 13, 2011. Particular targets of the siege included the United States embassy, NATO headquarters, and police stations in Kabul.

The assault, which was carried out by Islamic terrorist militants disguised in burqas, continued for as many as 20 hours -- in fact, well into the next day -- with both Afghan and international security forces contending with multiple points of conflict. NBC News, among other international news media, reported that about seven militants, likely from the Pakistan-based Haqqani network -- occupied a high-rise building in the area of the Abdul Haq roundabout. From their perch there, they were able to shoot and fire rockets at targets in Kabul's embassy district including the United States embassy and the NATO headquarters close by. While there were no casualties at the United States embassy or at NATO headquarters, the scene was not without bloodshed. The assailants shot and killed people at other locations in the area, with the list of victims including Afghan civilians and policemen. In addition to the attacks ensuing from the high-rise building, there were also a number of suicide attacks in Kabul by about four other militants, including one at a police station in the western part of the capital. Back at the embassy district, the scene devolved into a standoff of sorts as Afghan security forces attempted to ferret out the assailants occupying that building. The siege and gun battle finally ended in the early hours of Sept. 14, 2011 with all of the assailants dead.

At first, it appeared that the Taliban was claiming responsibility, as the militant extremist group conveyed a message that it was carrying out "a massive suicide attack on local and foreign intelligence facilities" to mark the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 2001 terror attacks in the United States.

But United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, said that it was the Pakistan-based Haqqani network that had orchestrated the siege of Kabul. As well, Cameron Munter, the United States ambassador to Pakistan asserted that there were links between the Haqqani network and the Pakistani government. During an interview with Radio Pakistan, Ambassador Munter said that there was evidence linking the Haqqani militant network to Pakistan's government. "The attack that took place in Kabul a few days ago was the work of the Haqqani network, and the fact that, as we have said in the past, that there are problems, there is evidence linking the Haqqani network to the Pakistan government, this is something that must stop," said Munter. Of course, the Haqqani network has been closely allied with the Taliban and al-Qaida both in terms of extremist Islamic ideology and in terms of its brutal use of terrorism.

Admiral Mike Mullen, the outgoing head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also intimated a connection between Pakistani intelligence and those who carried out the attacks.

Already, the United States government warned that if Pakistani authorities failed to take action against the Pakistan-based Haqqani network for its attack on the United States embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul, then it would retaliate. For its part, Pakistani authorities have continued to deny any connection to militant groups, the manifold evidence linking Pakistani intelligence to the Taliban notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Crocker asserted that the plague of violence in Afghanistan ten years after the 2001 terror attacks in the United States, which spurred the war in Afghanistan, would not change his country's plans. Earlier, in the aftermath of the attack by the Taliban on United States bases in Afghanistan, Crocker said the United States troops needed to remain in Afghanistan to prevent extremists from using Afghan territory to plan another catastrophic terror attack. But Crocker on Sept. 14, 2011 was also adamant about the fact that the actions of militant extremists would not deter the United States from its transition schedule -- including the transfer of security duties from coalition forces to Afghan forces, and the phased exit of United States troops from Afghanistan.

Note: Of the 100,000 United States troops in Afghanistan, about 33,000 were due to be redeployed in 2012. A full withdrawal of foreign combat troops was scheduled to take place in 2014.

Special Entry

Debt Ceiling Crisis, Default Risk, Downgrade

In July 2011, the credit ratings agency Moody's warned it would reassess the United States' AAA rating due to the ongoing imbroglio amongst American lawmakers on the matter of the debt ceiling. The warning by Moody's, according to Reuters, was a sign that the credit ratings agency was on the verge of actually downgrading the United States' "top-notch credit rating." As stated by Moody's in a statement, there was a "rising possibility that the statutory debt limit will not be raised on a timely basis, leading to a default on U.S. Treasury debt obligations." Already, Standard and Poor's had placed the United States' rating on a negative outlook months earlier, which in turn augured a downgrade in the months to come.

The main issue for the credit ratings agencies has been that certain factions within the United States Congress are virulently opposed to raising the United States debt ceiling; a failure to do so would result in default. Even with some movement from the Republican leadership in the Senate, there were insufficient votes from Republicans in the House of Representatives to pass a measure authorizing raising the debt ceiling.

There were warnings from President Barack Obama, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke that defaulting on United States debt would yield catastrophic consequences. Specifically, default by the United States Treasury would facilitate chaos in the international financial markets, increase borrowing costs for both the government and businesses, exacerbate the financial challenges of the country, and reverse the fragile economic recovery. In practical terms, it would result in the United States Treasury having to prioritize what payments could be made. As the president said in an interview with CBS News, there would be no guarantee that Social Security checks could be sent out, or that servicemen and servicewomen in the military would be paid.

On July 15, 2011, the Treasury Department issued an ominous warning as it asserted that all measures intended to mitigate the debt limit crisis had been used, and that the only weapon left in the proverbial arsenal was an increase to the debt ceiling. Specifically, Jeffrey Goldstein, the under secretary for domestic finance, explained that reinvestment in an emergency reserve had been suspended to help keep the country under the \$14.3 trillion limit. Goldstein said, "Today, as previously announced, the Treasury Department will suspend reinvestment of the Exchange Stabilization Fund, the last of the measures available to keep the nation under the statutory debt limit."

Federal Reserve Board Chairman Ben Bernanke characterized a potential default as "calamitous" during congressional testimony before the Senate Banking Committee in mid-July 2011, saying, "I think it would be a

calamitous outcome, create a very severe financial shock that would have effects not only on the U.S. economy but on the global economy." He continued, "Treasury securities are critical to the entire financial system. Default on those securities would throw the financial system into potentially into chaos." The Federal Reserve chairman cast that chaos as follows: "we would destroy the trust and confidence that global investors have in U.S. treasury securities as being the safest and most liquid assets in the world."

These warnings appeared to find little resonance with the "Tea Party" base of the Republican Party, which was lobbying for massive tax cuts during ongoing debt reductions talks between legislative leadership and the president. Those talks were linked with the debt ceiling issue. The Republicans insisted that there was no need for revenue procurement moves, leading to an impasse between the Republicans and the Democrats in Congress. For their part, the Democrats were insisting that debt reduction measures should include curtailment of tax benefits for the ultra-rich if the lower echelons of society had to deal with the consequences of reduced federal spending. At the same time, with an eye on the longer-term fiscal health of the nation, the president was indicating that he was willing to buck his own party and consider some cuts to popular entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security.

On July 16, 2011, during his weekly radio and Internet address, President Obama said that congressional leaders had to demonstrate to the American people "a willingness to compromise" on a deal to solve the challenge of the federal debt. The president said that any future solution would entail "a balanced approach, shared sacrifice and a willingness to make unpopular choices on all our parts." He noted that there would be repercussions on many of the pet programs of the two main political parties. President Obama explained, "That means spending less on domestic programs. It means spending less on defense programs. It means reforming programs like Medicare to reduce costs and strengthen the program for future generations. And it means taking on the tax code, and cutting out certain tax breaks and deductions for the wealthiest Americans." The president noted that cuts in domestic entitlement spending would not be popular with his fellow Democrats but the current debt problem required such measures. Likewise, President Obama called on Republicans to make equally unpopular decisions within that party, and move towards compromise. He said, "So I've put things on the table that are important to me and to Democrats, and I expect Republican leaders to do the same."

President Obama was especially vocal on the need for Republicans to assent to higher taxes for the wealthiest echelons of society. To this end, President Obama said that the debt crisis would not be solved without "asking the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share" and without the removal of special tax break loopholes for big corporations. The president emphasized that the lion's share of the deficit burden should not be carried by working people who were already making enormous sacrifices. But many Republicans outright rejected the notion of closing tax loopholes and lifting the Bush-era tax cuts on the wealthiest Americans, characterizing even those measures as onerous tax increases.

As July 2011 entered its third week, President Obama told congressional leaders that they had a very limited window of time to come up with a plan or a mechanism to resolve the debt ceiling crisis, charting possible paths to be taken: (1) a large agreement or "grand bargain" that would stabilize the finances for as many as two decades; (2) a modest deficit reduction plan that would include provisions for raising the deficit; or (3) a limited proposal that would simply raises the debt ceiling without addressing the deficit.

The president made it clear, though, that he would not sign onto any plan that would include converting Medicare to a voucher program requiring senior citizens to purchase private health insurance. Drawing a line in the sand, he said, "I view Social Security and Medicare as the most important social safety nets that we have," the president said. "I think it is important for them to remain as social insurance programs that give people some certainty and reliability in their golden years."

The president noted that since the situation was not comparable to the debt crisis wreaking havoc in Greece and across the euro zone, even a modest plan (i.e. Option 2) would do a lot to demonstrate that the United States was committed to putting its economic house in order. That being said, even modest Option 2 would required the relinquishment of political posturing and the adoption of the spirit of compromise -- elements likely to be elusive among the extremist Tea Party-dominated lower House of Representatives.

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In the Senate, gestures of compromise were being indicated, probably as a result of the potentially dire consequences in the offing for the United States economy and its standing in the world. Specifically, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky, was working with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, on a proposal that would authorize President Obama the authority to raise the debt ceiling, and empower a new bipartisan debt-reduction panel to craft an economic stabilization plan by the close of the year.

While members of the Senate of both parties appeared to grasp the sober realities of failing to raise the debt ceiling, such sentiment was not shared by Republicans in the House. Thus, even if the bipartisan Senate plan were to go forward in the Democratic-dominated upper chamber, it was yet to be seen if it would be passed in the lower House. There, in the late hours of July 19, 2011, Republicans were busy passing a controversial "cut, cap and balance" deficit reduction plan, which would cut federal spending by \$6 trillion and require a constitutional balanced budget amendment in exchange for averting a threatened government default. The "cut, cap and balance" deficit reduction plan was backed by Tea Party activists in the House of Representatives, but was regarded as a distraction by President Obama, who promised to veto the bill if it ever reached his desk. That likelihood was low since Senate Democrats promised to crush the bill when it came up for a vote in the upper chamber.

Meanwhile, a revived proposal by a bipartisan group of lawmakers, known as the "Gang of Six," appeared to be making new headway. That proposal included substantial cuts to spending measuring just under \$4 trillion over the course of a decade, as well as \$1 trillion in "additional revenue" (in the form of tax changes and increases). The proposal was strongly lauded by a surprising number of Senate Republicans and received cautious backing from the president. Analysts said that it could well act as a road map for the aforementioned debt reduction and economic stabilization plan. This news, which was being viewed positively on Wall Street, would yet have to be understood within the context of divided government, especially since the opposition Republican Party appeared to be split amongst the debt realists in the Senate and the base activists in the House.

Indeed, this split was vividly illuminated on July 22, 2011 when Republican House Speaker Boehner walked away from debt ceiling talks at the White House with President Obama. The president, who soon thereafter gave a news conference, said that "In the interest of being serious about deficit reduction, I was willing to take a lot of heat from my party." He asserted that he had offered an "extraordinarily fair deal" that would have included \$650 billion in cuts to entitlement programs, as well as slashes amounting to \$1 trillion in discretionary spending, while seeking \$1.2 trillion in revenue, mostly derived from raising income tax rates (i.e. the comprehensive rewriting of the tax code). This proposal, which would go a long to addressing the long-term debt challenges of the United States, was rejected by Boehner who balked at the notion of increasing revenue.

As stated by President Obama, "It is hard to understand why Speaker Boehner would walk away from this kind of deal." He continued, "In fact, there are a lot of Republican voters out there who are puzzled as to why it couldn't get done. Because the fact of the matter is the vast majority of the American people believe we should have a balanced approach."

For his part, Boehner blamed the breakdown in talks on the White House saying, "Dealing with the White House is like dealing with a bowl of Jell-O." He appeared to concur with the president in acknowledging that the main sticking point was demand for \$400 billion in tax increases in addition to \$800 billion in revenue that would come from tax restructuring as aforementioned.

A clearly angered President Obama warned that if there was a default and the United States failed to meet its obligations, there would be consequences; "If we default, then we're going to have to make adjustments," he said. President Obama exuded a rare show of emotion as he said that he was "fed up" with political posturing, and placed the onus on the Congressional leadership to come up with a plan to address the looming debt ceiling crisis.

With bipartisan negotiations now stalled and the debt ceiling and deficit imbroglio in a state of deadlock, the Republican House Speaker John Boehner and Democratic Senate Majority leader Harry Reid respectively unveiled separate deficit reduction plans on July 25, 2011. The Boehner plan included \$1.2 trillion in spending cuts and spending caps, along with a \$1 trillion debt ceiling increase. There would be a second debt limit increase in 2012,

but only if there were significant cuts to entitlement programs for the elderly and the poor. Of course, in an effort to appease the wing of the Republican Party that refused revenue enhancements of any kind, there were no provisions for tax increases or closure of tax loopholes.

The Reid proposal was composed of \$2.7 trillion in spending cuts but was bereft of either revenue increases (presumably to appease Republicans) or cuts to Social Security and Medicare (seemingly to quiet the fears of Democrats). Reid's proposal would, of course, include a debt ceiling increase equal to the amount of the debt ceiling increase, which would hold through 2013 -- well past the election season of 2012, as requested by the president.

Reid's plan appeared to be designed to gain bipartisan support in the Senate, since there were attractive elements for all parties ensconced in it; however, there was no sign that a House version would receive support. Reid emphasized that his plan offered Republicans exactly what they demanded -- spending cuts without any new taxes. But he appeared to harbor no illusions about the reception by Republicans, noting that members of that party in the House of Representatives showed no willingness to say yes to anything. Indeed, Reid accused Republicans of being "more interested in trying to embarrass the president than doing what's right for the country." The third-ranking Democrat in the Senate, Charles Schumer of New York, took the matter further, characterizing Reid's plan as "an offer Republicans can't refuse," and warning that if they did, it would indicate a desire to default. He said, "There are 100 people in the House who don't care if we default and you've not seen the House Republican leadership stand up to them. That's the problem here."

On the other side of the equation, the Boehner plan was expected to find resistance on a number of fronts: 1. "Tea Party" Republicans were on the record saying they would never vote for any bill with a debt ceiling increase contained within it; 2. Many Republicans argued that the cuts ensconced in that plan were not sufficiently draconian, even though there were no revenue enhancements; 3. Because of the spending cuts and the lack of revenue enhancements, it was viewed by Democrats in both houses of Congress as "dead on arrival" and therefore ensured Democratic resistance; and 4. It was not a longer term deal, as requested by the president, and would force the contentious issues to be negotiated once again in the election year of 2012, effectively infusing continued uncertainty into the markets.

On the night of July 25, 2011, President Obama once again addressed the American people in a prime time national address on television, intended to appeal for bipartisan action on the brewing debt ceiling crisis and deficit stalemate. To that end, the president laid out the recent history of events leading up to the current debt crisis, starting with the previous Bush administration's decision to fund two wars while also funding unprecedented tax cuts and an expensive drug prescription program. The president also explained that despite his efforts to go further than other Democratic leaders in addressing the debt ceiling and deficit woes of the United States, a segment of the Republicans in the House were insisting on intransigence, and preventing an agreement from being forged. As before, the president warned of catastrophic effects without a deal being reached by the deadline of Aug. 2, 2011 for raising the debt ceiling. He also reiterated his call for a "balanced approach" to dealing with the crisis, which would entail both spending cuts and revenue procurement from the ultra-wealthy. Explaining that the burden should not be carried only by working people, President Obama said: "Most Americans, regardless of political party, don't understand how we can ask a senior citizen to pay more for her Medicare before we ask corporate jet owners and oil companies to give up tax breaks that other companies don't get."

In a rebuttal-style address on the same night, Boehner accused the United States president of seeking a "blank check" and being the author of the looming crisis facing the country. He said, "The president wanted a blank check six months ago and he wants a blank check today." But Boehner insisted that such a fate would not befall the nation in the future as the country's "spending binge" was now over. Boehner also disparaged President Obama's call for a balanced deal saying, "The president has often said we need a balanced approach, which in Washington means: we spend more... you pay more. Having run a small business, I know those tax increases will destroy jobs."

The rhetoric aside, the focus was now on the passage of legislation. While the Reid proposal in the Senate (discussed above) had received the endorsement of the White House, perhaps, as expected, there was no favorable sanction for Boehner's plan in the House. President Obama indicated that in the unlikely event that the

Boehner plan reached his desk to be signed into law, he would veto it. The White House objected to the short-term initiative, which would likely result in another political fracas in 2012.

All eyes were now on the House where a revamped version of the Boehner plan was expected to be put to a vote by July 28, 2011. Boehner was forced to retool his offering when it became clear that it could not gain support from the "Tea Party" caucus of the Republican Party, which was demanding bigger spending cuts. As well, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office scored the Boehner plan and concluded that it would actually cut less than \$1 trillion, effectively decreasing its already-diminished attractiveness. Meanwhile, as reported by Politico, Senate Democrats were winning the "battle of budget scores." The Congressional Budget Office's report lauded Reid's proposal for reducing budget deficits by about \$2.2 trillion through 2021 -- three times the \$850 billion in the Boehner bill, but still \$500 billion less than originally claimed.

After multiple delays on the anticipated vote for the Boehner bill during the course of the day, the Republicans in House went into recess late on the night of July 28, 2011. Without sufficient support from the "Tea Party" or far-right caucus in the Republican party, and with united Democratic opposition, the bill clearly was en route to failure. This news was confirmed when the vote was rescheduled for the next day so that the Boehner bill could be changed. To that end, the reformulated bill contained within it a balanced budget amendment (BBA). The addition of the BBA -- a controversial provision, requiring exceedingly difficult constitutional changes -- was presumably added in a bid to curry favor with the most hard line elements of the Republican Party. A vote was rescheduled for later on July 29, 2011, where it finally passed with 218 votes in its favor and 210 against it.

Upon passage, the action shifted to the Senate as that legislation was fast-tracked on the road to nowhere with the Democratic leadership promising a quick vote to kill the Boehner bill, which was now viewed as even more objectionable to Democrats. As intimated above, the BBA has long been regarded as an unrealistic "non-starter," with even Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona making note of this reality on the floor of the upper chamber.

Ultimately, Senate Majority Leader Reid wasted no time in bringing the Boehner bill to a vote on the night of July 29, 2011 where it was quickly tabled with a vote of 41 for it and an overwhelming 59 votes against it.

Now attention was on re-crafting a bipartisan bill that could be passed in the upper chamber. However, that process promised to be imbued with difficulty when Senate Minority Leader McConnell (R-Kentucky) reportedly refused to negotiate with Senate Majority Leader Reid (D-Nevada) on the legislation. Instead, McConnell was demanding direct negotiations with the president. It was the first time in history that a minority leader outright refused to negotiate with a majority leader. Nevertheless, a test vote on some version of the Reid plan was expected to be held on July 31, 2011. To that end, the Reid bill went to a vote and did not go through, but was retained for amendments and a further vote, as negotiations continued with a fresh vote to come in the Senate.

Later on July 31, 2011, announcements emerged about a debt ceiling and deficit reduction agreement, which would potentially bring an end to the ongoing stalemate. Central to the agreement, which was being touted as a bipartisan creation, were the following provisions:

- Immediate authorization for President Obama to increase the debt limit by at least \$2.1 trillion, eliminating the need for further debt ceiling increases until 2013.
- Between \$900 billion and \$1 trillion in immediate spending cuts
- An additional \$1.5 trillion in deficit reduction to be identified by a bipartisan committee, derived from entitlement and tax reform. The committee would be required to report legislation by Nov. 23, 2011 with congressional votes on the recommendations by Dec. 23, 2011.
- The enactment of enforcement "triggers" that would go into effect if there was no agreement by the bipartisan commission on deficit reduction; the enforcement mechanism would trigger spending reductions beginning in 2013 that would be split 50/50 between domestic and defense spending.
- Social Security, Medicare beneficiaries, low-income programs, and Pell Grants for students would be exempt from any cuts.

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- The non-immediate deficit reduction measures would be phased in, beginning in 2013, to avoid harming the already sluggish economic recovery

The plan was endorsed by the president, albeit with little enthusiasm. In a brief and terse news conference, President Obama said that the agreement would "allow us to avoid default and end the crisis that Washington imposed on the rest of America." He added that default -- now on the cusp of being averted -- "would have had a devastating effect on our economy." While President Obama was not able to secure up front revenue increases, he did achieve his top line priorities to ensure that the debt ceiling was raised, that the country avoided unprecedented default, and that there would be no further crisis-laden debt ceiling debates until well after the 2012 elections. Also, in order to protect the economy from devastating austerity at a time when it was struggling to recover, a good portion of the deficit cutting measures would begin in 2013. Finally, from the point of view of Democrats, there was some protection being given to popular programs for the students, the poor, and the elderly.

Although Senate Majority Leader Reid signed off on the deal, it should be noted that House Minority Leader Pelosi warned that there might be limited support coming from her caucus. It would seem that progressive Democrats in the lower house were not enthused about the idea of giving so much in spending reductions for no guarantee of equivalent tax increases -- especially on upper income earners. On the other side of the equation, House Speaker Boehner was hailing the deal as a "win," asserting that his party had "changed the terms of the debate in this town," promising that even the provisions for revenue procurement were to be dismissed, and urging the Republicans to support the agreement with their votes.

Voting in the Senate on the debt ceiling and deficit reduction plan was expected to go to the floor of that chamber on Aug. 1, 2011. Pending approval, it would be sent to the House for passage there, presumably ahead of the Aug. 2, 2011 debt ceiling deadline. It was assumed that the new deal -- essentially, the last legislation "standing" -- would prevail during parliamentary procedures (i.e. escape filibustering) and then be passed in the Senate. It was a bit more difficult to say if, after being conveyed to the House, it could be passed there, before reaching the president's desk for signature. It was assumed that the Republicans would have to carry the lion's share of the votes there for passage, setting up some level of continued anxiety until final passage.

It should be noted that the debt ceiling imbroglio and the impasse on dealing with the deficit was leading to dismal approval ratings for politicians across party lines. The president, as well as Democrats and Republicans in Congress, were all suffering from low ratings according to polling data by NBC, ABC, and CBS; however, the political price being paid appeared to be higher for Republicans as compared with President Obama and the Democrats. Respondents were soured on politicians of all stripes, from the president all the way down the line, but the Democratic president -- with approval ratings in the upper 40s according to most polling outfits, was still commanding double digit advantages over Republicans. It was possible that Obama was benefiting in the eyes of the public from his willingness to cooperate with Republicans even in the face of obstreperousness and intractability. But by the close of July 2011, as the debt debate went on, with the Republicans dominating the terms of the debate, the president was losing support from both independents and his own base. It seemed that the president's bipartisan efforts were bearing no political fruit.

The politics aside, the United States had to grapple with the reality of the debt ceiling having to be raised by an August 2, 2011 deadline, or risk the United States sinking into default.

Concomitant with the repercussions of default was the downgrade element from the credit ratings agencies as those entities increasingly concluded that the United States Congress was ungovernable. To that end, as noted by Moody's, the risk on United States debt had been heightened and was "no longer to be de minimis." Moody's allowed that if the United States government was able to find concurrence, then, the credit rating would remain. Moody's said: "If the debt limit is raised again and a default avoided, the AAA rating would likely be confirmed."

As noted above, already, Standard and Poor's had placed the United States rating on negative outlook months earlier, effectively indicating a downgrade to come in the months ahead. Now, in July 2011, Standard and Poor's was expressly stating that there was a 50-50 chance of a downgrade in the United States credit rating within three months. Standard and Poor's described its stance as follows: "Owing to the dynamics of the political debate

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on the debt ceiling, there is at least a one-in-two likelihood that we could lower the long-term rating on the U.S. within the next 90 days." The statement continued, "The political debate about the U.S.' fiscal stance and the related issue of the U.S. government debt ceiling has, in our view, only become more entangled."

By the last week of July 2011, days before the crucial Aug. 2, 2011 debt ceiling deadline, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was urging American politicians to answer the call of urgency and raise the debt ceiling. The IMF also said that United States lawmakers should forge a "comprehensive solution" to reduce the country's deficit. To that end, the IMF said: "The strategy should include entitlement reforms, including additional savings in health care, as well as revenue increases." But the IMF warned against rapid reductions in spending, pointing to the realities of expected sluggish growth in the United States. The IMF warned that without these two moves, global investors would lose trust and confidence in the United States treasury securities, opening the door to "significant global repercussions, given the central role of U.S. Treasury bonds in world financial markets."

As noted above, voting in the houses of Congress on the debt ceiling and deficit reduction plan went to the floors of those chambers at the start of August 2011. As the country awaited the conclusion of these legislative procedures, it was fair to say that the country was very much in uncharted territory, marked by a ticking clock, as the debt ceiling deadline loomed only one day away, and as the United States government aimed to avert default and preserve its sterling credit rating.

Despite the decision by many liberal Democrats to vote against the bill, which they deemed to be unfair as it relied only on spending cuts rather than also tax hikes on the ultra-rich, and regardless of the no votes from Tea Party Republicans, who thought the deal did not go far enough in terms of austerity, the legislation passed through the House of Representatives on Aug. 1, 2011. A day later on Aug. 2, 2011, the Senate passed the agreement with strong bipartisan support. With this congressional approval, the bill was sent to the president for signature. Only ten hours ahead of the 11:59 pm deadline on Aug. 2, 2011, as he signed the legislation into law, President Obama said that while it was not the kind of policy he favored, the intent was to remove the "uncertainty surrounding the raising of the debt ceiling." The president expressed hope that the new bipartisan commission would take its duties seriously and come up with a plan that would include both spending reductions and revenue procurement since it would be impossible for the country "to close the deficit with just spending cuts."

With default averted, attention shifted to the issue of the United States credit rating. To that end, Moody's soon declared that it would retain the United States AAA credit rating, but the country would be placed under a "negative outlook." As well, the Chinese rating agency, Dagong, downgraded the United States credit rating from A+ to A, with a negative outlook. Then,

on Aug. 5, 2011, the ratings agency, Standard & Poor's opted to downgrade the United States from a AAA credit rating to to AA+. It was the first time in history that the United States lost its sterling credit rating.

Standard & Poor's said that its decision to remove the United States government from its list of risk-free borrowers was due to concerns about that country's federal debt. Indeed, the credit ratings agency had earlier warned that it might downgrade the United States if the debt reduction plan was not aggressive enough. Standard & Poor's had been looking for a \$4 trillion reduction over the course of a decade -- significantly more than the amount agreed upon in the plan passed by Congress. Standard & Poor's appeared to attribute responsibility for the downgrade to the political process in Washington D.C., even tacitly implicating partisan ideologues within government, who were disinterested in compromise.

Writing about the situation, Daniel Gross for Yahoo Finance placed explicit blame on Republicans for the downgrade, noting, "And it's difficult to escape the conclusion that America's credit rating was intentionally sabotaged by Congressional Republicans." The National Journal, which underwent a careful examination of the decision by Standard & Poor's to downgrade United States credit offered the following conclusion: "It based it on the political game of chicken over the debt ceiling, a game that Republicans initiated and pushed to the limit, and on a growing gloom about the partisan deadlock. Part of Standard & Poor's gloom, moreover, stemmed explicitly from what a new assessment of the GOP's ability to block any and all tax increases."

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Indeed, it was fair to say that the path to \$4 trillion in reductions could only be reached with a combination of spending cuts and revenue, and as has been discussed here, the Republicans were adamantly against the notion of any revenue procurement measures, including tax reform.

Perhaps not surprisingly, politicians entered the fray to apportion blame with Democratic Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts charging on NBC news that the downgrade of the United States was attributable to the Tea Party caucus of the Republican Party. Senator Kerry asserted: "I believe without question, this is the Tea Party Downgrade." Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona tried to transfer blame for dysfunctional government to the Democratic President Obama on the same show saying, "A lot of it has to do with the failure of the president of the United States to lead. I would remind you that Republicans control one-third of the government." On CBS News, Howard Dean, the former Democratic National Committee chairman, said of the Tea Party Republicans, "I think they're totally unreasonable and doctrinaire and not founded in reality. I think they've been smoking some of that tea, not just drinking it." But across the political aisle, Republican Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina (also featured on CBS) dismissed the notion of the Tea Party bearing responsibility. He said, "The Tea Party hasn't destroyed Washington ... Washington was destroyed before the Tea Party got there."

Nevertheless, the White House did not miss the opportunity to place the blame for the downgrade on the Tea Party Republicans. On CBS news on Aug. 7, 2011, David Axelrod, adviser to President Obama, said, "For months, the president was saying, let's get together, let's compromise. We thought we had such an arrangement with the Speaker of the House ... then he went back to his caucus; he had to yield to the most strident voices in his party. They played brinkmanship with the full faith and credit of the United States. This was the result in that." He continued, "The fact of the matter is that this is essentially a Tea Party downgrade. That clearly is on the backs of those who were willing to see the country default."

That being said, the Obama administration also pointed to a \$2 trillion mistake in the analysis of Standard & Poor's in making the decision to downgrade the United States. A spokesperson for the United States Treasury said, "A judgment flawed by a \$2 trillion error speaks for itself."

Note that in mid-August 2011, the ratings agency, Fitch, said that unlike Standard & Poor's, it would retain the United States' credit rating as

AAA and with a stable outlook.

Special Entry

U.S. President Obama unveils "American Jobs Act" during address to joint session of Congress

Summary

On Sept. 8, 2011, during an address to a joint session of Congress, United States President Barack Obama unveiled his much-anticipated employment and economic growth strategy to the nation. The "American Jobs Act" was a \$450 billion package of tax cuts and spending proposals aimed at shoring up the country's faltering economy and spurring employment.

Background

Faced with a 9.1 percent unemployment rate, a dismal economy suffering sluggish growth, a concomitantly depressed and frustrated citizenry, as well as plummeting approval ratings, United States President Barack Obama promised to unveil a "jobs package" after the country's Labor Day break. The president's employment and economic growth strategy was to be announced during a joint session of Congress on Sept. 8, 2011.

Ahead of that address, the president spent the Labor Day break on Sept. 5, 2011, rallying a crowd in Detroit (Michigan), and declaring to the people: "We're fighting for the chance to give our kids a better life." Offering a preview of what was to come on Sept. 8, 2011, in the form of infrastructure initiatives, President Obama suggested

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that the country needed to get back to building bridges and roads. He also intimated that there might be an extension of payroll tax cuts for working families.

President Obama said that his "jobs package" had already received the blessing of both labor unions and the business community, and now needed the support of Republicans in Congress. Hinting towards a future campaign strategy in which he set himself up in opposition to the Republicans in Congress, President Obama said, "We just need to get Congress on board." Clearly, the president's objective was to advance a plan that could conceivably gain bipartisan support. Should Republicans choose to continue the path of intransigence, then he would cast them as the ultimate obstacles to economic progress.

Showing that he was capable of shedding the image of rationality, President Obama ratcheted up his political rhetoric saying to Congressional Republicans: "Prove you'll fight just as hard for tax cuts for middle-class families as you do for oil companies." It was to be seen if the president's tougher language would prevail during his presentation of the expected "jobs package."

The Plan

On Sept. 8, 2011, during an address to a joint session of Congress, United States President Barack Obama unveiled his anticipated \$450 billion package of tax cuts and spending proposals aimed at shoring up the country's faltering economy and spurring employment. The package was to be funded via additional spending cuts already being negotiated in a congressional "super committee" formed after the debt ceiling crisis.

According to President Obama, the "American Jobs Act" would employ teachers and construction workers, fund economic growth via infrastructure projects, provide tax cuts for workers, and furnish tax incentives for small businesses to increase hiring of new employees. As stated by the president, "The purpose of the American Jobs Act is simple: to put more people back to work and more money in the pockets of those who are working." The president continued, "It will create more jobs for construction workers, more jobs for teachers, more jobs for veterans, and more jobs for the long-term unemployed."

The rough breakdown of the package, according to its provisions, was as follows:

- \$175 billion for employee payroll tax holiday (benefits include temporary \$1,500 tax break for average families)
- \$70 billion for employer payroll tax holiday and expensing (benefits include reduction of payroll tax by half on the first \$5 million and \$5 billion designed to encourage businesses to accelerate equipment purchases)
- \$80 billion in aid to state and local governments (potential assistance in re-hiring of teachers, firefighters and police)
- \$60 billion for infrastructure investment (direct infrastructure projects such as building bridges and improving airports)
- \$57 billion for unemployment benefits (help intended for long-term unemployed)

President Obama called on members of Congress to act quickly on behalf of the American people to pass the jobs act. He demanded that intransigent Republicans in Congress "stop the political circus," and emphasized that every element of his employment and economic development strategy was based on principles supported by both political parties. Drawing upon a succinct refrain, President Obama repeatedly declared the words: "You should pass this jobs plan right away." Indeed, some variation of the call to pass the "American Jobs Act" was uttered more than 20 times during the president's speech.

Using plain but fiery language, peppered with barbs against the obstructionist Republicans in Congress, nods to ideological issues such as collective bargaining rights, entitlement reform, and common sense regulations, the president stayed away from the kind of lofty rhetoric that catapulted him to popularity in the 2008 presidential campaign. Instead, the president detailed a "nuts and bolts" approach to boosting economic development and spurring employment, which would be paid for by additional spending cuts, as noted above.

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As noted by political consultants, a focus on non-controversial proposals, which have enjoyed bipartisan support in the past, might well be the practical way to go in terms of actively addressing the needs of the American citizenry. Indeed, the American citizenry was exhausted from enduring economic woes, angered by a seemingly ineffective government, and desperate for solutions.

The Reaction

Meanwhile, economic analysts of all stripes -- from Paul Krugman, the lauded New York Times writer and Nobel Laureate, to Mark Zandi, the chief economist at Moody's Analytics and former economic adviser to presidential contender John McCain -- observed that President Obama's plan could yield enough jobs to reduce the unemployment rate by a full percentage point.

Even union leaders lauded the president's employment and economic development plan, with Richard Trumka, the president of the AFL-CIO saying, "He [President Obama] showed working people that he is willing to go to the mat to create new jobs on a substantial scale. Tonight's speech should energize the nation to come together, work hard and get serious about jobs."

On the other side of the equation, House Speaker John Boehner appeared to offer some cautious praise for the president's jobs package, saying that some elements "merit consideration." Of course, the president went through effort to put forth a package of proposals that could only be characterized as bipartisan, so the Boehner was somewhat boxed into an accommodating position. The top Republican in Congress nonetheless pressed for inclusion of conservative measures saying, "We hope he gives serious consideration to our ideas as well."

The Politics

It was yet to be seen if the "American Jobs Act" would be passed into law, as advocated by the president along with an increasing chorus of business leaders and economic analysts. Since taking office, President Obama has had to contend with intransigent Republicans in Congress, many of who have expressly explained their obstreperousness as being aimed at limiting his tenure in office. Those efforts may well see success as the president has been dogged in recent months by low approval ratings, especially regarding his handling of the economy. That being said, polling data indicated that American voters have placed somewhat more blame on Republicans in Congress, rather than on the president, for their negative feelings about the direction of the country. Accordingly, President Obama's promise to promote his employment and economic strategy across the country could be regarded as the start of his re-election campaign.

Whether or not Republicans ultimately decide to sign onto the "American Jobs Act," President Obama was likely to reap some political rewards. If the proposal enjoyed passage in Congress, then the United States economy would find some degree of relief (assuming the economists' prognostications are correct). But even if Republicans opposed his plan, the president had already articulated a populist message championing the needs of middle and working class men and women. In so doing, the president was now positioned to cast the ultra-conservative opposition as a political force intent on protecting the wealthy elites from onerous taxes, while failing to meet the needs of average American people.

The political dynamic was stated concisely by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, who noted, "President Obama's package of common-sense, bipartisan proposals will present a litmus test to Republicans." He continued, "I hope Republicans will show Americans they're more interested in creating jobs than defeating Obama."

It should not escape notice that the president's bipartisan proposals were undoubtedly designed to appeal to independent and swing voters whose support he would need to be re-elected in 2012. As well, his more passionate tone and defense of regulations and collective bargaining were respectively intended to reassure his liberal base, which has become disenchanted by the president's ever-conciliatory stances. Thus, President Obama's employment and economic strategy served another purpose: to bolster support from among his most crucial political constituents.

It was fair to conclude that the "American Jobs Act" was as much about helping Barack Obama retain the office of the presidency as it was about helping unemployed Americans and struggling businesses find relief. Perhaps not surprisingly, Republican Representative Paul Broun of Georgia, who was not present for the joint session of Congress, tweeted the following message regarding the president's proposal: "This is obviously political grandstanding and class warfare."

The Advocacy

Class warfare might well be a reality in the context of the discussion of the "American Jobs Act." But warfare ultimately yields some semblance of a winner, and the president was banking on the notion that more Americans would side with his economic populism as he cast the Republicans as champions of the ultra-rich. As suggested above, the president was shaping the discussion of unemployment and economic growth as a stark choice between siding with the people, or siding with the economic elites. Thus, it was perhaps not surprising that on Sept. 12, 2011, President Obama recommended that taxes be raised on the wealthiest Americans to pay for his proposed "jobs package."

Included in his proposed funding scheme were: limits on the deductions on charitable contributions that tend to be utilized by wealthy Americans, the closing of oil and gas loopholes, increased taxes on fund managers, and changing the tax provisions for corporate jets. The president said, "We've got to make sure that everybody pays their fair share including the wealthiest Americans and biggest corporations. We've got to decide what our priorities are."

These propositions were likely to be rejected by Republicans, who were likely to interpret such measures as effective increases in taxes. Notably, House Speaker Boehner, who had earlier sounded cautiously optimistic about working with the president on the employment and economic development strategy, now seemed more skeptical. Of course, Republicans have balked at the notion of violating the far-right pledge or "holy grail" of raising taxes.

Undeterred by such a response, President Obama took his message to the country, campaigning in the backyards of leading Congressional Republicans. The American president went to Virginia -- the home state of Republican House Leader Eric Cantor, and also the Ohio constituency of House Speaker Boehner. In Ohio, which has been particularly hard-hit by unemployment and economically damaged by a struggling manufacturing sector, President Obama declared that his jobs package could create as many as 10,000 jobs for construction workers, while improving the infrastructure of schools. In his speech to Ohio residents, President Obama asked the crowd: "My question to Congress is, what on earth are we waiting for?" The president also maintained the tone of his speech delivered in the joint session of Congress, frequently employing the refrain, "Pass this bill!" The president was expected to travel on to another swing state -- North Carolina -- to deliver the same message.

Republicans were quick to dismiss the call to sign off on the "American Jobs Act." Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican of Kentucky, cast President Obama as indulging in political theater. "I think most people see through all this," McConnell said. But the president was quick to turn this type of response to his political advantage. During his "jobs package" advocacy tour in front of crowds of Americans, President Obama asserted, "This isn't about giving me a win, it's about giving the American people a win."

With attention on the question of how to pay for the jobs plan and how to address the country's economic woes, the president intensified the political stakes when he called on Sept. 12, 2011, for a high tax rate on millionaires. President Obama advocated the creation of a new minimum tax rate for individuals making more than \$1 million a year. The president said that the country's ultra-wealthy citizens should pay at least the same percentage of their earnings as middle-income taxpayers. President Obama referring to the new proposed tax structure as the Buffett Rule -- an apparent reference to billionaire investor, Warren Buffett, who has repeatedly decried the fact that he pays less in federal taxes than his secretary, as a result of the lower tax rates levied on investment gains.

Republicans railed angrily against this populist plan, characterizing the president's millionaire tax as "class warfare," and warning against penalizing the country's "job creators." President Obama's response to this charge was as follows: "We're already hearing the usual defenders of these kinds of loopholes saying, 'this is just class warfare.' I

reject the idea that asking a hedge fund manager to pay the same tax rate as a plumber or a teacher is class warfare."

The Context

The president's advocacy of his employment and economic development strategy came at a time when the Census Bureau released data showing that more Americans were living below the poverty line. In 2010, the poverty rate rose to 15.1 percent -- the highest level since 1993. In 2011, about 46.2 million people were classified as living in poverty -- an increase of 2.6 million over the previous year. The poverty rate for children under age 18 increased to 22 percent in 2010; stated differently, more than one in five children in the United States of America were now living in poverty.

In terms of particular demography, whereas the poverty rate for senior citizens remained somewhat stable, it was increasing for adults between the ages 18 to 64.

Likewise, African-Americans and Latinos were most affected by poverty, as compared to non-Hispanic Caucasians; as well, women were more prone to suffering from poverty than men.

Data also showed that income fell in 2010 from the year before for middle-class families. In fact, median income has displayed little change over the last three decades. As noted by CNN, even when adjusted for inflation, middle-income families earn only 11 percent more in 2010 than they did in 1980. By contrast, the richest five percent in America saw their incomes exponentially increase by 42 percent.

It should be noted that that amidst these bleak conditions, as many as 50 million people were living without any health insurance.

It was yet to be seen how the Republicans' claims of "class warfare" against millionaires (discussed above) would resonate in a country with so many citizens struggling to make ends meet. Indeed, for Americans living under the poverty line, they could well argue that they had lost the poverty battle in the so-called class war.

Special Entry

Drone strike kills al-Qaida in Yemen terrorist orchestrator, U.S.-born al-Alwaki.

At the close of September 2011, it was reported in the international media that a United States drone strike had killed Anwar al-Alwaki -- a United States-born terrorist orchestrator and propaganda communicator for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The Yemeni Defense Ministry confirmed the deaths of Alwaki and a number of his associates in the Yemeni province of Jawf.

As an English-speaking United States citizen, Alwaki used his command of language and biculturalism, along with modern media, to reach out to young Muslims in across the world with the objective of radicalizing them and urging them to turn to terrorism. He was also believed to have been responsible for orchestrating a number of attempted attacks, including the recruitment of infamous Nigerian "underwear" bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried but failed to blow up a United States-bound airliner on Christmas Day in 2009. Alwaki was also blamed for inspiring United States Major Nidal Malik Hasan to carry out a 2009 attack on an army base in Texas that left more than a dozen people dead. He was additionally linked with the failed bombing in New York's Times Square in 2010.

United States President Barack Obama hailed the death of Alwaki in Yemen as a "major blow" to the terror enslave, al-Qaida. President Obama said that the AQAP figure was instrumental in the "planning and directing efforts to murder innocent Americans" and was "directly responsible for the death of many Yemeni citizens."

President Obama also used the occasion to emphasize the United States' commitment to fighting terrorism. He said, "This is further proof that al-Qaida and its affiliates will find no safe haven anywhere in the world."

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At home in the United States, there were some challenges to the legitimacy of eliminating a United States citizen without a trial. That being said, the United States government could well argue that it was operating within legal bounds by targeting an enemy of the state, and a leader of a terror enclave that had declared war on the United States.

Special Report:

U.S uncovers plot by Iranian agents to assassinate Saudi envoy and bomb Saudi and Israeli embassies

Summary:

U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies uncovered a conspiracy plot by Iranian agents working on behalf of the elite Iranian Quds Force. The plot included plans to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, and to bomb the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington D.C. and Buenos Aires. The White House has promised to hold Tehran responsible for its involvement in this elaborate plot of assassination and terrorism. Meanwhile, a connection between the Iranian agents and Mexican drug cartels has been uncovered, effectively complicating the already-tangled web of complex geopolitics. The U.S. wasted no time in attempting to leverage these allegations to isolate Iran and place pressure on that country's nuclear development program.

In detail:

Federal law enforcement authorities and intelligence agencies in the United States have reportedly uncovered and foiled a plot by Iranian agents to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel Al-Jubeir, and to bomb the embassies of Saudi Arabia and Israel in Washington D.C. United States officials indicated there were discussions about extending the bombing targets to the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Buenos Aires -- the capital of Argentina.

According to court documents filed in federal court in the Southern District of New York, the individuals accused of conspiring to carry out this plot were two men of Iranian origin -- Manssor Arbabsiar and Gholam Shakuri. One of the men, Arbabsiar, was a naturalized United States citizen holding passports from both the United States and Iran. He was arrested on Sept. 29, 2011, and was said to be in United States custody and cooperating with American authorities. Indeed, Arbabsiar confessed his involvement in the plot, according to media reports. The other man, Shakuri, was apparently still at large, presumably in Iran where he was reported to be a member of Iran's Quds Force -- an elite division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Both defendants were charged with conspiracy to murder a foreign official; conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction (explosives); and conspiracy to commit an act of international terrorism transcending national boundaries. Arbabsiar was further charged with an additional count of foreign travel and use of interstate and foreign commerce facilities in the commission of murder-for-hire. Arbabsiar was due to appear in a federal court in New York; if convicted of all charges, he would face life imprisonment.

In a news conference on Oct. 11, 2011, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. said: "The criminal complaint unsealed today exposes a deadly plot directed by factions of the Iranian government to assassinate a foreign Ambassador on United States soil with explosives." He continued, "Through the diligent and coordinated efforts of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies, we were able to disrupt this plot before anyone was harmed. We will continue to investigate this matter vigorously and bring those who have violated any laws to justice."

Attorney General Holder explained that while payment for the operation had already been transferred via a New York bank, the conspiracy had not yet progressed to the point of the suspects acquiring explosives for the bombing aspect of the operation. Attorney General Holder also confirmed reports that Arbabsiar and Shakuri were connected to the Quds Force -- the elite division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which has been accused of being responsible for operations in other countries, and which has been a major player in Iran's controversial nuclear development program. Attorney General Holder additionally made it clear that the plot was "conceived" in Iran by the Quds force, effectively drawing a clear line of connection to Iran's power base.

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Attorney General was unrestrained in his characterization of the plot, which he said had been orchestrated from the spring of 2011 to October 2011. He emphatically asserted that the conspiracy was "conceived, sponsored and directed by Iran," and warned that the White House would hold Tehran accountable for its alleged involvement in an elaborate plot of assassination and terrorism. It should be noted that United States officials were tying the plot to high levels of the Iranian government, albeit not directly to the Iranian president or ayatollah. It should also be noted that the United States Department of State has listed Iran as a "state sponsor" of terrorism since 1984; now in 2011, this latest revelation of an international conspiracy would no doubt reify that classification.

A Justice Department report detailed Arbabsiar's recruitment by senior officials in Iran's Quds Force, which reportedly funded and directed the elaborate assassination and terror plot. Extracts from that Justice Department report also indicated that Arbabsiar had gone so far as to discuss a Washington D.C. restaurant frequented by the Saudi ambassador and United States senators, as a possible venue for the target of the assassination. Those extracts suggested that high level Iranians were unconcerned about the additional collateral damage to American politicians or civilians in carrying out such an attack. As the trusted and long-serving envoy of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, the assassination of United States-educated Adel Al-Jubeir, along with potential deaths of United States citizens, would undoubtedly cause international furor.

There was an additional international trajectory, reminiscent of a Hollywood movie script, as the Iranian agents were trying to secure the assistance of Mexican drug cartels in carrying out the assassination element of the plot. Indeed, Arbabsiar was arrested as he attempted to travel to Mexico to meet with a Mexican drug cartel operative, allegedly to move forward with this plan. The Mexican informant was, in fact, working on behalf of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency. The involvement of Iranian agents, Mexican drug cartels, and terror targets on United States and Argentine soil, belonging to Israeli, and Saudi interests, effectively complicated the already-tangled web of complex geopolitics and international intrigue.

The mechanics of the plot notwithstanding, there would no doubt be questions about the motivation for the Iranian Quds Force to act against Saudi and Israeli interests on United States and Argentine soil. Of course, Iran's government has never restrained its expression of enmity for Israel; its antagonism towards Saudi Arabia is more opaque.

In fact, the Middle East has become the terrain of an ethno-sectarian power struggle between Sunni Islamic Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran in regional countries with mixed and complicated demographic mixtures of Sunnis and Shi'ites. According to United States authorities, Iranian-backed militias have been responsible for the upsurge in sectarian violence in post-invasion Iraq, where Shi'a Iran hopes to extend its influence. United States authorities have also alleged that the Iranian Quds Force has been instrumental in attacking American troops in Iraq.

Likewise, in Bahrain, which has a similar Shi'a-Sunni demographic composition as Iraq, and which has seen its own episode of unrest in the so-called 2011 "Arab Spring," Iran's desire to extend its influence was apparent. Specifically, as Saudi Arabian troops aided the Bahraini government in cracking down on the predominantly Shi'a opposition in Bahrain, Iran was quick to condemn the presence of foreign forces there. The scenario was a clear manifestation of the prevailing power struggle between the two sectarian power houses of the region -- Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran. Thus, it was quite possible that this 2011 assassination and terror plot was another such manifestation of these tensions.

There was little doubt that the matter would be taken to the United Nations Security Council, where veto-wielding permanent seat holders, China and Russia, have been reluctant to take strong measures against Iran in regard to that country's controversial nuclear development program and its failure to abide with international conventions. Indeed, concurrence by China and Russia on the 2010 United Nations Security Council resolution against Iran was only reached due to Iran's unambiguous failure to comply with the standards imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the revelations about clandestine nuclear sites. Now, in 2011, with news of this assassination and terrorism plot, and the implicating of the Iranian regime, heavy pressure would be placed on China and Russia to again act in concert with the broader international community.

At the diplomatic level, the Saudi embassy in the United States released a strong statement of appreciation for the United States government for uncovering and foiling the plot. As well, during a news conference on Oct. 11, 2011, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a vociferous warning to Tehran that her country would be working with the international community to isolate Iran, and to ensure that it would be held accountable for its actions in violation of international norms. Days later, United States President Barack Obama fortified his country's stance by confirming that Iran would pay a price for its involvement in this assassination and terrorism plot. "We're going to continue... to mobilize the international community to make sure that Iran is further and further isolated and pays a price for this kind of behavior," President Obama said. The United States leader stopped short of accusing the uppermost leadership echelon of the Iranian government of being involved in the alleged plot; however, he noted that even if Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did not possess operational knowledge of the plot, "there has to be accountability with respect to anybody in the Iranian government engaging in this kind of activity."

For its part, the Iranian government has mocked any claims of its complicity in the conspiracy, suggesting that the entire situation had been a sensationalized scheme fabricated by the United States. It should be noted that the Revolutionary Guards holds control over Iran's nuclear program, as well as being the over-arching authority at the helm of the Quds Force -- the very group believed to be behind the assassination and terrorism plot discussed here.

By the middle of October 2011, the United States was looking to parlay the allegations of attempted assassination and terrorism against the Iranian Quds Force into international action against Iran's nuclear development program. To this end, President Obama was pressuring IAEA inspectors to release classified intelligence information illuminating Iran's continuing efforts to develop nuclear weapons technology.

There have been some hints of the evidence against Iran available via the claims of IAEA director, Yukiya Amano, who suggested in September 2011 that Iran was working on nuclear triggers and warheads. According to the New York Times, insiders familiar with the findings of the classified IAEA report have intimated that Iran has made efforts to develop specific technologies related to the design and detonation of a nuclear device, including the mechanisms for creating detonators, the method for turning uranium into bomb fuel, and the formulas for generating neutrons to spur a chain reaction, and also casting conventional explosives in a shape that could set off a nuclear explosion.

Clearly, coming after the revelations about the assassination and terrorism plot linked to the Iranian Quds Force, the move to declassify the IAEA's report was oriented toward isolating Iran, now with accentuated political ammunition, and aimed at arguing the point that Iran was a grave threat to global security, therefore, the need to halt work on Iran's suspected weapons program was imminent. To this end, Tommy Vietor, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, said: "The United States believes that a comprehensive assessment would be invaluable for the international community in its consideration of Iran's nuclear program and what to do about it."

Of course, one of the risks of disclosing the findings of the classified report was that Iran could move to eject IAEA inspectors from that country, effectively foreclosing one of the few avenues available to the international community to monitor Iran's nuclear activities.

Meanwhile, among the punitive measures being advocated by senior White House officials was a prohibition on financial transactions with Iran's central bank. Another punitive measure under consideration was the expansion of the prevailing ban on the purchase of petroleum products sold by Iranian companies under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

These options have not, in the past, gained traction due to objections by China among other Asian countries. In the case of China, as a significant buyer of Iranian oil, that country's energy interests could be affected. At the same time, key United States allies, such as Japan and South Korea, are also buyers of Iranian oil but additionally handle transactions via the Iranian Central Bank. Complicating the scenario even further, oil and financial sanctions carry with them the threat of spiking the price of oil at a time when the economies of the United States, the European Union, and several other major global players, were enduring sluggish growth.

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That being said, the case against Iran was bolstered by a November 2011 report by United Nations weapons inspectors, indicating a "credible" case that "Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear device" and arguing that such activities could well be ongoing. United Nations nuclear inspectors gave no estimate of how long it would be until Iran would be able to produce a nuclear weapon; however, they confirmed the aforementioned claim that Iran had created computer models of nuclear explosions in 2008 and 2009, and conducted experiments on nuclear triggers. The IAEA then passed a resolution expressing "deep and increasing concern" about Iran's nuclear program, and demanded that Iran clarify outstanding questions related the country's nuclear capabilities.

While Iran was not on the verge of a declaration of its nuclear breakout capability, clearly, these revelations would serve to reinvigorate the debate about what method could be used to stop Iran from accessing a nuclear weapon. Under consideration would be options ranging from sanctions, to sabotage and military action. Despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's assertion that the report made clear the need for global action to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons, Russia wasted no time in foreclosing the possibility of its support for fresh sanctions. With United Nations sanctions unlikely, on Nov. 21, 2011, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada slapped fresh sanctions on Iran's financial and energy sectors.

With international pressure being intensified against Iran, the Iranian regime appeared to be reacting by lashing out at the Western world. With hostilities already high between Iran and the United States, Tehran appeared to be taking aim at the United Kingdom.

Nov. 29, 2011 saw militant students aligned with the hard line conservative government in Tehran storm the British embassy compound. This action appeared to be part of a violent demonstration against the government of the United Kingdom, which joined the United States in issuing new financial sanctions against Iran.

There were serious allegations mounting that the assault on the British embassy compounds had taken place with approval from Iranian authorities. The scenario disturbingly recalled the shocking assault on the American Embassy in 1979 following Iran's Islamic Revolution.

The United Kingdom was backed by the 15-nation United Nations Security Council, which condemned the attack "in the strongest terms." Separately, United States President Barack Obama called for the Iranian government to ensure those responsible faced justice.

Other Significant Domestic and Foreign Policy Developments of 2011--early 2012

"Occupied Wall Street" protests go global as protesters rail against the international financial system

While the first part of 2011 was dominated by the spirit of dissent in the Middle East, known as "the Arab Spring," as the months have gone by, mass protest action in the West gave rise to the mass protests by "Indignants" in Spain in mid-2011, and the "Occupied Wall Street" movement in the United States months later. Whereas the ethos of rebellion in Arab Spring was marked by public frustration over a mix of economic hopelessness and political repression, the Occupied Wall Street Movement was characterized by anti-corporatist sentiment. At issue was the financial crisis of 2008 in the financial and banking sector in the United States, which had ripple effects across the Atlantic in many European countries.

To date, the United States has struggled to crawl out of a recession while suffering from joblessness, and in Europe, debt crises have plagued the euro zone countries, contributing to fears of collapse and sovereign default. Whereas the targets of anger in Middle Eastern and North African countries during the Arab Spring were repressive ruling regimes, in the United States and Europe, the focus was on the bankers of Wall Street and international banking system, whose reckless financial maneuvers in a regulation-free environment led to the 2008 financial crisis, but who were rescued by tax payers. Those very tax payers were now suffering the deleterious effects of economies in free fall from stagnant growth and unemployment, but with the banking and financial sector now posting profits. The central message of the protesters was that the climate of unfettered corporate capitalism served

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only the interests of one percent of the population -- the wealthy elites -- to the detriment of the vast majority of people, whom the protesters had dubbed to be the "99 percenters."

While occupied Wall Street in New York was "ground zero" of the anti-corporatist protest movement, demonstrations soon spread to major cities across the United States, before going global and expanding to the financial districts of several other countries. Indeed, angry protests were unfolding in Rome, where violence broke out, as well as Athens, Dublin, London, Berlin, and other capitals of the West.

President Obama authorizes 100 troops to help Uganda deal with notorious LRA rebels

In mid-October 2011, United States President Barack Obama authorized the deployment of approximately 100 combat-equipped forces to Uganda to assist regional forces in dealing with the notorious Lord's Resistance Army. The precise mission was the "removal from the battlefield" -- meaning capture or killing of -- LRA leader, Joseph Kony, and other senior leadership. The forces would be working in a cross-border zone encompassing Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and would be operating with the consent of the participating African countries.

In a letter dispatched to House Speaker John Boehner, Republican of Ohio, President Obama explained that "although the U.S. forces are combat-equipped, they will only be providing information, advice, and assistance to partner nation forces, and they will not themselves engage LRA forces unless necessary for self-defense." Of course, the action was consistent with prevailing legal norms in the United States, due to legislation passed unanimously by Congress more than a year earlier in May 2010, called the "Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act," which expressed congressional support "for increased, comprehensive United States efforts to help mitigate and eliminate the threat posed by the LRA to civilians and regional stability." President Obama also noted that this deployment in 2011 would advance "United States national security interests and foreign policy, and will be a significant contribution toward counter-LRA efforts in central Africa."

The LRA is one of the most brutal entities operating in the world today. During the 20-year long conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government, tens of thousands of people have died and two million have been displaced. Despite periodic peace overtures by the government, and in defiance of their own ceasefire declarations, the LRA has gone on to repeatedly carry out violent attacks on civilian populations in Uganda and surrounding border zones. Indeed, the LRA has operated across borders in an area that traverses several countries, compelling a joint-offensive by regional powers in an effort to stamp out the rebels. Nevertheless, by 2010, the United States-based human rights and anti-genocide group, Enough Project, said that the LRA had found safe haven in Sudan and was operating in Sudan's western Darfur region.

The LRA gained notoriety for its gross violations of human rights, such as rape, torture, murder, abduction of children for the purpose of making them either child soldiers or sex slaves, and vicious mutilation. United Nations Humanitarian Affairs head, Jan Egeland, has described the LRA's activities as being akin to the worst form of terrorism in the world. He has also characterized the situation in Central Africa as a horrific humanitarian crisis.

In 2004, the International Criminal Court of the United Nations commenced a war crimes investigation into the atrocities committed by the LRA. A year later in 2005, the ICC completed the inquest and issued the indictments of the group's five senior leaders. The war crimes charges included murder, rape, and forcible enlistment of children. The five individuals indicted included Kony, the leader of the LRA, as well as Raska Lukwiya, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen. All five were yet to be apprehended. According to the ICC, it would be Uganda's responsibility to ensure that all five individuals were brought into custody to face trial.

In 2006, with no progress on the apprehension of the LRA leadership by Ugandan authorities, the international police agency, INTERPOL, issued wanted notices for the five indicted individuals (including Kony) on behalf of the ICC.

President Obama's multilateral foreign policy is bolstered in Libya

Coming on the heels of the successful "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia and the "Nile Revolution" in Egypt, protests by thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators in Libya resulted in the liberation of the eastern part of the country. As part of a brutal crackdown aimed at shoring up power in the government's center of Tripoli, the Qadhafi regime opened fire on anti-government protesters before commencing a brutal military offensive against opposition strongholds to the east. Unapologetic for his ruthless tactics and in the face of worldwide condemnation, Qadhafi called for the crushing of the resistance movement by all means necessary and "without mercy."

In response to the audacious move by Qadhafi to attack and kill his own people, the United Nations Security Council, on Feb. 26, 2011, voted unanimously to impose sanctions on Libya and to refer the Qadhafi regime to the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes against humanity. Then, on March 17, 2011, the United Nations Security Council authorized a "no fly zone" against Libya, with an international coalition commencing air strikes on military targets in that country, with an eye on protecting the Libyan people from the Qadhafi regime. By the close of March 2011, NATO had taken control of the operation, the rebels were reconstituting their efforts at taking control of eastern towns, and the Qadhafi regime said it welcomed an African Union plan for a ceasefire and resolution. The United States, in concert with its NATO allies, was providing a support role to the rebels of Libya as they carried out their fight against one-time terrorist sponsor, Qadhafi.

Months later, Tripoli had fallen and the Qadhafi regime was being isolated. Only two remaining pro-Qadhafi strongholds remained: Qadhafi's hometown of Sirte and Bani Walid. Fierce fighting was reported in these two areas, with a special emphasis on Sirte, where Qadhafi -- still evading captivity -- was believed to be hiding. As rebels took control over the airport at Sirte, NATO forces were targeting command and control facilities in Sirte.

At the diplomatic level, the United States and allied Western nations wasted no time in recognizing the Transitional National Council (TNC) as the legitimate authority in Libya while the United Nations General Assembly had voted overwhelmingly to transfer control over Libya's seat at the international body to the interim Libyan authority.

In New York, the interim Libyan leader, Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, attended the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly and also met with President Barack Obama. President Obama, along with other Western leaders -- British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy -- were being hailed as heroes in Libya for their stewardship of NATO's efforts to support the rebel effort in that country.

Finally, in October 2011, Libyan transitional authorities declared that Sirte -- the final pro-Qadhafi stronghold -- had fallen, Qadhafi had died, and Libya's national liberation was at hand. Indeed, it appeared that the rebels' brazen prediction was coming to pass: "Zero Hour" was finally descending on the Qadhafi regime in Libya.

On Oct. 23, 2011, Libya's transitional government declared the national liberation of the country before a rejoicing crowds at a venue now called "Victory Square" in the eastern city of Benghazi, where the anti-Qadhafi revolt began months earlier. He paid homage to Libyan martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of freedom and profusely thanked NATO countries for their support.

Faced with the objective of providing stabilizing support for the Libyan people's hard-fought victory, while at the same time ensuring that the Libyan story was ultimately written by the Libyan people, United States President Barack Obama said: "The United States is committed to the Libyan people. You have won your revolution." He continued, "The Libyan people now have a responsibility to build an open democratic Libya that stands as a great rebuke to Qadhafi's dictatorship." Following the declaration of national liberation, President Obama congratulated Libyans, saying: "After four decades of brutal dictatorship and eight months of deadly conflict, the Libyan people can now celebrate their freedom and the beginning of a new era of promise."

The death of Qadhafi -- the world's most wanted man in the aftermath of the elimination of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden -- could well be viewed as a vindication of United States President Barack Obama's foreign policy. That foreign policy has been characterized by limited military engagement within a multilateral framework of international structures, combined with the judicious use of refined geopolitical and military intelligence. It was a position the Obama administration wasted no time in claiming with great enthusiasm. As stated by Vice President Joseph

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Biden in an apparent contrast to the previous Bush administration's invasion of Iraq: "In Libya, the United States only spent two billion dollars and lost not one American life."

Supreme Court agrees to hear case challenging President Obama's landmark health care policy

On Nov. 14, 2011, the Supreme Court of the United States agreed to hear a challenge to President Barack Obama's landmark health care policy, the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

In general, the ACA was expected to accomplish the following:

- Reduce the deficit by more than a trillion dollars over the next decade due to decreased spending on health care
- Expand health care coverage to 32 million people who did not have it before
- Allow more than one million young people to stay on their parent's health care plans until their 26th birthday
- End abusive insurance practices such as denying treatment for pre-existing conditions, dropping people from plans when they get sick, and implementing annual and lifetime limits on care
- Strengthen Medicare to help better protect seniors

But opponents have argued that the imposition of an insurance mandate in an overall national system is unconstitutional.

A review of the legal briefs indicated that the Supreme Court would decide (1) whether Congress can compel states to expand the number of people covered by Medicaid, and force them to pay for the expansion, by threatening to withhold billions in federal funding; (2) whether Congress is empowered by Article 1 to enact the insurance mandate; (3) whether the insurance mandate is a tax, which, as such, would mean that it could not be challenged in court until its enactment in 2104; (4) if the insurance mandate was determined to be illegal, which parts of the ACA would be so inextricably intertwined that they must be removed.

For its part, the Obama administration earlier this year asked the Supreme Court to hear the case against the ACA in order to put the challenges to rest, and to continue moving forward with implementing the law, which it said would lower the cost of health care for all Americans while ensuring more people are able to access the care they need. White House Communications Director Dan Pfeiffer responded to the news that the highest court in the United States would take up this case by saying, "We know the Affordable Care Act is constitutional and are confident the Supreme Court will agree."

Already, the Obama administration has enjoyed third favorable rulings on the ACA at federal appeals courts. The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals and the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed opponents' cases against the law. Most recently, the District of Columbia Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the ACA was constitutional. In upholding the constitutionality of the law, Judge Laurence H. Silberman reaffirmed that Congress has the constitutional authority "to forge national solutions to national problems" like the need to provide affordable, quality health care to all Americans. Clearly, the Obama administration was hoping for the Supreme Court to follow along those lines.

The Supreme Court was expected to hear oral arguments by March 2012, with a decision expected in mid-2012, in the heat of the 2012 presidential campaign.

Suspect arrested and charged in shooting at White House

On Nov. 15, 2011, federal law enforcement authorities in the United States arrested a young Idaho man suspected of shooting at the White House with a semi-automatic rifle. Following his arrest in Pennsylvania, Oscar Ramiro Ortega-Hernandez was charged with attempted assassination of the president. Secret Service officers said that at least one bullet had indeed struck the presidential residence, although no one was hurt. President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama were not in the White House at the time of the shooting.

Suspect arrested and Charged in New York City bomb plot

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On Nov. 20, 2011, authorities in New York said that a man named Jose Pimental had been arrested on suspicion of planning to bomb targets including police and police vehicles, returning military personnel from Iraq and Afghanistan, elected officials, and postal offices in the city. Described as a "lone wolf," Pimental was inspired by al-Qaida in his terrorism ambitions.

At a news conference at New York's City Hall, Cyrus Vance Jr., the Manhattan district attorney, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Commissioner Raymond Kelly of the New York Police Department announced that Pimental, who was under surveillance for about a year, had been charged with terrorism-related offenses. The arrest went forward when Pimental allegedly purchased bomb-making materials and began to manufacture bombs. According to Commissioner Kelly, some of Pimental's bomb-building knowledge was reportedly garnered from an article titled, "How to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom," in an al-Qaida's magazine. That magazine, Inspire, was published by militant Islamic cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, who died in a United States drone attack in Yemen two months prior in September 2011.

Iran arrests 12 "CIA spies" said to be targeting nuclear program; Hezbollah informants at risk in Lebanon

On Nov. 24, 2011, according to the state-run IRNA news agency, Iran announced it had broken up an American spy network and that 12 individuals had been arrested. Iranian officials claimed that the 12 individuals were "spies" working on behalf of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to undermine the country's military and its nuclear program. No information was available about the identity or nationality of the dozen so-called agents. Parviz Sorouri, an influential member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian parliament, was reported to have said that the agents were working cooperatively with Israel's Mossad. He was quoted in international media having said, "The US and Zionist regime's espionage apparatuses were trying to use regional intelligence services, both inside and outside Iran, in order to deal a strong blow to our country. Fortunately, these steps failed due to the quick measures taken by Intelligence Ministry officials." Iranian officials have further alleged that the United States has recruited spies from diplomatic missions in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Malaysia.

This news came on the heels of reports that the militant extremist Islamic organization, Hezbollah, uncovered a CIA spy ring in Lebanon. Months earlier, a Hezbollah member of parliament, Hassan Fadlallah, confirmed in an interview with Agence France Presse that "Lebanese intelligence vanquished U.S. and Israeli intelligence in what is now known as the intelligence war." A report by the Associated Press reflected the same claims with acknowledgment from officials in the United States. Of course, the dynamics of the respective governments notwithstanding, the lives of the individuals accused of spying were now broadly regarded to be at risk.

Lawmakers concede budget talks have failed

On Nov. 21, 2011, congressional leaders in the United States conceded that negotiations on a grand budget deal had ended in failure, opening the door to automated "across the board" cuts on domestic and military spending. At issue was an agreement forged months earlier that was intended to end a contentious debate on raising the debt ceiling. The agreement provided for Republican support for a previously-uncontroversial measure of raising the debt ceiling, in exchange for the formation of a bipartisan congressional "super committee" charged with finding ways to lower the federal deficit by \$1.5 trillion, derived from entitlement and tax reform. Failure to forge such an agreement by the end of November 2011 would trigger the aforementioned automated spending reductions beginning in 2013 that would be split 50/50 between domestic and defense spending.

Democrats blamed Republicans for their intransigence on the matter of revenue (raising taxes on the ultra-rich), emphasizing that the federal deficit could not be properly addressed without a combination of spending cuts and tax revenues. Republicans countered by accusing Democrats of being wedded to the notion of raising taxes.

President Obama channels Theodore Roosevelt: blasts Republicans for "trickle down" economic policies and delivers treatise in defense of the middle class in America--

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On Dec. 2, 2011, even as the wider global community was experiencing economic turmoil, the United States saw improvement in its employment sector as the jobless rate for the previous month dropped to 8.6 percent -- the lowest level in more than two years. According to the Labor Department, employers in the United States added 120,000 jobs -- a modest yet important development at a time with Republicans and Democrats continued to disagree about the path towards economic health. While Democrats advocated an extension to the payroll tax break, Republicans were not keen on the idea. The impasse constituted a continued state of stalemate in the political realm over the ways to stimulate the American economy.

Essentially, Democrats have blamed Republicans for their intransigence on the matter of revenue (raising taxes on the ultra-rich), emphasizing that the federal deficit could not be properly addressed without a combination of spending cuts and tax revenues. Republicans have countered by accusing Democrats of being wedded to the notion of raising taxes. Meanwhile, the continuing debt crisis in Europe continued to imperil the wider global economy, and threatened the United States' fragile economic recovery.

Against this background, on Dec. 6, 2011, United States President Barack Obama offered a sharp contrast between his Democratic Party's economic prescription for the nation and the Republicans' economic arguments. The address, delivered in the town of Osawatomie in the state of Kansas, appeared to thematically channel President Theodore Roosevelt, who in 1910 spoke from the same location and argued that the United States faced a "make-or-break moment for the middle class" in that country. With the Republicans set to vote in the caucus state of Iowa in just a month to choose a presidential nominee, it was apparent that President Obama's treatise on saving the middle class would be a resonant theme in his own re-election campaign. Indeed, the populist economic address would likely serve as the blueprint for President Obama's bid for a second term in office.

In this address, which sought to defend the rights of the middle class, President Obama asserted that the United States must reclaim its standing as a country in which everyone can prosper if provided with "a fair shot and a fair share." The particular lexicon appeared to evoke Theodore Roosevelt's "square deal." But President Obama went further.

To this end, President Obama expressly critiqued the Republican stance saying: "Their philosophy is simple: we are better off when everyone is left to fend for themselves and play by their own rules. Well, I'm here to say they are wrong."

For their part, Republicans have staked out ground to protect millionaires from bearing any further tax burdens and they have argued vociferously for cutting regulations -- both measures they said would protect the nation's "job creators," advance employment, and develop the economy. They have pointed to the slow recovery of the United States economy as proof of the president's own failed policies and the need to return to the conservative course.

of course, from the perspective of the president and the Democrats, that conservative course is what caused the current economic farrago in the United States. To that end, the speech in Kansas constituted a stinging indictment of Republican economic policies, which President Obama said had led to the Great Recession and the creation of the greatest income inequality the United States has seen in recent decades.

The president excoriated the conservative principle of "trickle down" (or "supply side") economics favored by Republicans for decades, saying: "Now, just as there was in Teddy Roosevelt's time, there's been a certain crowd in Washington for the last few decades who respond to this economic challenge with the same old tune. The market will take care of everything, they tell us. If only we cut more regulations and cut more taxes -- especially for the wealthy -- our economy will grow stronger. Sure, there will be winners and losers. But if the winners do really well, jobs and prosperity will eventually trickle down to everyone else. And even if prosperity doesn't trickle down, they argue, that's the price of liberty."

President Obama continued, "Here's the problem: It doesn't work. It's never worked. It didn't work when it was tried in the decade before the Great Depression. It's not what led to the incredible post-war boom of the 50s and 60s. And it didn't work when we tried it during the last decade."

In explaining how he believed the Republican position was wrong, President Obama explained, "Remember that in those years, in 2001 and 2003, Congress passed two of the most expensive tax cuts for the wealthy in history, and what did they get us? The slowest job growth in half a century. Massive deficits that have made it much harder to pay for the investments that built this country and provided the basic security that helped millions of Americans reach and stay in the middle class – things like education and infrastructure; science and technology; Medicare and Social Security."

The president made mention of the aforementioned matter of the extension of the payroll tax cut, which was due to expire at the end of the year. He also advocated legislation that would subject financial firms to stronger penalties for violating anti-fraud laws. To that end, President Obama noted that there was a deficit of trust between Wall Street and Main Street.

The speech also contained a vociferous defense of values that were championed by Republican Theodore Roosevelt, but which have since been embraced by the Democratic Party. Indeed, President Obama noted that Theodore Roosevelt had been characterized as a "radical, a socialist, even a communist" for putting forth ideas in his last campaign such as an eight-hour work day, a minimum wage for women, unemployment insurance and a progressive income tax.

That being said, it should be noted that the lion's share of the speech focused on the broader issue of income inequality -- a central theme of the protesters participating in the "Occupied Wall Street" movement, which has sought to highlight the way the economy has served the interests of the richest one percent of the population to the detriment of the remaining 99 percent of the country's citizenry. To this end, President Obama noted, "This kind of gaping inequality gives lie to the promise at the very heart of America: that this is the place where you can make it if you try." He continued by noting that such inequality "distorts our democracy."

Republicans responded to the address by dismissing it as election rhetoric and dismissing the references to Theodore Roosevelt as irrelevant. Mitt Romney, one of the Republican contenders seeking that party's nomination in the presidential race, wasted no time in ridiculing President Obama's attempt to link himself with Theodore Roosevelt. Speaking at a campaign event in Arizona, Romney said, "Obama said that he is like Teddy Roosevelt. And I thought, In what way is he like Teddy Roosevelt? Teddy Roosevelt of course founded the Bull Moose Party. One of those words applies."

President Obama's maintains populist stance from payroll tax fight to recess appointment for head of the CFPB

On Dec. 23, 2011, United States President Barack Obama secured a significant political victory in the payroll fight with Republicans when Congress approved a short-term renewal of the payroll tax cut along with extended unemployment insurance.

The president, backed by Democrats in the Senate and the House of Representatives, had been advocating an extension of the payroll tax cut. Indeed, President Obama and the Democrats wasted no time in using the "anti-tax increase" ideology fervently favored by Republicans to suggest that colleagues on the other side of the aisle should close ranks with Democrats. The president argued that there should be no increase on the economically-beleaguered American people, and warned that a tax hike would no doubt impede the fragile economic recovery of the United States.

Senate Republicans soon assented to the politically charged argument and joined Democrats to pass the short-term deal in the Senate, with an eye on forging a longer term deal in the new year. House Republicans, however, were not eager to work cooperatively with the president or Democrats and instead vowed to block the agreement. Clearly, House Republicans did not want to lose the support of their Tea Party caucus and their backers. The House Republicans' position, though, held little popular support among the American people and even respected conservatives. In fact, former advisers of the Bush administration and the Wall Street Journal's editorial board were respectively pillorying House Republicans for their position, pointing to the fact that the Republican Party was losing the public relations battle on the economy. To that end, the Republican Tea Party caucus' preoccupation with debt have given way in the public purview to the "Occupy Wall Street" protesters who were calling attention to the widening gap between the richest echelon of the society and the rest of the American citizenry. Political analysts

were soon warning House Republicans that their intransigence would yield deleterious consequences in 2012 at the polls.

Ultimately, with the political headwinds against them, House Republicans caved into the massive political pressure and held a voice vote to authorize the deal. The result was a political blow to House Speaker John Boehner who appeared to be held hostage by the most extreme elements of his party -- the Tea Party caucus -- before finally coaxing the Republicans in the House to join Senate Republicans in assenting to the short-term payroll tax deal. A seemingly satisfied Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, conveyed some advice to colleagues in the lower chamber saying, "I hope this Congress has had a very good learning experience, especially those who are newer to this body."

He continued, "The American people need this institution to work effectively."

For the president, the outcome of this political fight seemed to highlight President Obama's populist stance in recent months. Indeed, rising job approval ratings for President Obama appeared to illuminate his emerging reputation as one willing to stand on the side of working people and the middle class against a Republican Party, which had aligned itself with the richest echelon of society by resisting any increased tax contributions by millionaires to the national coffers. Before signing the legislation and traveling to his home state of Hawaii for the holidays, President Obama urged members of Congress to work diligently on a longer-term extension "without drama, without delay" in the new year. He said, "We have a lot more work to do. This continues to be a make or break moment for the middle class in this country."

At the start of 2012, the president maintained his populist stance by appointing Richard Cordray to head the new Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA). The move made during a recess appointment was intended to bypass Republican intransigence in the Senate, where the minority Republicans refused to give Cordray an "up or down vote," despite the fact that the majority in Senate supported President Obama's selection to head the newly-established CFPA, which was intended to advocate on behalf of consumers. The Republicans' opposition to Cordray appeared to have less to do with his credentials and more to do with their desire to stymie the effectiveness of pro-consumer bureau that they do not support. Explaining the president's decision to bypass the Senate Republicans and establish his choice of Cordray at the helm of the CFPA, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said, "The president feels very strongly that Americans deserve someone in Washington who will look out for their interests." Carney added, "The president is committed to working with Congress, but if Congress refuses to act, the president will act. Gridlock in Washington is not an excuse for inaction."

It should be noted that President Obama's populist tone was aimed at locking down base voters in the Democratic column ahead of the 2012 elections at a time when many American citizens were suffering economically. Faced with weak recovery, the president wanted to stake out ground as the advocate of the middle class, tasked with fighting on behalf of working people. It was apparent that this positioning was intended to provide a strong contrast with the business credentials of Mitt Romney, the likely Republican nominee for the presidency. President Obama could be helped by positive economic news on Jan. 6, 2012. Specifically, the United States posted fairly robust employment growth numbers by adding 200,000 jobs in December and with the unemployment number decreasing to 8.5 percent. In addition, consumer confidence was rising, the manufacturing sector was strengthening, and businesses seemed to see improvement. came in strong and small businesses showed signs of life. It was the sixth straight month that the economy has added more than 100,000 jobs.

Note: On Feb. 3, 2012, the Labor Department reported that the United States economy added 243,000 jobs in the previous month of January 2012 and that the unemployment rate had dipped to 8.3 percent. The news constituted two consecutive months of positive news on the economic front.

President Obama announces unprecedented cuts to the defense department

On Jan. 5, 2012, President Barack Obama and leaders of the United States Department of Defense announced unprecedented cuts in spending. The spending reductions of more than \$400 billion were part of an overall shift in strategy that aimed to prepare the United States military for 21st century challenges.

Central to that new strategy would be concentrating on intelligence rather than Cold War-era weapons systems, strengthening the country's military presence in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East where terrorism is a pressing threat, ensuring the troops have the equipment to succeed in their jobs, and providing for post-redeployment assistance for troops.

At a briefing at the Pentagon, President Obama said, "As we look beyond the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the end of long-term, nation-building with large military footprints, we'll be able to ensure our security with smaller conventional ground forces." The president explained that with "the tide of war receding," the United States military would be "leaner." According to President Obama, the United States would nevertheless "maintain our military superiority with armed forces that are agile, flexible and ready for the full range of contingencies and threats." President Obama concluded by noting that the United States needed to concentrate on renewing "the economic strength at home."

U.S. policy as regards Iran

As the year 2011 drew to a close, bilateral relations between the United States and Iran -- already dismally bad -- sunk even lower as an American drone was reported to be in Iranian hands. The official account was that the American drone had been flying in -- or close to -- Iranian air space, and somehow crashed. The drone, with its sensitive intelligence information, was then taken by Iranian authorities. But a report by the Christian Science Monitor suggested that Iran's possession of the drone may not have been the result of an accidental crash. Instead, according to an Iranian engineer, the country hijacked the drone and was able to technically take control of the aircraft by jamming the control signals, ultimately forcing it into autopilot mode. The Iranians then vitiated the GPS tracking by reconfiguring the GPS coordinates, effectively "fooling" the drone into landing in Iran, rather than in Afghanistan, which was where it was programmed to land. The images of the American drone in Iran's possession depict an aircraft remarkably intact -- rather than being subject to crash -- thus bolstering the credibility of the report by the Christian Science Monitor.

In December 2011, Iran successfully test-fired a medium-range surface-to-air missile during military exercises in the Persian Gulf.

The test occurred only a day after Iranian naval commander Mahmoud Mousavi denied media reports that his country had test-fired long-range missiles. Now, however, Mousavi was lauding the operation, noting that the missile was equipped with the "latest technology" and "intelligent systems." Mousavi also noted that further missile launches would be carried out in the near future as part of Iran's naval exercises in international waters close to the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

On Jan. 2, 2011, a day after testing a medium-range missile, Iran reportedly test-fired long-range missiles in the Persian Gulf. Making good on his previously-made vow that Iran would continue this path, Mousavi said on behalf of the Iranian government, "We have test fired a long-range shore-to-sea missile called Qader, which managed to successfully destroy predetermined targets in the gulf."

This news by Mousavi was followed by a disclosure by the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization that its scientists "tested the first nuclear fuel rod produced from uranium ore deposits inside the country." This news served only to bolster Western fears that Iran has made important progress in its nuclear development, augmenting anxieties that Iran's ultimate ambition is to enrich uranium at the 90 per cent level necessary to create a nuclear bomb.

This news from Iran came after several Western countries indicated their to impose further sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors, to register discontent over that country's continued nuclear ambitions. Indeed, the United States wasted no time in taking action and on Dec. 31, 2011, President Barack Obama signed legislation authorizing a package of sanctions

Iran's central bank and financial sector. These new sanctions by the United States aimed to intensify the pressure on Iran's oil sales, most of which are processed by the central bank. Essentially, they would force multinational

companies to choose whether to do business with Iran or the United States. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Iranian currency -- the rial -- slipped in value to a record low as a result of the news.

Iran was increasingly slipping into a state of isolation. China and Russia -- typically antagonists to the notion of increased pressure on that country -- seemed to be distancing themselves from Iran. China was reportedly seeking alternative sources of oil, while Russia was expressing "regret" over Tehran's decision to start work at the new Fordow uranium enrichment plant near Qom. Russia went further by saying that Iran should commence "serious negotiations ... without preconditions" or face the reality of consequences.

Meanwhile, on Jan. 5, 2012, the United States (U.S.) Pentagon announced that the U.S. Navy rescued 13 Iranian fishermen being held by pirates in the Arabian Sea. According to the Pentagon, the U.S. Navy responded to a distress call from an Iranian fishing vessel, which had been boarded by pirates several weeks prior. The U.S. Navy was able to apprehend 15 suspected pirates on that fishing vessel and release the Iranian fishermen whom the Pentagon described as having been held hostage under harsh conditions. A spokesperson for the U.S. Navy said that after the rescue of the Iranian fishermen, navy personnel went out of their way to treat the fishing crew "with kindness and respect."

The incident occurred at a time when tensions between Iran and the West were elevated. Several Western countries had recently indicated their intent to impose further sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors, for the purpose of registering discontent over that country's continued nuclear ambitions. Iran warned that it might retaliate against international pressure by closing the Strait of Hormuz through which a significant amount of oil is transported.

Only days after the U.S. Navy rescued the Iranian fishermen (as discussed here), the Iranian Revolutionary Court sentenced an American national of Iranian descent to death sentence for spying in behalf of the United States spy agency, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The family of Amir Mirzai Hekmati said that he was in Iran to visit his grandparents; however, the Iranian authorities claimed that Hekmati was guilty of "co-operating with a hostile nation," "holding membership in the CIA," and "trying to implicate Iran in terrorism." For his part, Hekmati -- who had served in the Marines as an Arabic translator -- was shown on television admitting that he had been sent to Iran by the CIA and was tasked with infiltrate Iran's intelligence agencies. Of course, the United States Department of State has asserted that Hekmati's so-called confession was likely coerced and that the U.S. citizen had been falsely accused.

Hekmati would have the opportunity to appeal his sentence; it was yet to be seen if Iranian authorities were willing to damage already-hostile bilateral relations with the United States by executing a U.S. citizen. Such a move would not help Iran in the public relations game on the international scene, given the fact that the U.S. Navy had rescued the aforementioned Iranian fishermen from pirates.

For its part, Iran has warned that it might retaliate against international pressure by closing the Strait of Hormuz through which a significant amount of oil is transported. Indeed, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi promised that "not a drop of oil will pass through the Strait of Hormuz" if further sanctions were imposed. That being said, analysts have noted that such a drastic step by Iran might serve primarily to hurt the Iranian economy, and imperil relations with Russia and China. Accordingly, the threat was being regarded with skepticism.

Moreover, United States Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta warned that a closure of the strait would yield consequences. Specifically, Defense Secretary Panetta said the United States would "not tolerate" the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, and warned that was a "red line" for his country, to which there would be a response.

According to the New York Times, the Obama administration in the United States reportedly dispatched a message via alternative communications channels to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warning him that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz would not be tolerated. In a separate report on CBS News, the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey appeared to underline the potential response by his country,

saying that the United States would "take action and re-open the strait." Of course, the general consensus was that the re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz could only be achieved by military means.

Clearly, the missile launch, the nuclear development news, the sanctions, the threats regarding the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, collectively raised the stakes in a burgeoning confrontation between Iran and the wider international community. As January 2012 was coming to a close, attention was on the question of what form that confrontation would take.

Going the route of "soft power" rather than military might, the West wasted no time in intensifying the sanctions regime against Iran in a bid to place pressure on the Islamic Republic's regime to curtail its controversial nuclear development moves. Specifically, the European Union was imposing a phased ban on oil purchases from Iran, while the United States was expanding its sanctions on Iran's banking sector.

According to a statement issued in Belgium, the countries of the European Union would not sign on to new oil contracts with Iran and would terminate any existing contracts by mid-2012. Since the European market has made up a full fifth of Iran's oil exports, this sweeping oil embargo would constitute a crushing blow. Making matters worse for Iran was the news that the European Union would also freeze the assets of the Iranian Central Bank and it would prohibit transactions involving Iranian diamonds, gold, and precious metals.

Expressing marked disapproval for Tehran's lack of transparency regarding its nuclear program, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that Iran had "failed to restore international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program."

Meanwhile, the United States' harsh sanctions regime against Iran would become even more targeted as it focused on the Bank Tejarat for its alleged role in (1) financing Iran's nuclear program, and (2) helping other banks evade international sanctions. In December 2011, United States President Barack Obama ordered a prohibition on any involvement with Iran's central bank. Now, a month later, the United States Treasury was asserting that the new sanctions against Bank Tejarat would target "one of Iran's few remaining access points to the international financial system."

Already diplomatically-isolated, Iran was now well on its way to being seriously financially isolated in the global marketplace. As noted by the United States Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism David Cohen, "The new round of sanctions will deepen Iran's financial isolation, make its access to hard currency even more tenuous and further impair Iran's ability to finance its illicit nuclear program." Indeed, the rial -- Iran's currency -- was being deleteriously affected as it underwent a massive downward slide in value.

In apparent reaction to the measures by the United States and the European Union, Tehran again threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz.

The level of brinkmanship reached new heights as the United States Ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, promised that his country and its allies would use any necessary measures to ensure that the crucial marine thoroughfare to the Persian Gulf remained open. In an interview with BBC News, Daalder said, that the Strait of Hormuz "needs to remain open and we need to maintain this as an international passageway. We will do what needs to be done to ensure that is the case." He continued, "Of this I am certain -- the international waterways that go through the Strait of Hormuz are to be sailed by international navies, including ours, the British and the French and any other navy that needs to go through the Gulf. And second, we will make sure that that happens under every circumstance."

Daalder did not foreclose the possibility of a diplomatic solution, saying that the countries of the West stood "ready at any time to sit down and have a serious conversation with [Iran] to resolve this [nuclear] issue with negotiations."

Just days after the war of words was being ratcheted upward, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that Tehran was prepared to return to negotiating table as regards its nuclear program. On Jan. 26, 2012, Ahmadinejad said that he was open to the idea of reviving multilateral talks in order to show that Iran remained interested in dialogue. At the start of 2011, negotiations between Iran and a cadre of six nations (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -- the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and

China) as well as Germany -- ended in stalemate. Indeed, those talks were marked by Iran's refusal to engage in any meaningful dialogue regarding its nuclear program. Now, a year later, Ahmadinejad said on state-run Iranian television, "They have this excuse that Iran is dodging negotiations while it is not the case. Why should we run away from the negotiations?"

There was some suggestion that Iran's interest in a return to the negotiating table might be a sign that international pressure was taking a toll. That being said, Ahmadinejad's words could just as easily be interpreted as a symbolic gesture by a figure head intent on rallying national sentiment. To that end, Ahmadinejad suggested that the West was responsible for the collapse of negotiations to date, saying. "It is the West that needs Iran and the Iranian nation will not lose from the sanctions. It is you who come up with excuses each time and issue resolutions on the verge of talks so that negotiations collapse."

As February 2012 began, Israel entered the Iranian nuclear fray. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak indicated that if sanctions against Iran did not serve to curtail that country's nuclear development, then his country would be willing to consider military action against Iran, before it could become a global threat. It should be noted that United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta expressed the view that Israel could very well strike Iran in the spring of 2012 -- citing a timeline of April through June. Panetta was cited in an article written by the Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, which suggested that Israel sought to hit Iran's nuclear targets before that country entered a "zone of immunity" in the effort to build a nuclear bomb. The article noted that the United States was opposed to such an attack, noting that it would imperil an increasingly successful non-military effort to isolate Iran, including the imposition of a harsh international economic sanctions program. Indeed, the Obama administration in the United States was reportedly worried about the "unintended consequences" of military action by Israel.

For its part, Iran had already said it was undeterred by either sanctions or threats of military action. Iranian Oil Minister Rostam Qassemi said the country would continue with its nuclear agenda regardless of pressure from foreign countries. As well, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had earlier claimed that Iran was actually benefiting from Western sanctions. He insisted that the sanctions were helping his country to grow domestically, and said that war would only hurt the United States and other Western countries. Moreover, Khamenei issued a disturbing warning that Iran had its own "threats to make, which will be made in its due time."

By Feb. 6, 2012, United States President Barack Obama announced the imposition of new sanctions against Iran's banks, including its central bank, the Iranian government, and all other Iranian financial institutions. In a letter to Congress detailing his executive order, President Obama wrote: "I have determined that additional sanctions are warranted, particularly in light of the deceptive practices of the Central Bank of Iran and other Iranian banks to conceal transactions of sanctioned parties, the deficiencies in Iran's anti-money laundering regime and the weaknesses in its implementation, and the continuing and unacceptable risk posed to the international financial system by Iran's activities." As before, the United States was hoping that the even stricter sanctions regime would further isolate Iran.

President Obama also made it clear that the United States would stand in solidarity with Israel to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. In an interview with the NBC news, President Obama said the United States and Israel would work "in lockstep" to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. "I will say that we have closer military and intelligence consultation between our two countries than we've ever had." President Obama also emphasized that while his objective was to resolve the nuclear standoff diplomatically, he was not taking any options off the table.

Of course, as noted above, the United States has sought to discourage Israel from going down the military route. This stance was emphasized on Feb. 19, 2012 when Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an interview with CNN that his country viewed a military strike on Iran by Israel as "not prudent." Dempsey noted that United States officials were attempting to move Israel away from that path saying, "That's been our counsel to our allies, the Israelis." He continued, "I'm confident that they [the Israelis] understand our concerns that a strike at this point would be destabilizing and wouldn't achieve their long-term objectives." That said, Dempsey had no illusions about the effectiveness of this argument as he noted: "I wouldn't suggest, sitting here today, that we've persuaded them that our view is the correct view. Nevertheless, Dempsey suggested that

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Iran was "a rational actor" and "the current path [re: diplomacy and sanctions] that we're on is the most prudent at this point."

The "soft power" of crippling sanctions -- led by the United States -- has, in fact, been yielding results. According to a report by Reuters, Iran was finding it difficult to purchase staples such as rice and cooking oil, which are needed to feed its population. For example, Malaysian exporters of palm oil stopped sales to Iran because they could not receive payment. Likewise, there were reports that Iran had defaulted on payments for rice from India -- its main supplier. As well, shipments of maize from Ukraine had apparently been cut in half. Meanwhile, the price of basic food was exponentially escalating. Meanwhile, countries around the world that previously did business with Iran, such as South Korea, were looking for alternative sources of oil. As well, multinational corporations based in Europe were suspending deals with Iran due to the new European Union sanctions.

Perhaps more detrimental for Iran were obstacles in selling its oil and receiving payments for its oil exports. In places where Iran is still able to sell oil, it has been stymied from receipt of funds due to prevailing sanctions, especially those levied by the United States. And in another twist, if Iran cannot sell its typical 2.6 million barrels of oil a day, or, it must sell those barrels at deep discounts, the decreased revenue will inevitably have a debilitating effect on the Iranian economy, adding to the possibility of social unrest.

These findings from international commodities traders, which were part of a Reuters investigation, indicated real disruptions to Iran and flew in the face of claims from Tehran that sanctions were having no effect.

In February 2012, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that his country had developed "advanced nuclear centrifuges," and that scientists had inserted nuclear fuel rods into Tehran's reactor that were enriched to 20 percent. Ahmadinejad also defiantly made clear that Iran had no intention of halting its uranium enrichment program. The West offering a symbolic yawn in response to Iran's nuclear announcement. France and the United Kingdom issued pro forma statements of "concern" while the United States Department of State spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, dismissed the announcement as "not terribly new and not terribly impressive."

But on Feb. 21, 2012, Iran was now taking a belligerent tone as regards the prospects of military action with an Iranian military commander declaring that his country will take pre-emptive actions against enemies if its national interests are threatened. The deputy head of Iran's armed forces, Mohammad Hejazi, said in an interview with the Iranian Fars news agency, "Our strategy now is that if we feel our enemies want to endanger Iran's national interests, and want to decide to do that, we will act without waiting for their actions." Since Iran's leadership has a tendency to assert the country's ability to crush preceived enemies, it was difficult to determine if this statement should be regarded as the ratcheting up of rhetoric or a warning.

U.S Policy as regards Pakistan

As the year 2011 drew to a close, and with bilateral ties between Washington and Islamabad under great strain, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) moved to suspend some drone missile strikes in Pakistan. According to a report by the Los Angeles Times, the CIA has suspended some drone missile strikes on gatherings of low-level targets suspected of terrorism or attacks on United States troops in the Afghan-Pak region.

An issue has been deteriorating bilateral relations between the United States and Pakistan dating back to May 2011 when United States President Barack Obama ordered a raid into Pakistani territory that ended in the death of global Jihadist terrorist, Osama Bin Laden. Relations were further strained by the November 2011 accidental death of 24 Pakistani soldiers as a result of United States gunships operating under the aegis of NATO. In response, Pakistan demanded that the United States vacate the Shamsi air base.

As well, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani warned that Pakistan could even close Pakistan's air space to the United States. Additionally, Pakistan moved to block NATO supply convoys from operating "in country" and called for a review of cooperation with NATO and the United States.

For Pakistan, there was a growing climate of resentment for the invasion of sovereignty, and over the deaths of Pakistani citizens as a result of United States anti-terrorism operations in Pakistani territory. However, for the United States, there has been prevailing suspicion that Pakistan was complicit in attacks by the Taliban and other militant extremist groups, such as the Haqqani network, on Western and Afghan targets. In fact, the United States has suggested complicity of the Pakistan's intelligence agency in the siege of Kabul that targeted the United States embassy and NATO headquarters in the Afghan capital in September 2011.

The United States' claims were somewhat augmented by a report in the Dawn newspaper detailing the Pakistani government's admission that it had limited authority over the powerful military and intelligence services. To that end, the Pakistani Ministry of Defense reportedly told the country's Supreme Court it had no operational control over the military or the country's intelligence agency. This claim would coincide with analysts' warnings that the even as the Pakistani government was trying to protect its own claims of sovereignty, its own power within this nuclear-capable country was severely curtailed. Thus, it was quite plausible that even as the Pakistani government was extending overtures of cooperation to the United States in fighting terrorism, it was balancing a difficult tightrope. Specifically, the powerful wings of the military and intelligence service in Pakistan could very well threaten the elected government's grip on power.

U.S. Policy as regards Burma (Myanmar)

Landmark Visit of United States Secretary of State Clinton

In the latter part of 2011, foreign policy was at the forefront of the political landscape in Burma (Myanmar) as the Obama administration in the United States announced that it would send United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Burma (Myanmar) on the first visit by an American secretary of state in half a century. The decision appeared to be a test of sorts for the new civilian government.

Speaking from a regional summit in Indonesia at the time, President Barack Obama, linked the new domestic developments in Burma (Myanmar) with the decision to engage with that country. In particular, he referenced the regime's recent treatment of pro-democracy icon and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was released from house arrest and was preparing to contest impending parliamentary by-elections (as discussed below). President Obama said, "Last night, I spoke to Aung San Suu Kyi directly and confirmed she supports American engagement to move this process forward." President Obama noted that Secretary of State Clinton would "explore whether the United States can empower a positive transition in Burma." He explained, "That possibility will depend on the Burmese government taking more concrete action. If Burma fails to move down the path of reform it will continue to face sanctions and isolation."

As November 2011 came to an end, Secretary of State Clinton landed in Burma (Myanmar) in the highly-anticipated historic visit to that country. There, Secretary of State Clinton met with Burmese President Thein Sein and pledged improved ties with Burma -- but only if that country continued on the path of democratization and reform. "The United States is prepared to walk the path of reform with you if you keep moving in the right direction," Clinton said. In an interview with media, Secretary of State Clinton addressed the recent moves to elections as follows: "These are incremental steps and we are prepared to go further if reforms maintain momentum. In that spirit, we are discussing what it will take to upgrade diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors." But the United States' top diplomat asserted: "We're not at the point where we could consider lifting sanctions." One of the sticking points for the United States has been Burma's relationship with North Korea; the United States has apparently made it clear that Burma should sever "illicit ties" with North Korea. For its part, the government of Burma appeared to welcome the "new chapter" in bilateral relations.

It should be noted that Secretary of State Clinton also held talks with pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, in what the international community regarded as a landmark meeting of two of the most iconic female politicians of the modern era.

The Political Realm in Burma (Myanmar)

Just before United States Secretary of State Clinton arrived in Burma (Myanmar) in the aforementioned landmark visit, the domestic landscape in this country was dominated by the news that the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by noted pro-democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, decided to rejoin the political scene. The NLD said that it would re-register as a legal political party and contest the forthcoming by-elections. Notably, Aung San Suu Kyi would herself be among the 48 candidates of the NLD seeking to contest the parliamentary by-elections, which were to be held in April 2012.

Speaking of this prospect at the time during an interview with Agence France Presse, Aung San Su Kyi noted, "If I think I should take part in the election, I will. Some people are worried that taking part could harm my dignity. Frankly, if you do politics, you should not be thinking about your dignity." She continued, "I stand for the re-registration of the NLD party. I would like to work effectively towards amending the constitution. So we have to do what we need to do."

The move constituted something of a political comeback for the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi after years of absence from the country's political arena. Indeed, the NLD boycotted the previous elections because of electoral laws prohibited Aung San Suu Kyi from contesting those polls. The NLD also accused the ruling junta of rigging the political structure to favor its newly-formed Union Solidarity and Development Party, and essentially creating a contrived electoral process. Now, the NLD had apparently decided that the time had come to re-enter the political system.

Note: By mid-December 2011, the NLD's bid to re-register as a legal political party was approved. Then, as noted here, in January 2012, it was confirmed that Aung San Suu Kyi would contest those elections for a parliamentary seat in the April 2012 vote.

Democratic Reform and Diplomatic Engagement

In late 2011, as the United States opened the door cautiously to bilateral dialogue, the government of Burma (Myanmar) appeared to be advancing measures intended to demonstrate its reformist credentials when Burmese President Thein Sein signed legislation allowing peaceful demonstrations for the first time. While the new law requires protesters to seek approval at least five days in advance of a possible rally, the move was clearly a shift in the direction of increased freedoms since all protests were previously prohibited. Indeed, it demonstrated a clear easing of long-standing political restrictions.

By the start of January 2012, the government of Burma (Myanmar) appeared to be traversing the path of political reform as the country's most prominent political dissidents were released from jail. Among those enjoying new-found freedom were student protesters imprisoned since the late 1980s, Buddhist monks involved in 2007 pro-democracy protests, journalists, as well as ethnic and minority activists. In addition, former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, who was detained in a 2004 purge, was released from house arrest.

The release of political prisoners was something the United States has urged for some time. United States President Barack Obama hailed the news that the government of Burma (Myanmar) had decided to free political dissidents from detainment, characterizing the move as a "substantial step forward." He said, "I spoke about the flickers of progress that were emerging in Burma. Today, that light burns a bit brighter, as prisoners are reunited with their families and people can see a democratic path forward."

In addition, there was new emerging from Burma (Myanmar) that the government was forging a ceasefire with ethnic Karen rebels. At issue was an emerging agreement with the Karen National Union.

In the background of these shifts was the parallel path of increased political participation of the opposition with the re-registering of the main opposition party, and the inclusion of Aung San Suu Kyi in impending parliamentary by-elections, as discussed here.

This groundwork yielded fruit for Burma (Myanmar) when the United States announced that Washington D.C. would restore diplomatic relations with Nay Pyi Taw in response to the Burmese government's move toward political reform. On Jan. 13, 2012, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that her country would commence the process of exchanging ambassadors with Burma (Myanmar).

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As noted by Secretary of States Clinton, the restoration of bilateral relations would be an ongoing process and it would be dependent on further reform. She said, "An American ambassador will help strengthen our efforts to support the historic and promising steps that are now unfolding."

The development was a clear diplomatic victory for the Obama administration's policy of engagement. For his part, President Obama urged leaders in Burma (Myanmar) to take "additional steps to build confidence." He continued, "Much more remains to be done to meet the aspirations of the Burmese people, but the United States is committed to continuing our engagement."

This progress illuminated the success of Secretary of State Clinton's landmark visit to Burma (Myanmar) in December 2011, which facilitated productive results. At the time, Secretary of State Clinton said that she wanted to be "in country" to decide for herself whether President Thein Sein was serious about taking the path of democratization. To that end, it was believed that her visit could encourage Burma (Myanmar) to continue traversing that path of reform.

It should be noted that there was no immediate call for international sanctions against Burma (Myanmar) to be eased. Those sanctions -- in place since the 1990s -- have included arms embargos, travel bans on officials of the ruling regime, and asset prohibitions on investment. While the United States has clearly rewarded Burma (Myanmar) for its recent thrust for reform, the lifting of sanctions was not likely to occur until democratic changes in Burma (Myanmar) can be classified as incontrovertible and irreversible.

International analysts would be watching the ruling government's future treatment of the political prisoners who were recently released from detainment. Would they be able to participate in the proverbial public sphere, without fear of recrimination?

For its part, the government has said that it does not recognize the categorization "political prisoner" and, instead, has argued that it only jails people for criminality. That being said, President Thein Sein took a sanguine tone as he suggested that the prisoners who were released could "play a constructive role in the political process."

Special Report: Iraq

Special Report: It's officially over; United States ends Iraq War

Summary: On Dec. 15, 2011, the flag of United States forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad, officially bringing the war to a close. As promised by President Barack Obama, the United States military would complete a full withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. The move, as discussed here, would provide President Obama with the opportunity to assert that he kept one of his most important 2008 campaign promises: to bring the controversial war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion. Speaking at a ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina for troops returning home the previous day, President Obama declared: "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history, and your service will belong to the ages." He additionally noted that his country had left behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." At home, Americans were sure to applaud the fact that there would be no more expenditure on former President George Bush's Iraq War, which cost some one trillion USD. Meanwhile, the future course of Iraq -- in terms of political stability, national security, and economic development -- was now in the hands of the Iraqi people.

U.S. ends combat operations in Iraq after seven and a half years

In the early hours of Aug. 19, 2010, (Iraq time) the last major combat brigade of United States forces left Iraq and crossed the border into Kuwait. They were protected from above by Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters, and on the ground by both American military and the very Iraqi armed forces that they helped to train. The exit of the United States forces ensued in a phased basis over the course of several days. The final convoy of the United States Army's 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, was carrying 14,000 United States combat forces in Iraq, according to Richard Engel of NBC/MSNBC News, who was embedded with the brigade. A small number of United States combat troops were yet to depart Iraq, and approximately 50,000 troops would remain in Iraq until the end of 2011

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in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Indeed, by Aug. 24, 2010, less than 50,000 United States troops were reported to be "in country" -- the very lowest level since the start of the war in 2003.

While violence continued in Iraq -- even in the days after the last American combat brigade left Iraq -- it was apparent that the Obama administration in the United States would not be deterred from the schedule for withdrawal, these fragile and chaotic conditions on the ground in Iraq notwithstanding. This decision has been a source of consternation among some quarters. In fact, a top military official in Iraq has questioned the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq, warning that local security forces were not able to handle the security challenges on their own for at least a decade. Echoing a similar tone, military officials from the United States said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that it was highly unlikely that Iraqi security forces were capable of maintaining Iraq's fragile stability after the exit of United States troops from Iraq in 2010. Nevertheless, the citizenry in the United States was war-weary and concerned over the costs of war at a time of economic hardship, while President Barack Obama was intent on making good on his promises made while as a candidate and later, as president, to end the war.

The withdrawal of the last major combat brigade was regarded with great symbolism as an end to the combat mission of the war in Iraq that has gone on for seven and a half years. It also made clear that President Obama was fulfilling his central campaign promise to end the war in Iraq -- a vow that was reiterated in 2009 when President Obama set the deadline for the end of the combat mission in Iraq as Aug. 31, 2010. To this end, President Obama was fulfilling this promise even though Iraq was yet to form a new government several months after its parliamentary elections. It should be noted that the withdrawal of United States forces from Iraq was set forth in the Status of Forces agreement signed two years ago.

President Obama gave a televised address on Aug. 31, 2010, regarding the end of the active phase of United States operations in Iraq. That was the official deadline set by President Obama for the exit of combat forces from Iraq and the end to the war.

In this address to the nation from the Oval Office, President Obama asserted: "Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country." President Obama paid tribute to the military that carried out their mission, saying that he was "awed" by the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform in service of the United States. President Obama additionally noted that the United States itself paid a high price for the Iraq War saying, "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people." The president noted that he disagreed with his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, on the very premise of the war, but urged the nation to "turn the page" on that chapter of recent history. To these ends, he said: "We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home... Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the US and Iraq, we have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

For his part, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki noted that his country was "independent" and that Iraqi security forces would now confront all the security threats facing the nation. Maliki said in his own address to the nation, "Iraq today is sovereign and independent. Our security forces will take the lead in ensuring security and safeguarding the country and removing all threats that the country has to weather, internally or externally." He also sought to reassure Iraqis that the security forces were "capable and qualified to shoulder the responsibility" of keeping Iraq safe and secure.

United Nations lifts sanctions on Iraq

It should also be noted that in December 2010, the United Nations Security Council lifted sanctions against Iraq. The vote ended most of the measures comprising a harsh sanctions regime that had been held in place for almost two decades, starting with the time of Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait during the era of Saddam Hussein. In its statement, the United Nations Security Council said that it "recognizes that the situation now existing in Iraq is significantly different from that which existed at the time of the adoption of Resolution 661." Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said of the move, "Today Iraq will be liberated from all sanctions caused by wars and misdeeds of the former regime." Meanwhile, United States Vice President Joe Biden, who acted as chairman of the meeting,

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said: "Iraq is on the cusp of something remarkable -- a stable, self-reliant nation." Striking a more pragmatic tone, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon noted that Iraq would yet have to forge an agreement with Kuwait in regards to its border, and would also have to resolve the matter of war reparations. To date, five percent of Iraq's oil revenues have been used to pay war reparations to Kuwait.

U.S. President Obama announces complete withdrawal of troops by close of 2011

On Oct. 21, 2011, United States President Barack Obama announced the complete withdrawal of all American troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. President Obama said his country's nine-year military engagement in Iraq would officially come to an end at that time. He noted that the United States had fulfilled its commitment in Iraq and would bring all American troops home "in time for the holidays."

With the end of United States combat operations in Iraq in August 2010, the end of the war was believed to be in the offing. That being said, at the time in mid-2010, approximately 50,000 troops remained in Iraq in a support role to train Iraqi forces. Negotiations have been ongoing since that time to forge a deal that would allow them to stay in Iraq to work with Iraqi security forces. However, the United States and Iraq were unable to find concurrence on an agreement allowing United States trainers to remain "in country" and still enjoy immunity. Thus, United States President Obama and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki concluded that the time had come to shift the nature of their bilateral relationship to one marked by respect for mutual sovereignty.

The end of the Iraq war would close a controversial chapter in the story of American foreign policy, which began with George W. Bush's doctrine of "pre-emptive war," undertaken in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Indeed, the invasion of Iraq -- the defining policy decision of former President Bush -- resulted in the ousting of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, from office. The invasion of Iraq was criticized as a violation of international law by many, and condemned as ill-conceived foreign policy by others who argued that Iraq had nothing to do with the terror attacks in the United States of 2001, and that Iraq was not home to weapons of mass destruction -- the two expressed reasons for going to war in Iraq, according to the Bush administration. Analysts further warned that the deleterious consequence of the war and the unintended result of the ousting of Saddam Hussein would be ethno-sectarian strife and a strengthened Iran. Of course, on the other side of the equation, the Bush administration insisted on the necessity of the war in the interests of national security. These competing viewpoints notwithstanding, the war in Iraq ultimately left more than 4,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

As President Bush's successor to the presidency, President Obama has stood as a vocal critic of the Iraq war whose political influence in the war-weary United States intensified due to his pledge to bring an end to the controversial military engagement in Iraq. Clearly, now in 2011, President Obama was honoring a 2008 campaign promise to end the war in Iraq in a responsible manner. Indeed, President Obama said: "The U.S. leaves Iraq with our heads held high." He continued, "That is how America's military efforts in Iraq will end."

It should also be noted that the Obama administration has emphasized the fact there will be no permanent military bases in Iraq -- even after the withdrawal of all remaining troops from Iraq at the end of 2011. As well, as stated in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2010 passed by Congress and signed by President Obama on Oct. 28, 2009: "No funds appropriated pursuant to an authorization of appropriations in this Act may be obligated or expended ... to establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq." That being said, Iraq is home to one of the United States most significant embassies.

Flag of U.S. forces in Iraq lowered in Baghdad bringing the war to a close

On Dec. 15, 2011, the flag of United States forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad, officially bringing the war to a close. The small, somber, and symbolic ceremony in Baghdad, which focused on the military tradition of retiring or "casing" the flag, marked the end of the Iraq War. On this historic day, only 4,000 troops remained "in country," and were expected to depart Iraq within two weeks. At the height of the United States-led occupation of Iraq, there were as many as 170,000 American troops in that country.

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Speaking of the momentous occasion, United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: "To all of the men and women in uniform today your nation is deeply indebted to you." Secretary Panetta paid tribute to the sacrifices of United States troops saying that they could leave Iraq with great pride. He declared, "After a lot of blood spilled by Iraqis and Americans, the mission of an Iraq that could govern and secure itself has become real."

As promised by President Barack Obama, the United States military would complete a full withdrawal of its troops from Iraq by the close of 2011. The move, as discussed here, would provide President Obama with the opportunity to assert that he kept one of his most important 2008 campaign promises: to bring the controversial war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion.

Speaking at a ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina for troops returning home the previous day, President Obama declared: "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history, and your service will belong to the ages." He additionally noted that his country had left behind a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." The American president also asserted that United States troops had left "with their heads held high" and he lauded their "extraordinary achievement." President Obama said, "Everything that American troops have done in Iraq, all the fighting and dying, bleeding and building, training and partnering, has led us to this moment of success." He continued, "You have shown why the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in the history of the world." At home, Americans were sure to applaud the fact that there would be no more expenditure on former President George Bush's Iraq War, which cost some one trillion USD.

Iraq -- while now liberated from the dictatorial hand of Saddam Hussein -- was not fully stabilized. Indeed, an insurgency continues to plague the country, which is culturally and politically characterized by ethno-sectarian tensions. There are enduring questions about the Iraqis' ability to maintain security in this country. Nevertheless, Iraq has made it clear that the time had come to end the occupation of their country. Indeed, as stated by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Hussain al-Shahristani, "I think we are all happy that the American soldiers are returning home safely to their families and we are also confident that the Iraqi people and their armed forces, police, are in a position now to take care of their own security."

Clearly, the future course of Iraq -- in terms of political stability, national security and economic development -- was now in the hands of the Iraqi people. That agenda would not be achieved with ease. On Dec. 20, 2011, only one day after the United States withdrew its last combat troops from Iraq, the Shi'a-dominated government of that country ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni, on grounds of terrorism. The Iraqi authorities accused al-Hashimi of directing a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. The serious charges were sure to damage the coalition government, and indeed, already a Sunni-backed political coalition said that its ministers would resign from their posts, effectively leaving several Iraqi agencies in disarray. While the charges themselves, if true, could not be understood as anything by highly disturbing, another school of thought was warning that the Shi'a dominated government might be abusing its authority to persecute the minority Sunni in leadership positions, in a bid to consolidate power. For his part, Vice President Hashemi denied any wrongdoing and said he was ready to defend himself against the accusations of terrorism. Vice President Hashemi also wasted no time in accusing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a, of orchestrating a sensational plot to debase him and to undermine the process of national reconciliation. He also warned that the situation could send Iraq -- an incredibly young and fragile democracy characterized by complex ethno-sectarian tensions -- into a state of sectarian war.

Update on Developments in 2012

United States President Obama delivers his 2012 State of the Union address

On Jan. 24, 2012, United States President Barack Obama delivered his annual "State of the Union" address before a joint session of Congress.

As he entered the chamber, President Obama exchanged an affectionate hug with United States Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Democrat of Arizona, who was critically injured during an assassination attempt a year earlier. The president was also warmly greeted by members of Congress -- the expected reception for most American presidents during this ceremonial event.

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In his "State of the Union" address, President Obama laid out his vision of an America that is "built to last." Characterizing that America, he said: "America within our reach: A country that leads the world in educating its people. An America that attracts a new generation of high-tech manufacturing and high-paying jobs. A future where we're in control of our own energy, and our security and prosperity aren't so tied to unstable parts of the world. An economy built to last, where hard work pays off, and responsibility is rewarded."

President Obama's address focused on his plan to stimulate economic growth, spur job growth, and crucially -- enact more fairness in the country's taxation code, which benefits the ultra-wealthy to the detriment of the struggling middle class. To that end, he vociferously reiterated his call for billionaires to pay their fair share in taxes.

President Obama said that the defining issue of the current period was to keep that promise of the American dream alive. He said, "No challenge is more urgent. No debate is more important. We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well, while a growing number of Americans barely get by. Or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules."

Also included in the president's policy agenda was a comprehensive approach to energy independence and the environment, criticism of outsourcing, encouragement for all American youth to get a higher education while not being burdened by student loans, encouragement for comprehensive immigration reform, including passage of the "Dream Act," President Obama additionally took credit for the recovery of Michigan's auto industry.

President Obama acknowledged his administration's manifold foreign policy accomplishments -- from ending the Iraq war, apprehending a record number of terrorist leaders, using multilateral power effectively to bring an end to the Qadhafi regime in Libya, and eliminating Bin Laden. Indeed, President Obama was rewarded with a standing ovation when he said, "For the first time in two decades, Osama bin Laden is not a threat to this country." He also took the time to highlight the internationalist Obama foreign policy that eschews the neoconservative notion of hegemony. In a rebuke to his Republican antagonists who accuse him of weakening the nation, President Obama noted that America's standing in the world has been enhanced and was being felt across the globe. He said, "Anyone who tells you otherwise, anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about." He continued, "America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs -- and as long as I'm president, I intend to keep it that way."

President Obama anchored his speech with a call for unity in the national interest, and deployed the example of the United States military's sense of mission in so doing. President Obama recalled that as he sat in the situation room with his "team of rivals" on the night of the raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound, there was a sense of common purpose binding them together. He noted that the SEAL team tasked with a difficult task in Pakistan was also focused on the mission at hand rather than identity differences. He urged Americans -- and especially Americans in Congress -- to adopt the principle of the "mission" to do the business of the people. Speaking of the mission-driven military, the president said, "At a time when too many of our institutions have let us down, they exceed all expectations. They're not consumed with personal ambition. They don't obsess over their differences. They focus on the mission at hand. They work together."

But the president also made it clear that even without the cooperation of Republicans, he intended to act on behalf of the American people. President Obama declared, "The state of our union is getting stronger. And we've come too far to turn back now. As long as I'm president, I will work with anyone in this chamber to build on this momentum. But I intend to fight obstruction with action, and I will oppose any effort to return to the very same policies that brought on this economic crisis in the first place."

Afghanistan --

At the close of January 2012, it was reported that the Taliban in Afghanistan refused to assent to a ceasefire demand by the United States in Afghanistan. The demand was part of a prisoner exchange/peace proposal, which focused on the release of five leading Taliban commanders who were being held at the United States military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay (Cuba) since 2002. As reported by NBC news, a Taliban spokesperson said:

"Our stance is the same. We will announce a ceasefire when the foreign forces start their withdrawal from Afghanistan."

By the start of February 2012, attention switched to the security scene in Afghanistan, with NATO affirming that local forces would play a leading role in defending the country in mid-2013, ahead of the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014.

Speaking of these developments to come, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said: From that time [2013], the role of our troops will gradually change from combat to support." Consistent with this plan, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced his intention to withdraw his country's troops from Afghanistan by 2013. Meanwhile, United States Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was asserting success in the anti-extremist operations in Afghanistan, noting that insurgent forces there had been successfully weakened. Panetta said that the United States' goal in Afghanistan was to complete the transition "from a combat role to a training, advice and assist role" in 2013.

In March 2012, following a series of incidents (the unfortunate burning of Korans and the killing of civilians by a United States soldier), there was accentuated emphasis on United States foreign policy regarding Afghanistan. The American public was war-weary after such a lengthy engagement in Afghanistan and clamoring for "nation-building" at home on the domestic front. Accordingly, the calls for an even earlier exit strategy from Afghanistan were increasing.

That being said, the United States and its closest ally, the United Kingdom, indicated that the current schedule for ending engagement in Afghanistan would remain intact. Leaders of both countries addressed the matter while British Prime Minister David Cameron was in the United States for a state visit with American President Barack Obama. They said their respective countries would end combat roles in Afghanistan by mid-to-late 2013. Before then, 23,000 United States troops would return from Afghanistan by September 2012 (10,000 already returned in June 2011), as promised by President Obama. For its part, the United Kingdom would send 500 British troops home in the early autumn of 2012. These moves would assure that American and British forces would shift from lead combat roles to support and training capacities by the second half of 2013, with the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014.

United States President Obama said his intent was to ensure a "responsible" end to the war in Afghanistan. Speaking of this issue, the American president said, "We have a strategy that will allow us to responsibly wind down this [Afghan] war. We're steadily transitioning to the Afghans who are moving into the lead. And that's going to allow us to bring our troops home. Already we're scheduled to remove 23,000 troops by the end of this summer ... following the 10,000 that we withdrew last year. And meanwhile, we will continue the work of devastating al-Qaida's leadership and denying them a safe haven." Referring to the recent tragedies and unfortunate incidents that raised tensions with Afghanistan, President Obama said, "There's no question that we face a difficult challenge in Afghanistan, but I am ... confident that we can continue the work of meeting our objectives, protecting our country and responsibly bringing this war to a close."

It should be noted that France was set to withdraw 1,000 of its soldiers from Afghanistan by the end of 2012, leaving about 3,000 "in country." Belgium had begun withdrawing half of its force at the start of 2012. Norway likewise began its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and was looking towards a complete exit. Spain said that 2012 would mark the start of its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, with a complete exit set for 2014. Canada withdrew its combat troops in 2011 and had already made its transition to a training role in Afghanistan.

With an eye on smoothing tensions with Afghanistan, especially after Afghan President Karzai urged a faster exit of NATO forces from his country (as noted above), President Obama reportedly convened a telephone meeting with the Afghan leader. In that call, the White House said that President Obama and President Karzai "affirmed that they share the goal of building capable Afghan security forces and strengthening Afghan sovereignty so that Afghans are increasingly in charge of their own security, with the lead for combat operations shifting to Afghan forces, with U.S. forces in support, in 2013." Obviously, this schedule would also mean that the "date certain" for the deadline of the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014 remained intact.

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As March 2012 was entering its final week, the White House confirmed the exit schedule noting that the United **States** would have about 68,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2013 after surge forces withdraw from that country. Obviously, this schedule would also mean that the "date certain" for the deadline of the complete termination of NATO combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014 remained intact.

Congress clears payroll tax cut extension giving President Obama a policy win

On Feb. 17, 2012, a bill extending the payroll tax cut through 2012, continuing unemployment benefits on a temporary basis, and retaining Medicare payments to doctors, cleared the United **States** Congress. The vote in the Senate was 60-36; the vote in the House was 293-132. The development offered President Barack Obama a significant policy victory since intransigent Republicans in Congress have been against the legislation, leading previously to a acrimonious showdown in 2011. Unwilling for a repeat of that fight, many Republicans decided to vote in favor of the legislation during this iteration. For his part, President Obama thanked members of Congress for "listening to the voices" of the people.

Terror suspect arrested in Washington on grounds of preparing suicide attack on the Capitol

On Feb. 17, 2012, police in Washington D.C. arrested a man for allegedly plotting to carry out a suicide bombing on the United **States** Capitol. Amine El Khalifi -- a native of Morocco living illegally in the United **States** -- was arrested following a closely-monitored undercover operation orchestrated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In that undercover operation, El Khalifi apparently believed that undercover FBI agents assisting him were members of the terror group, al-Qaida.

Irish Taoiseach meets with President Obama; grants U.S. president certificate of Irish heritage

On March 20, 2012, United **States** (U.S.) President Barack Obama and Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny met behind closed doors Tuesday to discuss Iran and Syria. After the meeting, the Irish Taoiseach described the talks as follows: "We discussed the issue of Syria, and I gave the president a rundown on the last discussions at the European Council meeting. We also discussed the question of Iran and what the U.S. has said very clearly about this in the short time window that there is" to reach an agreement on that country's efforts to build a nuclear weapon. For his part, President Obama discussed the strong bilateral bonds shared between his country and Ireland, and also thanked Ireland for contributing peacekeepers and humanitarian aid to various efforts around the world. In a nod to President Obama's partial Irish heritage, Prime Minister Kenny presented the United **States**' biracial president with an official certificate of Irish heritage saying, "These are rare, as rare as the man himself." Thanking the Irish Taoiseach, President Obama

said, "This will have a special place of honor alongside my birth certificate." There was a significant eruption of laughter in the room in response to the president's quip regarding the ongoing obsession by far-right elements about his natural born status as an American citizen.

Legislation bans insider trading by Congress

On April 4, 2012, United **States** President Barack Obama signed into law legislation that prohibits insider trading by Congress. The "Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge Act of 2012" -- also known as the "STOCK Act" -- bans members of Congress, executive branch employees, federal judges, and judicial employees from using "non-public information derived from their official positions for personal profit." The new legislation additionally requires that financial forms of certain federal employees be made available to the public electronically. During his 2012 **State** of the Union address, President Obama had called on Congress to advance such a law. Now, with the legislation a reality, the president asserted: "The STOCK Act makes it clear that if members of Congress use non-public information to gain an unfair advantage in the market, then they are breaking the law. It creates new disclosure requirements and new measures of accountability and transparency for thousands of federal employees. That is a good and necessary thing. We were sent here to serve the American people and look out for their interests -- not to look out for our own interests."

Numbers show a modest addition of new jobs; unemployment rate falls to 8.2 percent

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A report by the United States Labor Department on April 6, 2012, showed that the economy added 120,000 jobs in March 2010 and that the unemployment rate had dropped to 8.2 percent. The modest addition of only 120,000 jobs -- notably below the 200,000 new jobs forecast -- was expected to disappoint investors; however, the drop in the unemployment rate in the United States was a welcome development, when compared with a rising rate of unemployment in Europe. Moreover, the trend was positive for the United States as the economy has added jobs for several consecutive months -- from December 2011 to the present. The job sectors posting additional employment included manufacturing, leisure and hospitality, health care, and financial services. Note that although the April employment numbers were less than impressive, unemployment was 8.1 percent.

The May numbers showed an uptick in unemployment to 8.2 percent.

Prostitution scandal dogs reputation of U.S. secret service

In mid-April 2012, the respected United States Secret Service was plagued by a prostitution scandal. At issue were revelations that Secret Service agents and military personnel working as part of the "advance team" ahead of President Barack Obama's trip to Colombia for the Summit of the Americas had engaged women at a strip club, and later at the Hotel Caribe. The situation came to light when a woman at the hotel demanded payment for what she described as "escort services." The agents involved in the case were all redeployed to the United States from Cartagena in Colombia and subjected to intensive inquiry. Six of the agents were reported to be no longer employed with the Secret Service while others were placed on administrative leave and had their security clearances revoked. It should be noted that a dozen members of the military were also implicated in the scandal.

For his part, Secret Service Director Mark Sullivan said he was "appalled" by the actions of the agents and said he would pursue a vigorous internal investigation. Director Sullivan also suggested that the safety of the president was not at risk since the agents at the center of the scandal were not directly involved with presidential security. Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said that the security clearances were suspended for all military personnel involved in the incident. The White House also entered the fray with the Obama administration conducting its own internal review, which yielded "no evidence of any misconduct" on behalf of the White House staff, according to White House spokesperson, Jay Carney.

United States President Obama endorses same-sex marriage

On May 9, 2012, United States President Barack Obama offered an explicit endorsement of same-sex marriage. In an interview with ABC's Robin Roberts, President Obama declared: "At a certain point, I've just concluded that for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same sex couples should be able to get married." The president's comments ended years of speculation about his actual position on the controversial social issue, his long-standing support of civil unions notwithstanding. President Obama has maintained that although he was supportive of civil unions, his views on same-sex marriage were "evolving." Over time, his relationships with gays and lesbians, along with conversations with his wife and daughters, appeared to have transformed his position in favor of full marriage rights for all Americans, regardless of sexuality.

According to leaks from the White House, the president intended to address the issue in an orchestrated manner ahead of the Democratic Convention to be held in the late summer of 2012. However, fulsome support for gay marriage was articulated by Vice President Joseph Biden during an interview on the NBC news show, "Meet the Press." Vice President Biden's unscripted expression of support for same-sex marriage, combined with similar support by Education Secretary Arne Duncan just days later, appeared to have hastened the president's public endorsement.

It should be noted that President Obama's expressed support for same-sex marriage ironically occurred a day after the state of North Carolina voted to ban same sex marriage. That vote pointed to the political liabilities of coming out strongly in support of a controversial social stance. Would this position adversely affect President Obama at the polls in November 2012? While that question was yet to be answered, President Obama was being met by predictable responses. Whereas social conservatives and Republicans criticized President Obama for supporting

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same-sex marriage, liberals and the Democratic base, who have been strong advocates of gay rights as civil rights, applauded the president for taking the final step towards marriage equality.

United States President Obama ends deportations of undocumented youth

On June 15, 2012, the Obama administration in the United States announced a shift in immigration policy. President Barack Obama said his administration would stop deporting undocumented youth; his administration would also grant work permits to undocumented immigrant youth who came to the United States as children and have led law-abiding lives.

The policy would vitiate Congress, where the notion of immigration reform has stalled due to intransigent Republicans, and partially accomplish some of the objectives of the "DREAM Act," which at one time was supported by many leading Republicans but has since become a litmus test for the far-right base.

It should be noted that while the policy change was expected to affect as many as 800,000 undocumented immigrants by bringing them out of the so-called "shadows," it would not establish a path towards citizenship. Instead, the new terms would simply provide immunity from deportation for a select class of undocumented immigrants. That category would include people who were brought to the United States before they were 16 years of age and are younger than 30 years of age who: have been in the United States continuously for five years, graduated from an American high school or served in the military, and have no criminal history. The new policy would also allow people who fall into this category to apply for a two-year work permit, subject to renewal.

Republican-led congressional committee votes to hold U.S. Attorney General Holder in contempt

On June 20, 2012, the Republican-led House of Representatives Oversight Committee voted along party lines to hold Attorney General Eric Holder in contempt of Congress. At issue was Attorney General Holder's refusal to hand over a selection of documents related to the so-called "Operation Fast and Furious" -- a sting operation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) -- that facilitated the flow of illegal arms across the United States-Mexico border with the intent of apprehending Mexican drug cartel members. "Operation Fast and Furious" was actually based on a program started by the previous Bush administration and then-Attorney General Michael Mukasey. But it ran into trouble when in December 2012 a United States border agent was killed with a weapon traced to "Operation Fast and Furious." Attorney General Holder has since shut down the program but was now -- somewhat ironically -- being held accountable by Republicans in the House of Representatives for the matter.

Republicans have pointed to the fact that Attorney General Holder -- even if he was not the originator of the program -- nevertheless has offered contradictory information about the ATF. They note that in 2011, Attorney General Holder had to retract a letter sent to Congress that asserted the ATF was not allowing guns to traverse the United States-Mexico border. The Justice Department said that when it dispatched that letter, it had been relying on inaccurate field reports, and was now aware that information was not correct. Still, the Justice Department insisted that its responsiveness and correction showed its desire to cooperate with the congressional inquiry that was now ongoing for more than a year.

At the broader level, Committee chairman Representative Darrell Issa insisted that the Justice Department has not cooperated with his requests. Attorney General Holder has disputed this claim, pointing to the countless documents released to the committee, as well as his repeated appearances at congressional hearings. He also drew attention to the fact that House Republicans rejected his offer to brief them on the operation. The attorney general blasted Issa for using his oversight authority "to take an extraordinary, unprecedented, and entirely unnecessary action, intended to provoke an avoidable conflict between Congress and the Executive Branch." He continued, "It's an election-year tactic intended to distract attention."

Undeterred by the outrage registered by Democrats over the historic decision to hold a United States attorney general in contempt of Congress, House Speaker John Boehner insisted that a full House vote would be held unless Holder released the requested documents. It should be noted that Attorney General Holder actually released most documents, but the documents at issue for the House Republicans constituted a small subsection related to the Obama administration's knowledge of Operation Fast and Furious. Attorney General Holder has said

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that those particular documents contained information that could affect ongoing criminal investigations. For his part, President Obama has cited executive privilege and warned that he will not soon be acquiescing to the demands of Republicans.

Note that on June 28, 2012, the Republican-dominated House of Representatives voted to hold Attorney General Holder in contempt of congress for failing to disclose internal Justice Department documents in response to a subpoena. Most House Democrats walked out of the chamber in protest of the move, and accused Republicans of taking this unprecedented step only to inflict damage upon the Obama administration in an election year.

SCOTUS strikes down much of Arizona's controversial immigration law

On June 25, 2012, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled to strike down most of Arizona's SB1070 immigration law. Note that while conservative justices, Antonin Scalia, Samuel Alito, and Clarence Thomas issued their dissent in this case, the center-left justices, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Stephen Breyer, and Sonia Sotomayor, were joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and Anthony Kennedy (both conservatives) in holding for the majority. Elena Kagan recused herself from the decision.

The court determined that Arizona (1) cannot compel immigrants to carry registration documents, (2) cannot criminalize the act of an illegal immigrant seeking employment, or (3) cannot authorize state officers to arrest an individual on the basis of the notion that the person committed a deportable offense.

The SCOTUS ruling held in place a limited provision allowing police in Arizona to cross-check the legal status of detainees. Yet in that particular regard, the 5-3 majority ruling offered guidance as to how that provision should be applied, even adding the following warning: "Detaining individuals solely to verify their immigration status would raise constitutional concerns." In fact, Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing on behalf of the majority, offered the following words of caution: "This opinion does not foreclose other pre-emption and constitutional challenges to the law as interpreted and applied after it goes into effect."

The ruling was a victory for the Obama administration, which decided to challenge the Arizona legislation soon after it was passed into law. For his part, President Obama expressed satisfaction over the fact that the SCOTUS had struck down key provisions of Arizona's immigration law. President Obama said the decision made clear "that Congress must act on comprehensive immigration reform," since a "patchwork of state laws is not a solution to our broken immigration system." Referring to the lone aspect of SB1070 that was allowed to stand, the president said: "No American should ever live under a cloud of suspicion just because of what they look like. Going forward, we must ensure that Arizona law enforcement officials do not enforce this law in a manner that undermines the civil rights of Americans, as the Court's decision recognizes."

Despite suffering a serious legal blow, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer claimed victory following the court decision, saying that the central provisions of her program had been vindicated in the country's highest court. In fact, the ruling reinforced the federal government's power to determine immigration policy -- a power that is not extended to individual states. As stated by Justice Kennedy, who was writing for the majority: "Arizona may have understandable frustrations with the problems caused by illegal immigration while that process continues, but the state may not pursue policies that undermine federal law."

Note: On the same day as this decision, the Supreme Court of the United States also struck down a Montana law limiting corporate campaign spending, essentially affirming the Citizens United case; and it also ruled that life sentences in prison and without parole for juveniles to be unconstitutional.

SCOTUS upholds President Obama's landmark health care program

Summary --

On June 28, 2012, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) upheld President Barack Obama's landmark health care reform act as constitutional. The highest court in the country upheld the central tenet of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), known as the "individual mandate," requiring that Americans buy insurance or pay a penalty. Most

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of the provisions of the legislation, therefore, stood intact. One slight exception was the expansion of Medicaid, which the court said would be left to individual states to decide whether or not to opt into the program. The vote was a narrow victory for the majority, with Chief Justice John Roberts casting his lot with the four so-called "liberal" justices -- Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan. The so-called "conservative wing" of the court -- Antonin Scalia, Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas, and Anthony Kennedy -- issued their dissent over the ruling. See below for background and details.

Background --

President Barack Obama's signature domestic achievement -- the health care law known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA) -- went before the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) for oral arguments in the final week of March 2012. The case was brought to the courts by the state of Florida, along with 12 other states, as they filed a legal challenge to the bill almost immediately after President Obama signed the ACA into law in March 2010. These states were subsequently joined by another 13 states, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, and several individuals in challenging the constitutionality of the legislation.

At issue was the controversial mandate (that all Americans obtain health insurance), which insurance companies have championed in the interest of keeping costs down but which more than 25 states with Republican governors claimed was unconstitutional (as noted above). Also at issue was the matter of "severability." That is to say, even if the mandate was ultimately ruled to be constitutional, would the popular provisions contained in the ACA -- such as children remaining on parents' health care plans until the age of 26, the elimination of discrimination based on pre-existing conditions, and the expansion of Medicaid -- be thrown out as well?

Although the mandate survived through the lower courts, including passing scrutiny by standpoint conservative judges at the appellate level, there was grave skepticism about its fate once it came before the SCOTUS. The current SCOTUS has gained a reputation as being highly polarized and politicized -- divided crucially into two camps of five conservative justices (Chief Justice John Roberts, Antonin Scalia, Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas, and Anthony Kennedy), and four center-left justices (Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan). Many of the most contentious decisions of late have ended in close -- and partisan -- five to four rulings. Would the fate of the ACA end in the same manner? At the conclusion of oral arguments, legal scholars appeared to indicate that the five conservative justices were leaning toward striking down the law's mandate that all Americans obtain health insurance.

For their part, leading Democrats decried the possibility that the ACA would be struck down, claiming that the status quo in health care has been unacceptable and the current trends are economically unsustainable, thus requiring a solution as provided by the ACA. Meanwhile, the White House said it had no contingency plan if the SCOTUS ruled the ACA mandate to be unconstitutional and overturns the law. During a briefing with reporters, White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said the Obama administration was developing neither a backup policy nor political messaging in the event the court ruled against the federal government. "We're confident that the legislation is constitutional," Earnest said. He continued by noting that the White House was "focused on implementing all the provisions of the law."

For his part, President Obama said he remained confident that the Supreme Court would uphold the two-year-old health care reform law.

During a news conference with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Caldero, President Obama said the law would be upheld because it is "in accordance with precedent out there, it's constitutional." He continued saying, "I think the American people understand, and I think the justices should understand that in the absence of an individual mandate, you cannot have a mechanism to ensure that people with pre-existing conditions can actually get health care. So there's not only an economic element and a legal element to this, but there's a human element to this."

Republicans, of course, won mid-term congressional elections on the basis of striking down the ACA and so would regard such a fate as a major victory. Of course, it should be noted that while the ACA -- as a law -- is viewed

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favorably by just under half the population (48 percent), its major provisions are decisively popular and show support in excess of 65 percent.

All eyes would be on the SCOTUS in mid-2012 when a ruling was expected.

The Ruling --

On June 28, 2012, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) upheld President Barack Obama's landmark health care reform act as constitutional. The highest court in the country upheld the central tenet of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), known as the "individual mandate," requiring that Americans buy insurance or pay a penalty. Most of the provisions of the legislation, therefore, stood intact. One slight exception was the expansion of Medicaid, which the court said would be left up to the states to decide whether or not to opt into the program. The ruling did not strike down the expansion of Medicaid; instead it limited the provisions, and said that states could choose not to participate in the new program without being subject to penalty.

The vote was a narrow victory for the majority, with Chief Justice John Roberts casting his lot with the four so-called "liberal" justices -- Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan. The so-called "conservative wing" of the court -- Antonin Scalia, Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas, and Anthony Kennedy -- issued their dissent over the ruling. In an opinion written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, the dissenting justices went indicated that the entire health care bill should be struck down. He wrote, "In our view, the entire Act before us is invalid in its entirety."

The vote outcome was something of a shock since the conventional wisdom in the public purview was that Kennedy was the swing vote on the court, irrespective of the fact that Kennedy's track record was actually that of one who has tended to vote in lockstep with the conservative wing of the court in recent times. Chief Justice Roberts' move to cast a decisive vote with the center-left wing of the court surprised court watchers who viewed him as having a deeply conservative perspective. That being said, Roberts swayed the other four justices siding with the majority to abandon the argument that the mandate was constitutional under the aegis of the "commerce clause" that regulates interstate commerce, and uphold the mandate on the basis of taxation powers granted to congress by the United States constitution. As stated in the ruling for the majority: "The mandate can be regarded as establishing a condition -- not owning health insurance -- that triggers a tax - the required payment to IRS."

Court watchers surmised that in the aftermath of a number of controversial rulings that went the way of the conservatives in slim 5-4 decisions, the reputation and legitimacy of SCOTUS was at serious risk of being irreparably damaged. Causing particular outrage were cases such as "Bush v. Gore" in 2000, which awarded the presidency to George W. Bush, and "Citizens United" more recently, which opened the floodgates to unregulated 'soft' money in politics. Accordingly, Roberts may have been trying to find an acceptable juridical path to uphold the ACA, rather than having to deal with accusations that the judicial branch of government was undermining the other co-equal branches. As stated by Justice Roberts on behalf of the majority: "We do not consider whether the Act embodies sound policies. That judgment is entrusted to the nation's elected leaders. We ask only whether congress has the power under the constitution to enact the challenged provisions."

Politically, the ruling was a victory for President Obama and Congressional Democrats as it affirmed one of the central achievements of the first two years of the Obama administration, when it was aided by a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress. With polls showing that the ACA evoked highly partisan reactions among the divided and polarized American populace, President Obama and Democrats would likely be boosted by the ruling that came only months ahead of the 2012 general elections in the United States. On the other side of the equation, Republicans wasted no time in promising to repeal the bill. Of course, going into the elections, Republicans would have Mitt Romney at the top of their ticket -- a former governor of Massachusetts whose health care program that was implemented during his tenure, and which has largely been viewed as the foundation of the ACA (mandate included). Ironically, Romney -- the originator of the health care program in Massachusetts, which served as the model for a national program -- said that the health care bill was "bad law yesterday, it's bad law today."

For his part, in an address following the court ruling, President Obama characterized the decision as a victory for the country, and noted that Americans would no longer have to "hang their fortunes on chance" or fear bankruptcy

if they became ill. President Obama indicated that the country would move forward to implement the provisions of the ACA, rather than re-litigate a matter that had now been deemed constitutional, and therefore, legitimate. He said, "The highest court in the land has now spoken. We will continue to implement this law and we'll work together to improve on it where we can. What we won't do -- what the country can't afford to do -- is re-fight the political battles of two years ago or go back to the way things were. With today's announcement, it's time for us to move forward." The president added: "We will be better off because we had the courage to pass this law."

Special Feature:

Nuclear Politics on the Global Stage

Highlights --

- U.S. President Obama visits Korean DMZ; affirms ties with South Korea
- U.S. President calls for "a world free of nuclear weapons"
- Follow up on the "New START" treaty between U.S. and Russia
- North Korean "denuclearization for food" deal dead amidst plans for satellite launch
- Japan and U.S. prepare for fallout from North Korean launch
- Implications of global cooperation on Iran's nuclear development program
- New sanctions for Iran?

In Detail --

In the aftermath of a "denuclearization for food" agreement with the United States, there were high hopes that the deal would facilitate progress in multilateral negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program. Those high hopes were somewhat dashed by news that North Korea intended to launch a satellite into orbit.

The bilateral "denuclearization for food" deal was formalized at the end of February 2012 and included the exchange of 240,000 tons of food from the United States for North Korea's pledge to move towards denuclearization. The agreement included provisions for a North Korean moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches and uranium enrichment at its Yongbyon nuclear center, and acceptance of United Nations inspectors who would monitor the implementation of the terms. At the time, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that Washington and Pyongyang "reached the agreement based on North Korea's pledge to implement initial measures of denuclearization that include a suspension of its uranium-enrichment program" in exchange for much-needed food. North Korea, which has been plagued by chronic food shortages, would soon receive shipments of food aid, including biscuits and nutritional supplements for infants, rather than rice, which was requested by the North Koreans. United States officials have apparently been concerned that rice would be given to the country's military rather than used to alleviate the dire circumstances of the North Korean general populace.

The agreement was intended to set the tone for forthcoming multilateral nuclear negotiations. Six-party talks -- involving North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States -- have stalled since late 2008. For its part, the United States welcomed the North Koreans' movement on the breakthrough deal, deeming it "important, if limited." United States Department of State spokeswoman Victoria Nuland took a cautiously optimistic stance saying, "The United States still has profound concerns regarding North Korean behavior across a wide range of areas, but today's announcement reflects important, if limited, progress in addressing some of these."

That caution appeared to be well placed since North Korea was planning to launch a satellite. Pyongyang announced on March 16, 2011, that it would launch an "earth observation" satellite, or the Kwangmyongsong-3, using a long-range rocket. The event was intended to mark the 100th birthday of its late leader Kim Il-Sung. Of course, such a move would be contrary to the prevailing United Nations resolutions, which prohibits North Korea's use of long-range intercontinental ballistic missile technology, as well as the aforementioned "denuclearization for food" agreement, the latter of which requires North Korea to adhere to a moratorium on nuclear tests and long-range missile launches.

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Not surprisingly, all the other countries involved in multilateral negotiations -- South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States -- expressed dismay over this plan by North Korea. Nuland pointed to this concurrence and urged North Korea to rethink the satellite launch saying, "Obviously, we were heartened that every single one of the six-party talks participants made clear that they think that this would be an extremely bad idea and a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions, so we are hoping and expecting that the DPRK will take that to heart." The United States also noted it would be "very hard" to go forward with its planned food assistance if North Korea moved ahead with the plan to launch a satellite into orbit.

The geopolitical complexity of the Korean peninsula became more complicated on March 21, 2012, when the White House in the United States announced that President Barack Obama intended to visit to the world's most heavily militarized border -- the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The White House explained that the trip to the DMZ was intended to convey the president's support for the 30,000 United States troops stationed in South Korea, and to augment bilateral relations between Washington and Seoul. In a press briefing, Daniel Russel, Asia director for the White House National Security Council, said: "The DMZ is the front line of democracy in the Korean Peninsula, and it's the symbol of the U.S. and [South Korean] resolve, as well as solidarity. So a visit by the president there to see and to thank the U.S. and the South Korean service members makes perfect sense."

After his visit to the DMZ, President Obama was set to attend a global summit aimed at reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism in the South Korean capital of Seoul. In addition to the controversial and difficult issues of nuclear development in Iran and North Korea, the summit also addressed the threats posed by nuclear terrorists, as well as radiological materials that could be used to construct a "dirty bomb" (i.e. a bomb that would spread radiological contamination rather than causing a nuclear explosion). Also on the agenda was a plan for nuclear power stations to convert to low-enriched fuel. Due to the complexity of these issues, it was unlikely that new agreements and concurrence would be found anytime soon despite the participation of 50 countries at the Nuclear Security Summit. Notably absent from the list of participants at the summit were North Korea and Iran.

During his trip to Asia for the Nuclear Security Summit, President Obama reiterated his call for "a world without nuclear weapons" and advanced his foreign policy agenda that advocates non-proliferation and the reduction of nuclear weapons through increase diplomacy.

In a speech to students at South Korea's Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, President Obama said the United States -- the only nation to have ever used nuclear weapons -- was fully committed to reducing its stockpile of nuclear arms. The United States leader said his country had a

"moral obligation" to pursue strategic arms cuts. President Obama also drew thunderous applause from the audience of students when he said that, as a father, he did not wish to see his daughters growing up in a world with nuclear threats.

"I say this as president of the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons," Obama said. "I say it as a commander in chief who knows that our nuclear codes are never far from my side. Most of all, I say it as a father, who wants my two young daughters to grow up in a world where everything they know and love can't be instantly wiped out."

President Obama acknowledged his country's unique position in the world but noted that "serious sustained global effort" was needed to achieve his expressed hope for a nuclear weapons-free world.

The issue of nuclear proliferation has been at the forefront of the international purview given the ongoing concerns about North Korea's nuclear arsenal as well as Iran's nuclear ambitions. To that latter end, President Obama was expected to meet with Russia's outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev on the matter of Iran's nuclear program -- an issue that has not always seen progress due to divisions among countries with veto power on the United Nations Security Council. With an eye on working cooperatively with such countries, President Obama pledged to work with Russia and China at reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism.

With regard to China, President Obama noted he has called on Beijing to work directly with Washington and this offer "remains open." He further noted that the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul presented an opportunity for the

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United States and China to fortify bilateral relations. He said, "I think this is also an opportunity to build on the excellent cooperation and dialogue across all the dimensions of our relationship that we've been able to establish over the last three years" The United States leader observed that the summit "shows the progress that the international community has made in preventing nuclear proliferation and making sure that we've secured nuclear materials." He continued,

"And I know that's in the interest of both the United States and China."

With regard to Russia, the United States president said he hoped to follow up on the New Start Treaty (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).

The "New START" provided for the significant reduction of the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by the United States and Russia; it would limit the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of nearly 3,000 to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. "New START" was regarded as a milestone in the decades-long thrust to decrease the chances of nuclearized warfare. Indeed, it could arguably be characterized as one of the most important treaties forged in a generation.

President Obama expressed hope there could be a deal forged with Russia for further strategic arms cuts with Russia as part of the nuclear disarmament agenda. "Going forward, we'll continue to seek discussions with Russia on a step we have never taken before -- reducing not only our strategic nuclear warheads, but also tactical weapons and warheads in reserve," President Obama said.

Domestic politics intervened onto the international summit when President Obama was overheard telling his Russian counterpart President Dmitry Medvedev that dealing with the European missile defense shield would have to wait until after the election. President Obama suggested he would have more "flexibility" on difficult issues, such as missile defense, after the presidential election in the United States later in the year. Willard "Mitt" Romney, a political rival of President Obama, pounced on the United States' presidents words, saying that they were "alarming" and "troubling." Romney also cast Russia as the "number one geopolitical foe" of the United States. Russian President Medvedev responded to these claims by rebuking the American presidential hopeful for using such bellicose language, saying Romney's comments "smelled of Hollywood." Medvedev also offered some advice to American aspirants to higher office regarding foreign policy in the modern era. He said, "I recommend that all U.S. presidential candidates... do at least two things: that they use their head and consult their reason when they formulate their positions, and that they check the time - it is now 2012, not the mid-1970s." For its part, the White House explained that President Obama was expressing the political reality of the campaign season where rigorous diplomacy and negotiations would be difficult to accommodate.

President Obama addressed the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear development program, saying that time remained to resolve the deadlock through diplomacy. "But time is short," said President Obama. "Iran must act with the seriousness and sense of urgency that this moment demands," he continued.

For its part, Iran has insisted that it has the right to develop nuclear development for peaceful civilian purposes. On the other side of the equation, the West has asserted that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons via its clandestine nuclear arms development program. While Iran has been subject to sanctions as a result of its failure to fulfill its international obligations, international concurrence has not come easily due to objections from China and Russia. However, President Obama made it clear that he intended to work with these two countries as he stated: "Today, I'll meet with the leaders of Russia and China as we work to achieve a resolution in which Iran fulfills its obligations."

Addressing the matter of North Korea's nuclear ambitions, President Obama made it clear that the United States held "no hostile intent" to that country, but warned that there would be "no rewards for provocation."

The United States president said: "The United States has no hostile intent toward your country...We are committed to peace. And we are prepared to take steps to improve relations, which is why we have offered nutritional aid to North Korean mothers and children." President Obama continued, "But by now it should be clear,

your provocations and pursuit of nuclear weapons have not achieved the security you seek -- they have undermined it. Instead of the dignity you desire, you're more isolated. Instead of earning the respect of the world, you've been met with strong sanctions and condemnation. You can continue down the road you are on, but we know where that leads. It leads to more of the same -- more broken dreams, more isolation, ever more distance between the people of North Korea and the dignity and the opportunity that they deserve."

President Obama also reiterated the warning already issued by his government that the long-range missile launch to place a satellite in orbit would only result in isolation for Pyongyang.

He said,

"With respect to North Korea, we are going to be both sending messages to North Korea that they should not go forward with this missile launch, which would violate existing U.N. Security Council resolutions. And our hope is, is that we can resolve these issues diplomatically."

President Obama also joined South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in noting that North Korea would be subject to further sanctions if it did not cancel its launch plans. Making clear the options available for North Korea, President Obama addressed the leadership of that country saying, "You can continue with the road you are on but we know where that leads...Today, we say: Pyongyang, have the courage to pursue peace."

For his part, Kim Jong Un -- North Korea's new leader -- appeared to be following his father's footsteps in the realm of rhetoric as he deemed the nuclear summit to be "a childish farce." Earlier, Pyongyang asserted that denunciations of North Korea would amount to a "declaration of war."

Pyongyang was also signaling that it had no intention of pulling back from its missile launch to sent a satellite into orbit. Instead, South Korean sources were reporting that North Korea moved a long-range rocket to a launch pad close to the Chinese border. As well, satellite imagery appeared to depict preparations for the launch, which Pyongyang has said will take place between April 12-16, 2012. The guidance was that the rocket would follow a trajectory that would take it close to south-western Japan.

Accordingly, Japan's defense ministry made it clear that it had ordered the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to intercept North Korea's rocket launch, if necessary, using its missile shield. Japanese authorities also alerted rescue personnel that they would be mobilized to deal with potential disasters, should the veer off course. Already, the South Korean government had said that it would shoot down any North Korean rocket that strayed into its territory. As well, the United States was sea-based X-band radar into the Pacific to monitor the launch. Upset about the prospect of rocket debris affecting countries of the Pacific, President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines called on Pyongyang to abandon the launch plans.

It should be noted that the Obama administration in the United States canceled its food aid program to North Korea due to that country's decision to move forward with the satellite launch. An official from the Pentagon was cited as saying: "Why we're not providing that food assistance at this point is because our confidence in their ability to meet their agreements has been diminished. We do not use it as a lever to change their policies."

Along another vein, the United States was clearly using sanctions to pressure Iran into changing its nuclear development policies. As March 2012 drew to a close, President Obama was clearing the way to tighten sanctions against that country. Suggesting that there was enough oil on the world market to allow countries to withstand the loss of some Iranian oil, President Obama moved to ramp up sanctions against Iran that would penalize foreign entities that purchase oil from Iran's central bank, which collects payment for most of the country's energy exports. This move was intended to pressure Iran to halt its nuclear program.

Special Report:

U.S. President Obama marks one-year anniversary of elimination of Bin Laden; makes surprise trip to Afghanistan

Introduction

On May 1, 2012, United States President Barack Obama marked the one year anniversary of the elimination of notorious global Jihadist terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, by making a surprise visit to Afghanistan, to mark the approaching end of the war that has lasted for more than a decade. While President Obama traveled to Afghanistan to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan, the trip was imbued by symbolic significance. As a president seeking a second term in office, the trip brought to mind the signature achievement of President Obama's refocused war effort: the killing of Bin Laden.

Revisiting the Elimination of Bin Laden --

The war in Afghanistan was sparked by the tragic 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, which were orchestrated by Bin Laden. As the leader of the terror enclave al-Qaida operating from Afghanistan, then-United States President George W. Bush promised to hunt down Bin Laden and get him "dead or alive." Bush launched attacks on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which was allied with Bin Laden, later that year. While the Taliban regime was defeated and a new government installed, the effort to capture or kill Bin Laden waned, most notably as the Bush administration became embroiled in the war in Iraq, leaving Afghanistan war effort in the hands of multinational coalition forces under the aegis of NATO command. Since his election to power in 2008, President Obama closed down the war in Iraq and made good on his campaign promise to redouble the United States war effort in the Afghan-Pak region, given the general belief that Bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan and that al-Qaida was now operating widely across the border.

Finally, on May 1, 2011, following a highly orchestrated operation ordered by United States President Barack Obama, it was announced that Bin Laden had been killed by United States special forces during a raid on a highly-fortified compound in Pakistan. United States forces from the elite Navy Seal Team Six launched an attack on Bin Laden's mansion in Abbottabad, located about 60 miles to the northeast of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. United States officials said that while Bin Laden could have been taken into custody alive by United States commandos, the terrorist leader was shot to death after resisting detainment and an ensuing gun battle.

Politically, the successful elimination of Osama Bin Laden could hardly be interpreted as anything but a boon for President Obama. His predecessor, Bush, staked his presidency on the anti-terrorism theme, even arguing that a war in Iraq was necessary in the effort against global terrorism. However, Bush was never able to apprehend Bin Laden. Bush was criticized by his political opponents for allowing Bin Laden to escape capture at Tora Bora in Afghanistan and for using questionable tactics -- including torture and extraordinary rendition -- to try to find and eliminate al-Qaida terrorists. Earlier efforts by former President Bill Clinton to target Bin Laden also ended in failure. Consequently, for years since his earliest forays into global terrorism, including the East Africa embassy bombings of the 1990s, Bin Laden evaded capture. In fact, he raised the ire of many in the world by regularly releasing taped messages encouraging attacks on the United States, Western interests, Western allies, and even fellow Muslims deemed to be enemies of his extremist doctrine.

But in 2011, President Obama had made good on a promise he made while a candidate -- to move immediately on actionable intelligence to either kill or capture Osama Bin Laden. Indeed, having received the intelligence that Bin Laden may have been hiding out in a mansion in Pakistan, President Obama opted not for a drone attack; instead, he ordered a surgical strike, carried out by special forces, and left open the possibility of taking Bin Laden alive. It was a high risk calculation that could have ended in disaster. Instead, the operation ended with the world's most notorious terrorist dead, no deaths to Americans participating in the operation, no civilian casualties, and five deaths in total (Bin Laden included). Striking a patriotic tone at the time, President Obama hailed the outcome saying, "Today we are reminded that as a nation there is nothing we can't do."

An Exit Strategy from Afghanistan --

Since the elimination of Bin Laden in 2011, the war-weary American public has clamored for an end to the military engagement in Afghanistan. The matter has caused political consternation between some factions. On one hand were those who want the United States out of Afghanistan, in accordance with a "date certain" schedule, and concentrating on economic development on the home front. Then there were the neoconservatives who have

urged continual military engagement in Afghanistan as part of a muscular anti-terrorism campaign. Another divide resided at the heart of the Afghanistan war debate. There were hawkish elements warning that a premature withdrawal of ground forces would result in a reversal of the fragile military gains made against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan. At the other end of the philosophical spectrum was a cadre of advisers who were against the initial surge strategy in Afghanistan, favoring instead targeted attacks in the Afghan-Pak region.

In June 2011, more than a month after the killing of Bin Laden, President Obama unveiled his exit strategy from Afghanistan. At issue was the number of United States troops expected to leave Afghanistan and the associated pace of withdrawal from that country.

To be clear, since coming to office, President Obama tripled the number of United States forces operating in Afghanistan, for a total of about 100,000 troops "in country." Included in this 100,000 number were the 30,000 troops that were added as part of the "surge" aimed at providing reinforcements in the mission to reverse the Taliban's battlefield momentum.

In his 2011 Afghanistan strategy address, President Obama unveiled a plan to redeploy United States troops from Afghanistan and effectively end its commitments in that country that had now lasted a decade. President Obama ordered the withdrawal of 10,000 United States troops from Afghanistan in 2011, with another 23,000 troops to be redeployed the following year. This "draw down" of 33,000 United States forces from Afghanistan would essentially end the aforementioned surge by the summer of 2012. Remaining "in country" would be the rest of the troops -- about 67,000 in total -- which would themselves undergo a steady pace of phased withdrawal to end by a final deadline of 2014. Commanders on the ground in Afghanistan would be given the autonomy to sort out the "battlefield geometry" and decide on what types of troops would be needed in certain capacities from special forces, to trainers, intelligence officers, and combat troops.

President Obama explained that the withdrawal plan would take time, saying, "This is the beginning -- but not the end -- of our effort to wind down this war." He also outlined the specific mission in Afghanistan going forward was to be: "No safe-haven from which al-Qaida or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland, or our allies. We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government, which must step up its ability to protect its people."

All told, the new mission would transition from that of comprehensive counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy to a focused and targeted counter-terrorism strategy, aimed at capturing and killing terrorists and insurgents. There would also be a clear "date-certain" exit deadline. Borrowing from the experience in Iraq, the Obama administration believed that it was vital that the Afghan government be pressured towards taking full responsibility for the country's security, and the United States Congress needed to have clear targets to be used as mileposts for evaluation.

Exit Strategy Confirmed --

Fast forward to May 2012 and the United States president landed in Afghanistan in a surprise visit to sign a partnership security agreement with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

President Obama -- traveling in Air Force One -- traveled to Afghanistan under a veil of secrecy before landing in the dark of night at Bagram Air Base north of Kabul. The trip meant that the partnership security agreement would be signed on Afghan soil. Coming on the anniversary of the death of al-Qaida's leader, the timing of the trip was key. Not only was it a reminder that Afghanistan -- the geopolitical source of the 2001 terror attacks remained in the cross-hairs of American interests -- but it also signaled that the long engagement in that country was coming to an end.

The agreement, which was signed at the Afghan presidential palace, was something of a road map for bilateral relations going forward. Ensclosed in it was the confirmation of the exit strategy as regards military engagement at the close of 2014, as well as the direction for future relations through the following decade.

Before departing from Afghanistan, President Obama offered an address to his fellow Americans. Speaking from a military base in Afghanistan, the United States president acknowledged the end of the Iraq war and presaged an

end to the war in Afghanistan saying, "The Iraq war is over. The number of our troops in harm's way has been cut in half, and more will be coming home soon. We have a clear path to fulfill our mission in Afghanistan, while delivering justice to al-Qaida." President Obama nonetheless indicated that the United States had to complete its mission. He said, "I will not keep Americans in harm's way a single day longer than is absolutely required for our national security," Mr Obama said. "But we must finish the job we started in Afghanistan, and end this war responsibly." Making it clear that the Afghanistan war was moving towards its final stages, President Obama said, "My fellow Americans, we have traveled through more than a decade under the dark cloud of war. Yet here, in the pre-dawn darkness of Afghanistan, we can see the light of a new day on the horizon." Conjuring up the national agenda, he said: "It is time to renew America."

The president also noted that at the forthcoming NATO summit in Chicago, the alliance would "set a goal for Afghan forces to be in the lead for combat operations across the country next year." Already, NATO -- in line with the President's exit schedule -- had signaled that combat operations in Afghanistan would end by the close of 2014. Indeed, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was already on the record indicating that 2013 would be a transitional year for NATO, with 2014 as a likely end date. He said: From that time [2013], the role of our troops will gradually change from combat to support."

Consistent with this plan, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has announced his intention to withdraw his country's troops from Afghanistan by 2013, although, like the United States, phased withdrawals would begin in 2012. As well, British Prime Minister David Cameron has said that his country would end its combat roles in Afghanistan by mid-to-late 2013, with phased withdrawal starting in 2012 and a shift to a support role for remaining troops in the next year. Belgium had already begun withdrawing half of its force at the start of 2012. Norway likewise began its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and was looking towards a complete exit. Spain said that 2012 would mark the start of its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, with a complete exit set for 2014. Canada withdrew its combat troops in 2011 and had already made its transition to a training role in Afghanistan.

It should be noted that only hours after President Obama departed Afghanistan on Air Force One, a suicide car bombing ensued in Kabul. Afghan officials said that at least two suicide bombers targeted a guesthouse popular with foreigners in the eastern part Kabul in the attack, killing several people. The Taliban soon claimed responsibility for the attack.

Shift in Strategy --

In May 2012, the New York Times reported that President Obama's strategy in the Afghan-Pak region has shifted over time, and his policy-making has gradually moved away from advice from military commanders to influence by his inner national security circle. At issue in the New York Times report was a suggestion that military leaders agreed to the president's circumscribed withdrawal schedule only because they believed they could persuade "an inexperienced president" to extend the engagement. Such an end, was not to come. According to a White House national security aide, President Obama reportedly said: "Well, I'm not going to give them more time."

The New York Times asserts that President Obama concluded in his very first year in office that the neo-conservative vision -- advanced by the previous Bush administration -- of remaking a democratized Afghanistan was unrealistic, and that the real threat posed to the United States was emanating from nuclearized Pakistan with its fragile and unstable government. Over the course of the next two years, President Obama repeatedly narrowed the goals of the Afghanistan mission, limiting the goals to targeted assassinations in the region against al-Qaida's leadership and weakening that terrorist enterprise. References to the fight against the resurgent Taliban were limited, and in some ways replaced by reminders that Afghanistan would have to be responsible for its own security. There has also been an increased reliance on drone strikes in the Afghan-Pak region and also in Yemen, where al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula has become far more active. Stated differently, rather than being bogged down further in a potentially victory-free war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has moved toward a more tactical and targeted approach of eliminating enemies of the state.

President Obama's shift in approach was reportedly sourced in a briefing of the Obama transition team shortly after Barack Obama won the 2008 election. During that briefing, Thomas Donilon -- who would eventually become

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President Obama's national security adviser -- viewed a Power Point presentation in which military officials in the outgoing Bush administration expressed an inability to articulate a clear strategy for engagement in Afghanistan after eight years at war in that country.

The president's evolving strategy was also informed by the realization that Afghan President Hamid Karzai was a volatile and corrupt leader, who should not be trusted as a reliable partner. Another consideration has been the cost of a continued counter-insurgency plan championed by the generals that would cost about one trillion over ten years, without any guarantees of truly transforming the Afghan landscape. As stated by the New York Times, "The more he [President Obama] delved into what it would take to truly change Afghan society, the more he concluded that the task was so overwhelming that it would make little difference whether a large American and NATO force remained for two more years, five more years or ten more years."

Following up on that insight, once he was inaugurated, President Obama commissioned a rapid review by former Central Intelligence Agency officer Bruce Riedel. That review offered the first glimpse of an emerging policy that would look not only at Afghanistan, but at the threat posed by al-Qaida terrorists from the wider Afghan-Pak region, where nuclear-armed Pakistan with its shadowy intelligence service was identified as the bigger challenge. At first, the political calculation was that indicting Pakistan with such claims would not pay dividends either in Islamabad or in Washington D.C. As well, according to his aides, the president felt compelled to try to eke out a victory in Afghanistan by continuing the effort there, if only with a date-certain exit. Over time, though, the goals of that effort became more limited with the president's national security aides informally dubbing it: "Afghan Good Enough."

By 2011, President Obama reportedly reached his breaking point and concluded that he wanted an orderly exit strategy to be draw up for Afghanistan. The results of that assignment was manifested in the Obama administration's withdrawal schedule and plan, as discussed here.

Fastforward to the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago and on May 20, 2012, President Obama again affirmed the exit schedule from Afghanistan in 2014, while making it clear that all combat operations led by United States forces end in 2013. The end of the war in Afghanistan dominated the NATO summit where France's newly-elected President Francois Hollande made it clear that French troops would be withdrawn by the end of 2012 -- two years ahead of the schedule. (As noted above, France was to withdraw 1,000 troops in 2012 with the rest to remain "in country" until 2014.) Acknowledging that there would be "hard days ahead" for Afghanistan, President Obama urged allied countries to "pool resources" to assist in completing the mission. NATO leadership and the Obama administration also placed pressure on Pakistan to re-open key NATO supply routes through that country into Afghanistan, which were closed in late 2011 after air strikes accidentally killed Pakistani troops.

Editor's Note:

President Obama's decision to end the Iraq war, his restrained approach towards conflicts in Libya and Syria, his reliance on smart sanctions (or "soft power") with regards to nuclear Iran, suggest a "light footprint" orientation. Furthermore, President Obama's refocus on the Afghan-Pak region, culminating in May 2011 with the elimination of Bin Laden, and his tactical/targeted approach to deal with al-Qaida havens, collectively offer a glimpse of his foreign policy. Indeed, the Obama doctrine has embraced the following elements: (1) vigorous diplomatic engagement augmented by strategic military pressure; (2) strategic pragmatism, reliant more on intelligence and targeted operations than excessive boots on the ground; (3) multilateralism, in which an engaged United States of America works within an international framework to solve global problems; and (4) fidelity to democratic ideals, in which the United States would support self-determination of freedom-seeking people, while eschewing the neoconservative vision of American hegemony and empire.

National Security Special Reports

CIA says it foiled another "underwear bomb plot" involving double agent

On May 7, 2012, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) said that it foiled a new "underwear bomb plot" by al-Qaida in Yemen. According to United States authorities, an upgraded version of the failed 2009 "underwear bomb" was disrupted and the improvised explosives device (IED) was now in the hands of United

States intelligence officials. The bomb plot did not reach the advanced planning stages -- such as selection of a target and the purchase of airplane tickets -- and, accordingly, did not pose a direct threat to the public. That being said, the very development of the IED was a clear indication of the intent to carry out a terrorist attack.

A statement released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation read as follows: "As a result of close co-operation with our security and intelligence partners overseas, an improvised explosive device (IED) designed to carry out a terrorist attack has been seized abroad. Initial exploitation indicates that the device is very similar to IEDs that have been used previously by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in attempted terrorist attacks, including against aircraft and for targeted assassinations."

It was soon disclosed that the foiling of the plot involved a double agent who infiltrated an al-Qaida terror cell, volunteered for the suicide mission, but who then delivered the IED to joint United States and international authorities. The double agent -- a British national of Saudi background -- supplied crucial intelligence information to United States and other foreign intelligence agencies, which allowed the CIA to successfully direct a recent drone strike in Yemen that killed Fahd al-Quso -- a senior figure in al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Quso was linked with the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

Meanwhile, with the IED in the hands of the CIA, it could now undergo technical and forensic analysis. Of concern was the degree of technological advancement garnered by al-Qaida terrorists as they attempt to evade conventional airport security measures, such as metal detectors and body scans. The "custom fit" device was reportedly difficult to detect in current airport security checks, and is believed to be the work of master bomb-maker and member of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula -- Ibrahim Hassan Tali al-Asiri.

Overall, the operation was an extraordinary intelligence coup for joint United States, British, and Saudi authorities. The identity of the double agent/informant has not been disclosed although, according to the New York Times, the British national was recruited by United Kingdom intelligence and has been functioning under the aegis of Saudi intelligence service, and in close cooperation with the CIA for several years.

U.S. cuts aid to Pakistan aid over jailing of doctor who helped with Bin Laden raid

On May 25, 2012, a United States (U.S.) Senate panel cut \$33 million in aid to Pakistan as a result of that country's decision to place Shakil Afridi in jail for assisting the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in locating the notorious Jihadist terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, who was ultimately found -- and killed -- on Pakistani soil. Afridi -- a Pakistani doctor -- was sentenced to 33 years in jail for treason under a tribal system of justice. He was found guilty of operating a vaccination program as a cover for gathering intelligence on behalf of the CIA. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton characterized Afridi's jail term as "unjust and unwarranted." Accordingly, the Senate Appropriations Committee decided to cut U.S. aid by one million for each year of Afridi's sentence. Describing his country's increasingly problematic relationship with Pakistan, Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy said: "It's Alice in Wonderland at best. If this is co-operation, I'd hate like hell to see opposition." Likewise, his Republican colleague, Lindsay Graham said: "We need Pakistan, Pakistan needs us, but we don't need Pakistan double-dealing and not seeing the justice in bringing Osama Bin Laden to an end." For its part, Pakistan has maintained the view that that any country would take strong action if it found one of its citizens working for a foreign spy agency.

Al-Qaida deputy commander al-Libi killed by U.S. drone strike in Pakistan

On June 5, 2012, United States officials confirmed that the al-Qaida deputy commander, Abu Yahya al-Libi, was killed during a drone strike in the tribal area of northwestern Pakistan. As the second in command after al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi was a high value target on the face of it. That said, al-Libi's elimination was also a practical accomplishment in the mission to defeat al-Qaida. Specifically, al-Libi has played a critical role in organizing al-Qaida's terrorism agenda against the West, according to United States officials, and there would be few individuals capable of filling his shoes. Moreover, as a young and charismatic figure, he was long considered the future leader of al-Qaida, and a likely successor to the less popular Zawahiri.

An Islamic scholar from Libya, al-Libi had become a respected al-Qaida leader possessing both religious credentials as he issued fatwas, as well as logistical guidance in terror operations. He joined al-Qaida in

Afghanistan in the 1990s and was captured by NATO forces in 2002. Instead of transporting him to the United States for trial as a member of a designated terrorist organization, the Bush administration kept him jailed at the Bagram airbase along with many other high-ranking al-Qaida operatives. There, in 2005, al-Libi and three other leading al-Qaida terrorists launched a successful prison break from Bagram. He then rejoined al-Qaida in Pakistan, and rose through the ranks due to his cachet as an escapee from "the belly of the infidel." Al-Libi's standing as a marquee player in al-Qaida became obvious as more videotaped footage of him leading the front-lines, training operatives, and offering Jihadist sermons took hold on extremist Islamic websites.

Of course, in Pakistan, the drone strike raised the ire of the Pakistani government, and spurred Pakistani authorities to lodge a formal protest against the United States for violating its sovereignty. Indeed, coming after a spate of drone strikes by the United States on Pakistani territory in only the space of two weeks, anger by Pakistani authorities was at new heights.

However, the United States was well-placed to offer that counter-argument that Pakistan's sovereignty argument was weak since it clearly has no sovereign control over the volatile tribal regions of the northwest where extremists militants and terrorists have found safe haven. For its part, the United States was likely to be quite satisfied that it had struck a blow to the al-Qaida "brand" around the world.

Special Report: 2012 Elections Primer:

Summary:

A presidential election was to be held in November 2012 between incumbent President Barack Obama and a Republican nominee. After a protracted Republican primary process, it was Willard "Mitt" Romney who emerged as the nominee. Romney would, therefore, contest the presidential election on the Republican ticket against incumbent President Barack Obama, a Democrat. Romney was enjoying the "consolidation" effect as reality set in among Republican voters that he would be their standard bearer. This was manifest in his improving polling numbers. Romney was also getting credit for his business background at a time of economic recovery. For his part, President Obama's re-election prospects were being helped by the fact that the United States economy was consistently -- if only modestly-- adding jobs and the unemployment rate had dipped to 8.2 percent. The Republican so-called "war on women" in regards to women's health issues was also boosting the president's standing with female voters. As of August 2012 -- just months ahead of election day -- President Obama and Romney were in a tight race for the White House.

Also at stake in November 2012 would be control over the two houses of Congress.

2012 Elections Primer:

General elections were scheduled to take place in the United States on the first Tuesday in November 2012. At stake would be the presidency and the composition of the two houses of the bicameral Congress. The president, along with the vice president, is elected to a four-year term. Since 1951, the president has been limited to two terms by a constitutional amendment. There are 100 members of the Senate; they are elected for six-year terms in dual-seat constituencies, with one-third of the seats being contested every two years. There are 435 members of the House of Representatives; they are elected for two-year terms in single-seat constituencies.

At the presidential level, incumbent President Barack Obama and Vice President Joseph Biden were seeking another term in office. President Barack Obama and Vice President Joseph Biden on the Democratic ticket won a decisive victory over their Republican counterparts, John McCain and Sarah Palin on Nov. 4, 2008. Obama-Biden won an overwhelming 365 electoral votes including one Congressional district of Nebraska, while McCain-Palin carried only 173 electoral votes. Obama-Biden also decisively won the popular vote with 53 percent of the vote

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share – a full seven percentage points ahead of McCain-Palin with 46 percent. Barack Obama and Joseph Biden were inaugurated into office on Jan. 20, 2009. Obama took office as the 44th president of the United States and the first African American to ever hold that post in the nation's history.

In 2012, President Obama was seeking re-election against the Republican nominee, Willard "Mitt" Romney. The 2012 election race was expected to be a close and highly competitive contest between the Democratic incumbent president and the Republican standard bearer.

The Republican Nomination Process:

In 2012, President Obama would be challenged by a Republican nominee. Among the likely winners of that nomination was former Governor Willard "Mitt" Romney, a billionaire who was trying for the second time to win the Republican Party's mantle. His previous attempt in 2008 ended in failure as John McCain won the nomination that year. Helped by limitless personal funds, as well as the blessing of "establishment Republicans," Romney was widely regarded as the de facto "frontrunner," even though he could not seem to get past the 25 percent mark among Republican base voters who did not trust the former Massachusetts governor's past moderate positions. Romney's constant lurching to the political right on immigration, the economy, and foreign policy, was presumably aimed at burnishing his conservative credentials.

Also hoping to grab the Republican nomination was former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who was forced to resign from office more than a decade prior under a cloud of misconduct allegations. The early months of Gingrich's candidacy as a presidential contender were characterized by difficulty as staffers quit en masse over his undisciplined campaign, and as Gingrich appeared unable to attract donors. That said, strong debate performances breathed new life into Gingrich's campaign. As well, time appeared to have erased Republican voters' memories of Gingrich's unfortunate past. With the conservative base eager to find an alternative to Romney, and given their mistrust of the former Massachusetts' governor's conservative credentials, the base Republican bloc soon locked onto Gingrich as the favored "anti-Romney" option. In this way, the former House Speaker was boosted to the head of the pack for several weeks. But front-runner status in a volatile field also meant that Gingrich was subject to relentless attacks by his rivals, and the barrage of negative advertisements eventually took a toll, eroding Gingrich's polling advantage in key states such as Iowa.

Iconoclast Representative Ron Paul of Texas was also contesting the primary contests. As with Romney, this was another attempt by Ron Paul to gain his party's nomination after a failed 2008 bid. Earlier in the Republicans' primary campaign, Ron Paul was regarded as something of a "long shot" for the nomination. While his anti-spending economic message had a strong following among base voters, his isolationist foreign policy stance was not regarded as the norm among militaristic Republicans.

Also contesting the Republican nomination were Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, Governor Rick Perry of Texas, former Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, former Governor Jon Huntsman of Utah, former Governor Gary Johnson of New Mexico, former Louisiana Governor Buddy Roemer, and Georgia businessman, Herman Cain.

For his part, Cain held his place in the limelight as voters flocked to him as the anti-Romney option in the autumn of 2011; a series of salacious allegations by women against Cain forced the head of Godfather's Pizza to withdraw from the race, though.

Bachmann, Perry, Huntsman, Johnson, and Roemer -- all polling in single digits or low teens -- were not expected to be likely winners of the nomination.

Once riding high in the polls, Perry's poor debate performances appeared to have negatively affected his prospects, despite an ambitious advertising campaign in Iowa aimed at wooing socially conservative and ultra-religious voters there. He soon withdrew from the presidential contest with a promise to return to the national spotlight in the future. Bachmann benefited from some good early debate performances, which helped her rise in the polls for a temporary period. Some unfortunate and factually-challenged statements appeared to have been the death knell in her case, and she did not recover her earlier level of popularity. She left the presidential race soon after the Iowa caucuses. Huntsman's moderate credentials, embrace of science, and former post in the Obama administration, collectively appeared to have doomed his prospects for the Republican Party's nomination. In fact, analysts were whispering that he was not a conceivable option for the base voters in a party that has drifted to the far right politically. After he withdrew from the race, Huntsman was on the record saying that the time was ripe for an alternative political path, given the Republican Party's tendency towards extremism. Johnson was in similar territory and eventually dropped out of the race, saying he would instead seek the nomination of the Libertarian Party. Roemer has similarly never been considered a possible winner for the Republican nomination due to low popularity among base voters.

Santorum had initially commanded limited support among early primary and caucus voters, but as the field of likely prospects dwindled, and with Romney still not "sealing the deal" with social conservatives, the intensely-conservative former senator from Pennsylvania was surging in the polls in Iowa, even moving past former front-runner Gingrich. Could Santorum pull off a coup as the last "anti-Romney" option left standing in the field?

Iowa was the first battle of the nomination contest among the Republicans. Romney eked out what seemed to be a slim win in that state, thanks to the vast amounts of money spent by his "super pacs," ahead of Santorum and Paul. But Romney somewhat underperformed his 2008 primary election result in Iowa in 2012 -- a sign that the Republican base was simply not "sold" on the notion of Romney as the party's standard bearer. But the real story was that of Santorum who managed to stake out a virtual tie and a symbolic victory in Iowa, and would now become the new conservative star in the race. Santorum's good fortune would be elevated days later when the final count that he -- and not Romney -- had actually won Iowa.

Santorum was to be helped by an angry and passionate Gingrich, who made clear that his new mission would be to destroy Romney. Incensed about Romney's gratuitous use of "super pacs" to attack him (Gingrich) in negative advertising in Iowa, Gingrich vociferously warned Republican voters that Romney's executive experience would allow him (Romney) to "effectively manage the decay of America." The pithy phraseology by Gingrich augured a hitherto unknown

assault on Romney, the self-described front runner. But Romney's own momentum would not quickly come to an end as -- consistent with expectations -- won a convincing victory in one of his many home states of New Hampshire. The efforts of Santorum and Gingrich notwithstanding, the victory solidified Romney's position as the prohibitive favorite of the Republican race and set him well on his way to becoming the Republican nominee.

The dynamic for the primary contest was as follows: several candidates would take their respective turns ousting Romney from his top tier position only to slip from the apex weeks later. It was certainly true that Romney, while apparently holding a consistent quarter of the likely Republican base vote, was having trouble augmenting that support in a party that had moved ever to the right due to the machinations of the populist and extremist elements of the "Tea Party" wing. However, Romney was retaining a plurality of the vote share -- if not a majority -- thanks in part to fragmentation or vote splitting among more conservative candidates. As well, Romney was now "peaking" at precisely the right time. Indeed, Republican base voters were growing more resigned to the possibility that he would be their standard bearer in November 2012. Cognizant of this strong positioning for some time, a Romney staffer in an interview with New York magazine's John Heilemann was on the record saying: "The dynamics couldn't be better for us ... I don't see any scenario where we're not the nominee."

Ultimately, despite winning South Carolina, Gingrich soon found himself on a downward slide, and although Santorum was providing the only viable non-Romney option, both men were soon effectively out of the race. In mid-April 2012, Rick Santorum dropped out of the race for the Republican presidential nomination due to the hospitalization of his young daughter. For his part, Santorum said: "It's over for me." It should be noted that Santorum stopped short of endorsing Romney although he promised to help defeat President Obama in November. Nevertheless, the move all but guaranteed the nomination would go to Mitt Romney, as he would now be able to bank votes and delegates in uncontested primary races through the next month. In May 2012, Romney finally gained the support of Santorum who announced his endorsement in an e-mail to supporters. Santorum indicated that Romney would be a better choice than President Obama for voters in November. Romney's status as presumptive nominee was further bolstered in mid-May 2012 when Ron Paul indicated that he would no longer be actively campaigning for the nomination although he was not withdrawing from the race and intended to continue seeking delegates.

It should be noted that by May 2012, with his status as the presumptive Republican nominee solidifying, Romney was benefiting from "the Republican consolidation effect." He was posting healthier polling numbers at the national level against President Obama, with some surveys showed him highly competitive with -- or even leading -- the incumbent president. Moreover, his business credentials, along with a weak economic recovery, have continued to boost Romney's prospects among voters against President Obama.

It was yet to be seen how a host of advertising and publicity by the Obama campaign drawing attention to Romney's background at the venture capitalism firm, Bain Capital, would affect presidential prospects. News of his bank accounts in Switzerland and the Cayman Islands, as well as "blind trust" investments, could provide the perfect foil for President Obama's populist message. Romney's image as a man of privilege was only hardened when he referred to his wife's Cadillac cars in the plural during a poorly-attended speech at Ford Field in Michigan.

Other primary contest issues that could haunt Romney included his infamous \$10,000 bet proposal to Perry in a December 2011 debate over the health care mandate he championed in Massachusetts. As well, his championing of Paul Ryan's proposal to privatize Medicare could provide fodder for the Obama camp. Indeed, Romney told an audience at the 2012 Conservative Political Action Conference that he would make sweeping changes to Medicare and Social Security. "We're going to have to recognize that Social Security and Medicare are unsustainable, not for the current group of retirees, but for coming generations. And we can't afford to avoid these entitlement challenges any longer."

The legacy of Santorum in the Republican contest would also likely affect the Republican nominee, given his introduction of ultra-conservative views on birth control to the public discourse. To that end, from February 2012 and for months after, access to birth control for women was dominating the political air waves, and re-igniting the so-called "culture wars." This was a battlefield where conservative culture warriors were on the front lines, staking out hard line positions, making it very difficult for Romney -- as the Republican standard bearer -- to pivot to the middle in the general election. All of these issues, therefore, could become poisonous in a general election battle where the electorate would be far more moderate.

Note that on May 29, 2012, having won the Republican primary election in Texas, Romney garnered enough delegates to secure the Republican nomination. He celebrated the momentous occasion by co-hosting a fundraiser in Las Vegas with Donald Trump, who earlier in the day questioned the natural born citizenship status of President Obama. At the start of June 2012, as the presumptive Republican nominee, Romney was consolidating the support of Republicans who were united in their desire to defeat President Obama in November 2012. Polling numbers (detailed in the next section) suggested Romney was in striking distance of winning the presidency.

Mid-2012 saw the Obama re-election campaign launch a brutal attack on the executive business background of Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, at the venture capital firm, Bain Capital. Self-described by Romney

himself as his major credential for the presidency, the Republican nominee has argued that his experience turning around failing companies would position him as the best person to turn around the sluggish United States economy. However, the Obama campaign was determined to neutralize and even undermine Romney's claim by advancing an aggressive campaign.

That campaign began with an extension of the arguments taken up by Romney's own Republican rivals in the primary race that his work at Bain Capital was not so much about turning around struggling companies, as it was a way of maximizing the profits of those who bought up such companies while turning out workers. The practice was dubbed "vulture capitalism" by Governor Rick Perry during the primary contest, and highlighted by Newt Gingrich in his advertising against Romney. Now, in the general election, the Obama campaign was reminding voters that Romney's business experience had little to do with increasing jobs and, instead, focused on maximizing shareholder wealth.

But it was not so much the work of the Obama campaign as an article by the Washington Post in June 2012 that drew attention to the fact that Bain Capital investments helped send American jobs overseas. The Romney campaign did little to help its cause at this time by arguing that there was a legitimate distinction between "offshoring" and "outsourcing" in the modern American economy. The Romney campaign suggested that while it outsourced jobs -- a typical business practice of allowing external vendors to handle functions externally -- it was not necessarily offshoring American jobs overseas. The distinction was inevitably lost on many people who simply understood that not only was Bain Capital responsible for laying off workers of companies that it bought, but that jobs were going overseas.

Meanwhile, a number of articles were emerging about Romney's low taxation rates, in the two years of tax returns he supplied, his refusal to supply a wider range of tax returns, and the fact that he appeared to be protecting his own funds from being taxed by holding them in foreign entities. As reported in an article in Vanity Fair in June 2012, Romney appeared to have been able to exploit arcane loopholes to skirt tax laws, and had interests in Swiss bank accounts, as well as holdings in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands.

For its part, the Obama campaign in July 2012 decided to capitalize on the dynamic and intensify its assault on the Romney campaign. It did so by highlighting in a devastating advertisement the fact that Bain Capital was responsible for a series of moves in which jobs were outsourced to China, India, Mexico, and other foreign markets. The advertisement, which was being shown in swing states, went further, as it also noted that Romney had money in Swiss bank accounts, as well as holding companies in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands. The advertisement ended with the following statement "Mitt Romney's not the solution; he's the problem." The message was clear: Romney was a job creator for workers in other countries, to the detriment of American workers.

On the other side of the equation, Romney was demanding that President Obama apologize for his aggressive campaign, while his campaign unleashed its own advertisement questioning whether the president was really a agent of hope and change, as promised in 2008. Romney unleashed a harsh critique of President Obama's foreign policy, emphasizing that the president's record was one of weakness rather than American strength.

Romney then traveled to the United Kingdom as part of an international trip intended to burnish his foreign policy credentials in late July 2012. The British leg of the trip promised to be the easiest for the former venture capital executive and Massachusetts governor. As the person who rehabilitated the flailing winter Olympics in Utah a decade prior, a visit to the London Olympics to remind voters in the United States of that background seemed to be an easy assignment. But in an interview with NBC News, when asked about London's readiness for the 2012 Olympics, Romney expressed "concerns" over the London's challenges with security and border staff strikes, even going so far as to characterize the situation as "not encouraging." Romney further said of the London Olympics: "It's hard to know just how well it will turn out."

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For these statements, Romney earned rebuke from United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron, who sarcastically noted that it would be easier to organize the Olympics "in the middle of nowhere" -- a clear reference to Romney's responsibilities related to the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games. Romney also garnered ridicule from London Mayor Boris Johnson, who said before a crowd of 100,000 gathered in Hyde Park in central London: "There's a guy called Mitt Romney who wants to know whether we're ready. Are we ready? Are we ready? Yes, we are!" The crowd soon chanted the 2008 Obama campaign slogan "Yes we can" in response to Mayor Johnson -- evoking a rather unfavorable and unwelcome contrast between Romney and the man he hoped to unseat for the White House.

Romney soon sought to reverse the tide of negative public relations, which included front page references in a British newspaper to the Republican nominee as "Mitt the Twit," by asserting that London would host a "very successful" Olympics. He also "applauded the work of the organizing committee in bringing the Olympic experience right into the heart of London."

But Romney's problems in the United Kingdom were not limited to the Olympics. During a meeting with Opposition Leader and Labour Party head, Ed Miliband, Romney appeared to forget the name of the senior politician, and resorted to referring to him as "Mr. Leader." As well, Romney publicly disclosed a meeting with the head of the United Kingdom's secretive intelligence agency, MI6, in a break from proper protocol.

At home in the United States, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid offered a blunt assessment of the first part of Romney's highly-touted international trip, saying in an interview with the Huffington Post, "It's not good for us as a country -- it's not good for him -- but as a country to have somebody that's nominated by one of the principal parties to go over and insult everybody..." Romney's surrogates, including Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, sought to dismiss the political damage, noting that it did not matter how the international audience viewed Romney. But social media was actively excoriating Romney's official entry onto the international stage, with the phrase "America's Borat" trending on Twitter.

Romney's trip took on a far more serious and consequential meaning when he arrived in Israel and expressly referred to Jerusalem as Israel's capital. While the United States regards Jerusalem as the Israeli capital (as asserted by Israel), it nonetheless maintains an embassy in Tel Aviv, and has officially treated the final status of Jerusalem as a matter to be decided amidst Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Since Palestinians also claim Jerusalem, United States presidents have typically been sensitive to the contested nature of the question of Jerusalem's jurisdiction. Romney's reference to Jerusalem as Israel's capital was devoid of nuance, and predictably roused the outrage of Palestinian leaders. Saeb Erekat, chief Palestinian peace negotiator and aide to President Mahmoud Abbas, said in an interview with Agence France Presse: "The reference was unacceptable and we completely reject it." He continued, "Romney's declarations are harmful to American interests in our region, and they harm peace, security and stability."

Complicating the situation even further, while speaking before a gathering of wealthy donors in Israel, Romney suggested that cultural superiority accounted for the fact that Israelis were better positioned economically than Palestinians. Romney said: "As you come here and you see the GDP per capita, for instance, in Israel which is about \$21,000, and compare that with the GDP per capita just across the areas managed by the Palestinian Authority, which is more like \$10,000 per capita, you notice such a dramatically stark difference in economic vitality." He continued by noting that some experts have theorized that "culture makes all the difference." Without a reference to the social, political, and economic complexities of the area, the Republican presidential hopeful further attributed Israel's economic success to the "hand of providence." His comments drew immediate fire from Palestinian leaders with Saeb Erakat saying: "It is a racist statement and this man doesn't realize that the Palestinian economy cannot reach its potential because there is an Israeli occupation." Erekat continued, "It seems to me this man lacks information, knowledge, vision and understanding of this region and its people. He also lacks knowledge about the Israelis themselves. I have not heard any Israeli official speak about cultural superiority."

Meanwhile, Romney also raised eyebrows when he declared that the United States had a "moral imperative" to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Romney characterized Iran as the most destabilizing country in the world, and accused Iran's ruling ayatollahs of "testing our moral defenses." Since Dan Senor, a senior Romney adviser, had already stated that the Republican nominee would respect any decision by Israel to use military force against Iran, some analysts were interpreting Romney's words as a warning that a Romney presidency could augur military engagement as regards to Iran. In fact, it should be noted that Romney never overtly promised military action, although he said that his country should "employ any and all measures to dissuade the Iranian regime from its nuclear course." Moreover, he said: "It is our fervent hope that diplomatic and economic measures will do so. In the final analysis, of course, no option should be excluded." That statement presaged a neoconservative foreign policy by Romney, reminiscent of the Bush administration, and promised to cause anxiety among war-weary factions within the United States.

Romney's political problems in certain circumscribed regards may or many not have an impact at the polls. Indeed, polling data showed that Romney was still running a competitive race against the president, who was yet to deal with the fact that the June jobs report was disappointing. The Romney campaign was also promising that it would counter-punch with its own aggressive campaign against President Obama, whom they characterized as a failure on the economy.

But politics aside, Romney would likely have to face unsavory speculation about the ethics of contradictory statements about when exactly he served as CEO of Bain Capital. While he has insisted that he left the company on 1999 and was busy running the Olympics in 2002, technical SEC filings show Romney as a managing member of the Bain Capital in 2002. Romney's top political adviser, Ed Gillespie, attempted to explain the discrepancy by claiming that Romney "retroactively" resigned from Bain Capital. That explanation, though, served only to ignite derision among critics as "#Retroactively" became a nationally trending hashtag on Twitter.

The Incumbent President and His Prospects for Re-election:

Regardless of who would eventually become the Republican standard bearer against President Obama, the incumbent president would undoubtedly put up a strong fight to hold onto his job. Despite being plagued by high unemployment, an intransigent opposition, and a host of domestic and economic woes, President Obama was holding a job approval rating in the 47-48 percent range in late December 2011 and into early 2012. That number -- while below the "safe watermark" of 50 percent -- still offered a somewhat healthy position for the president to seek re-election.

Head to head match-ups suggested that President Obama would have an easier victory over Gingrich or Santorum, rather than Romney. The actual Republican nominee notwithstanding, the president himself acknowledged that the election fight would be tough and that Election 2012 would be close.

Indeed, polling data at the start of 2012 showed that President Obama would have to work hard to secure victory in mid-west states, such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, all of which gave him their electoral votes in 2008. Likewise, the president was not in a secure position in states that became part of the Obama 2008 coalition, such as Virginia and North Carolina. Should Romney be the nominee, the president was at risk of losing New Hampshire's essential electoral votes.

That being said, the president appeared to be holding strong in states such as Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico, suggesting that he had something of a "western firewall" to protect his re-election prospects.

President Obama was being helped by the fact that his populist, pro-middle class message held resonance, and re-energized his supporters. Moreover, his bold decision to use the Senate's recess to appoint a progressive to head the Consumer Financial Protection Agency, was winning kudos from the Democratic base. Improving employment figures and President Obama's formidable record on foreign policy could also help him win another four years in office.

Also, as discussed above, President Obama could be helped indirectly by a protracted primary process on the Republican side, leaving the eventual winner bruised, battered, and standing squarely on right-wing terrain. Such positioning would make it very difficult to pivot to the middle in the general election. Those conditions could favor President Obama's re-election bid, especially as economic conditions moved tentatively into a more favorable direction.

In February 2012, President Obama was enjoying improving favorability and job approval polling numbers, with a spate of head-to-head match ups against potential Republican rivals showing him in the lead, or in a competitive position. For his part, President Obama said he believed that he deserved a second term in office based on his performance thus far. In an interview with NBC news, President Obama was asked if he had done enough to deserve re-election, given that unemployment rate was still above eight percent. In response, President Obama said, "We've made progress, and the thing right now is to just make sure we don't starting turning in a new direction that could throw that progress off." As the month came to a close, White House Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that President Obama expected a "vigorous debate," a "competitive election," and ultimate victory in his fight for second term.

President Obama's re-election prospects were likely helped by the fact that the United States economy added 243,000 jobs in January 2012 and that the unemployment rate had dipped to 8.3 percent. The news constituted two consecutive months of positive news on the economic front. Note: (This trend would continue into the months of February, March and April, with modest job growth and an unemployment rate dropping further to around 8.1 percent).

Speaking at a Democratic Party fundraiser in New York on March 1, 2012, President Obama took credit for the improving economy -- from better employment numbers and expanded credit flow, to the recovery of the auto industry and expanded American manufacturing. That said, he acknowledged that "there are a lot of folks out there who are still having a tough time." Speaking of his presidential prospects, President Obama said, "Nobody is under any illusion that this isn't going to be a tight race for us. But as I travel around the country and I talk to folks, including people who don't support me, when you break down the individual items that are being debated right now -- how do we balance this budget, what our tax policy should be, should we be investing in education, should we make sure that science and basic research continue to be paramount in our economy, do we have an obligation to make sure that our seniors can retire with dignity and respect -- we win that argument every time."

As the Republican nomination process continued, all the Republican candidates were suffering from negative favorability ratings, while President Obama stood in positive territory. It seemed that the longer the primary contests went on, in combination with the internecine debates, the worse the impressions of the Republican candidates deteriorated. By contrast, President Obama was being viewed more positively.

With a protracted nomination fight looming ahead for the Republicans, President Obama was taking advantage of his incumbent status. Both he and Vice President Biden were set to travel across the nation to attend fundraisers and rallies, and his campaign launched a well-produced video depicting all the progress made since the time President Obama came to the White House in 2009 and was faced with an economic farrago, an auto industry on the brink, and manifold foreign policy challenges. The president also stole some Super Tuesday attention by scheduling a press conference that day. There, he excoriated his Republican rivals for their "casual" attitude towards war saying that it was always the ones that "pop off the most" who do not pay the price for war.

In March 2012, the narrative involving President Obama's prospects for re-election were mixed. Two polls -- Washington Post-ABC News and CBS-New York Times -- saw the president's approval ratings slide precipitously to the low 40 percent mark in highly competitive races with the main Republican candidates. However, surveys by the Pew Research Center as well as Reuters-Ipsos offered a completely different view with President Obama enjoying a healthy approval rating around the 50 percent mark, and routing all of the Republican presidential candidates in head-to-head match-ups.

In early April 2012, with Romney seemingly in place to secure the Republican nomination, President Obama did not waste an opportunity to go after his likely rival and the Republican Party at large. In an address dedicated to rail against the so-called "Ryan budget" (which has been crafted by a key Romney supporter, Representative Paul Ryan), President Obama cast that economic plan as a "radical vision" and "thinly veiled social Darwinism" that amounted to "a prescription for decline" in the country. Linking Romney directly with the Ryan budget, President Obama said: "{Romney} said that he's very supportive of this new budget. And he even called it marvelous -- which is a word you don't often hear when it comes to describing a budget. It's a word you don't often hear generally."

Also at the start of April 2012, a number of polls of national and battleground states were released and all showed cautiously rosy news for the president. (Note that three of the following polls were taken in the last week of March 2012.)

According to CNN/ORC, in hypothetical "head-to-head" match-ups, President Obama would beat Mitt Romney 54 percent to 43 percent and Rick Santorum 55-42. Both margins were wider than earlier polls had shown, according to CNN. This survey also showed that President Obama's approval rating had moved above the crucial 50 percent mark for the first time since May 2011. While most Americans still believed that the United States economy was struggling, there was an increase in positive views on the subject by a notable 13 percent. CNN's polling department noted that the president was enjoying increased support from key groups where he has not always done well, such as men, older voters, suburbanites, and independents.

Two weeks later in mid-April 2012, the scene was not so optimistic for the president as a number of polling outfits showed a tightening race. Indeed, while polls by CBS/New York Times, NBC/Wall Street Journal, PPP, and Quinnipiac showed President Obama's lead shrinking against Romney, while Gallup and Rasmussen showed Romney actually ahead -- albeit in the margin of error. The movement appeared to indicate that with Romney now regarded as the de facto nominee, conservatives were consolidating around him. Combined with the "winner effect" after shutting down each of his rivals, Romney was enjoying something of a political "honeymoon."

State-based polling (as of April 2012), though, was offering a counter-intuitive picture suggesting some comfort for the president. Polling data by Quinnipiac University showed President Obama opening up leads in key battleground states of Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania. In Florida, President Obama was leading GOP front runner Mitt Romney with 49 percent to 42 percent. In Ohio, the president was leading Romney 47 percent to 41 percent. In Pennsylvania, Obama had a narrower lead over Romney (45 percent to 42 percent). The president won all three states in 2008 and sought to hold on to at least two of the three in 2012 in order to secure re-election.

The polling outfit, Gallup, surveyed the battleground states of Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin cumulatively. President Obama was leading the expected Republican nominee, Romney, by 51 percent to 42 percent. This was quite a reversal of fortune since just a month prior, the same battleground poll showed the president trailing Romney by two percentage points. The main "takeaway" from the Gallup survey was the fact that while Romney led President Obama by a mere one percentage point among men, President Obama swamped Romney with women thanks to a

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lead of a whopping 18 percentage points. It was apparent that the Republican so-called "war on women's health" was repelling female voters and driving them to the fold of the Democratic president.

It should be noted that President Obama won each of the battleground states mentioned above in 2008 but would not need all of them to win re-election in 2012. See section on election projections below for details.

As April 2012 drew to a close, the polling scene was again contradictory. National head-to-head match-ups by Rasmussen and YouGov/Economist showed Romney moving into slim leads against President Obama -- 48-45 according to Rasmussen, and 47-47 according to YouGov/Economist. Yet during the same time frame, Gallup showed President Obama's job approval rating increasing to 50 percent -- a notable shift since the president's approval rating has typically been in the mid-40 percent range for the previous three months. Meanwhile, the Purple Strategies Poll showed the president leading Romney in 12 swing states, although Romney was making significant inroads with independents. Other individual pollsters, as noted above, were showing the president leading in several key states, the closeness of the head-to-head match-ups notwithstanding.

For his part, President Obama unveiled his new 2012 campaign slogan "Forward" on April 30, 2012. The new slogan was highlighted in a seven-minute campaign advertisement, ahead of the president's first official re-election rallies to be held in key swing states of Ohio and Virginia. The promotional piece recalls the unfortunate legacy left by the previous Bush administration -- a surging jobless rate and a dismal economic outlook -- and noted the president's efforts to pull the country back from "an economic disaster." The promotional piece also highlighted the keystone of the president's foreign policy agenda -- the refocused attention on the war in Afghanistan and the elimination of the global Jihadist terrorist leader, Osama Bin Laden. The hard-hitting advertisement included criticism of Republicans in both house of Congress for obstructing the president's agenda, to the detriment of the economic recovery of the country.

At the start of May 2012, with the general election campaign really only just starting, the political climate was as follows: Romney (and the Republican Party broadly) would have to work hard to prevent further erosion among key demographic groups such as women and Hispanics, while trying to attract independent voters, if he hoped to be successful in November. Meanwhile, if the economic recovery of the country stalled or was anemic, President Obama would have to contend with a rival claiming to have precisely the right economic credentials needed to turn the nation around. Of course, Democratic activists believed that Romney's background at the venture capital firm, Bain Capital, which often gutted struggling companies, and left employees out of work, would highlight his inability to relate to the working class people. While Romney was championing his economic leadership bona fides, President Obama cast conservative economic policies as akin to a "failed science experiment" that caused the economic problems now facing the nation. The resonance of these respective themes among the voting public was yet to be seen.

By mid-May 2012, the state of the presidential race had turned to a genuine toss-up, but with an advantage to Romney, according to some data. Polling data by CBS/New York Times gave Romney an edge of three percentage points against President Obama (46 percent to 43 percent), while the rolling poll by Rasmussen indicated Romney with the advantage (48/47 percent to 45 percent), and the rolling poll by Gallup, showed a virtual tie between the two men (Obama with 46 percent and Romney with 45 percent). Meanwhile, a poll by PPP gave the president a two point lead over Romney (48 percent to 46 percent), and more decisive results according to polls by Reuters-Ipsos (Obama with 49 percent and Romney with 42 percent), and Associated Press/GfK (Obama with 50 versus Romney with 42). The conflicting picture from these pollsters at the national level gave little indication of a trend one way or another, although polling at the state level showed a tightening in key battleground states.

On the issues, Romney seemed to be enjoying the blessing of voters on the economy with a poll sponsored by USA Today in the spring of 2012 showing a decisive advantage for the Republican nominee on the question of who would be best positioned to move the American economy in a more positive direction. A series of other polls (ABC/Washington Post and NBC/Wall Street Journal) in May 2012 showed similar trends as Romney held the economic stewardship advantage.

That being said, President Obama was maintaining the support of women (overall and including all ethnicities) and non-white voters. A number of polls by PPP and NBC/Wall Street Journal, the president had a double digit advantage among women. A Gallup poll showed Obama with the support of 90 percent of blacks, 68 percent of Hispanics, and 57 percent of other races, with preferences fairly uniform by gender, education, religion, and other demographic parameters. Romney led Obama by 54 percent to 37 percent, with nine percent undecided, among non-Hispanic whites. Another poll by NBC/Wall Street Journal in late May 2012 showed similar demographic trends. President Obama held the support of 61 percent of Hispanic voters, as compared with 27 percent for Romney ; as well, Romney was running about four percentage points less than the 2008 Republican nominee, John McCain, with Hispanics. This advantage in the numbers for the president aside, he would still have to contend with ensuring that Hispanic voters actually turn out to vote for him in November 2012.

One wild card was expected to be the president's recent support for marriage equality -- a controversial and decisive social issue that could diminish support among certain socially conservative sub-groups. It could also impact the president's standing in key swing states such as Ohio and Florida with older populations, who typically have not been as sanguine on the matter of same-sex marriage. Of course, the president's progressive stance could also augment his support among the liberal base of the Democratic Party.

With an eye on galvanizing his conservative base, Romney said during a speech at Liberty University that marriage is a "relationship between one man and one woman;" earlier, he advocated a federal statute enshrining such a definition of marriage.

It was yet to be seen how monumental negative advertising from pro-Romney so-called "super pacs" would affect the presidential race. It was also yet to be seen how advertising and publicity by the Obama campaign drawing attention to Romney's background at the private equity firm, Bain Capital, would affect presidential prospects. The Obama campaign was prepared to go on the offensive against Romney in this regard, pointing out that the Republican's business experience as a venture capitalist had little to do job creation -- the number one issue among American voters. President Barack Obama's senior campaign strategist, David Axelrod, noted in an interview with CNN that Romney's Bain experience "wasn't about job creation." The president himself entered the fray and said during a media availability at the NATO summit on May 21, 2012: "Private equity is set up to maximize profits. That's the healthy part of free market... but that (maximize profits) is not always good for community. When you're president, as opposed to the head of private equity firm, your job is not simply to maximize profit, your job is to figure out how everybody in the country has a fair shot, your job is to retain workers who was laid off, and how to set up an equitable tax system." For his part, though, Romney accentuated his business credentials, arguing that he had the right background to guide the American economic recovery.

In late May 2012, polling data showed a competitive race between President Obama and Romney. In head to head national match ups, Gallup showed Obama and Romney tied at 46 percent; Rasmussen was volatile -- a week earlier Romney was leading at 46 percent and with Obama at 44 percent but as May 2012 came to a close, Romney and Obama were in a tie of 45 percent respectively; PPP had Obama a tiny lead of 47 percent over Romney with 46 percent; ABC/Washington Post showed a modest lead for the president of 49 percent over Romney with 46 percent; and the NBC/Wall Street Journal had a moderate lead for the president of 47 percent over Romney with 43 percent.

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In the first part of June 2012, a handful of polls showed Romney slightly of the president. Both Rasmussen and Gallup showed fairly static numbers with Romney a few percentage points ahead of Obama; Romney was hovering in both rolling polls around the 47 percent mark with President Obama hovering around the 45 percent mark. During this period, Fox News had both Obama and Romney tied at 43 percent. Meanwhile, two polls showed a clear advantage for the president; the Pew poll (taken over a month long time horizon from May through June) showed Obama with 49 percent ahead of Romney with 42 percent; the PPP poll (taken from late May through the first week of June) showed similar results with 50 percent ahead of Romney with 42 percent.

By mid-June, YouGov showed President Obama either tied with Romney or a few percentage points ahead of the Republican nominee. Both Tarrance Group and Reuters/Ipsos showed a one percent lead for the president over Romney in this period. More decisive leads for the president were shown in polls by TIPP (for Christian Science Monitor and Investors Business Daily) and Associated Press/GfK. The poll for TIPP had Obama at 46 percent over Romney with 41 percent; Associated Press/GfK showed Obama with 47 percent over Romney with 44 percent. Pew Research showed a closer race than its previous poll; still, President Obama was clearing the 50 percent mark over Romney with 46 percent. Two polls by PPP gave Obama a lead; one showed an eight point lead (50-42) for the president; the president had a four point lead (49-45) as June moved into its third week, according to PPP. Meanwhile, a Bloomberg poll by the renowned pollster, Seltzer, raised eyebrows when it showed a 13 percent lead for the president over Romney (53-40).

At the close of June 2012, both Gallup and Rasmussen were showing movement for President Obama. Rasmussen had the president either tied with Romney or moving into a slim lead of a percentage point or two ahead of the Republican nominee; Gallup had the president advancing a lead of between two and five percentage points ahead of Romney (anywhere from 46-44 to 48-43). YouGov showed numbers in line with Rasmussen as the president was in a dead heat with Romney (45-44). The NBC/Wall Street Journal, PPP, Newsweek/Daily Beast, and Democracy Corps showed a modest three percentage point lead for the president (47-44, 48-45, 47-44, and 49-46 respectively). Fox News gave President Obama a more decisive five point lead over Romney (45-40).

The Gallup and Rasmussen rolling trackers by mid-2012 showed a close race with undulations from one candidate leading to the other. By mid-July 2012, Gallup had the president a few points ahead of Romney while Rasmussen showed Romney slightly ahead. In this period, the Obama campaign's assault on Romney's record as the executive with business experience at Bain Capital -- but with a record of outsourcing jobs to other countries -- appeared to be gaining traction. (See above for details as regards the Bain Capital controversy.) Almost every poll from the early part of the month to mid-July 2012 showed President Obama leading his Republican rival. The only exceptions were Zogby and CBS, which showed Romney in a dead heat with Obama (42.8-42 and 47-46 respectively). Marist had the president at 48 percent and Romney at 46 percent. PPP, CNN, Quinnipiac, and YouGov all had Obama with three percent leads over Romney (58-45, 49-46, 46-43, 47-44 respectively). Reuters/Ipsos showed a decisive lead for the president with 49 percent to Romney with 43 percent. Pew showed similar numbers for the president with 50 percent of support against Romney with 43 percent. As July 2012 came to a close, the rolling trackers of Gallup and Rasmussen continued to show a dead heat with no one candidate clearly ahead of the other. PPP also showed a tied race at this time with both contenders at 46 percent. But the NBC/WSJ poll at the end of July 2012 gave President Obama a decisive lead of six percentage points over Romney -- 49 percent to 43 percent.

At the start of August 2012, the rolling trackers were going in opposite directions. Rasmussen showed Romney either leading Obama or tied with him, while Gallup had Obama either leading Romney or in a dead heat with him.

PPP and YouGov showed a very slight advantage for the president -- 48-46 and 46-45 respectively. Meanwhile, Pew issued its new poll showing the president extending his previous lead; now President Obama was leading Romney by a full 10 percentage points -- 51 percent to 41 percent. Reuters/Ipsos had President Obama maintaining a clear lead of 49 percent over Romney with 42 percent in this period.

It should be clear that a number of national polls have often suggested a far closer race -- akin to a tie or with Romney leading at times -- than the electoral college. But in terms of the electoral vote count map -- President Obama has enjoyed moderately better polling numbers in key battleground states and more pathways to victory. In the battleground states during the period of late May to mid-July 2012, the only conclusion to be drawn was that regardless of the national numbers, the president maintained a moderate edge over Romney in the electoral college, which determines the presidency.

In Colorado, the polls showed a real toss up of a race. Rasmussen, showed a tie in this state in early June, Purple Strategies showed the president with a lead of only one percentage point in July, while WAA, PPP, and Garin-Hart-Yang showed President Obama sporting clear leads in their polls in mid-2012. In August, Quinnipiac/NYT/CBS gave Romney the lead over Obama while PPP showed the opposite with Obama leading Romney. Meanwhile, Rasmussen had the race tied. To be clear, the contradictory nature of the polls gave no clear idea of the state of the race in this state in August 2012.

In Florida, Quinnipiac and Purple Strategies had Romney beating President Obama in the Sunshine state in early June, while the Marist poll and PPP gave the president a modest edge, and Suffolk had a virtual tie between the two. By the middle of June, new Quinnipiac polls gave the president a healthier lead of four percentage points over Romney. In early July, WAA had President Obama in a dead heat with Romney, a scenario mirrored in polls by both Rasmussen and Mason-Dixon in mid-July. But the same period showed President Obama with a four percent lead over Romney, according to Garin-Hart-Yang, while Purple Strategies showed Romney leading the president by three percentage points. The conclusion was that there was no clear sense of who had the edge in Florida -- perhaps it was a dead heat, or perhaps either Romney or President Obama were slightly ahead. By late July, PPP had the president in a dead heat with Romney, and SUSA had the president with a clear lead of five percentage points. A new poll by Quinnipiac-NYT/CBS in early August 2012 also gave the president a lead over Romney in the Sunshine state -- 51 percent to 45 percent. It was to be seen if a trend was afoot.

Indiana, which went Democratic in 2008 seemed out of reach for Obama in 2012, since Romney was leading the president decisively there. Missouri showed Romney leading, according to Rasmussen, although PPP showed a somewhat closer race.

In Iowa, Michigan, and New Hampshire, the president maintained a slight overall edge, but the very close results were sure to give the Obama re-election team heartburn in mid-2012. Polling data by PPP and WAA gave the president a lead in Iowa, while Marist showed a tie here. Polls by Foster McCollum White/Boudoun, WAA, Mitchell Research, and Marist all gave the president slight leads in Michigan, although PPP showed a much clearer advantage for the president at the close of July. In New Hampshire, the president held a clear lead according to polls by Rasmussen and American Research in the third week of June; a Marist poll at the end of the month, though, showed Romney in a tie with Obama.

In the western states of New Mexico and Nevada, the president was enjoying consistent leads. The race in Nevada -- key to Obama's so-called "Western Firewall" -- showed a competitive scene, according to polling data by PPP, Marist, and Rasmussen, but with an advantage for the president. In New Mexico, President Obama was holding a decisive lead.

In North Carolina, which the president won in 2008, the race was very close in 2012. Polls at the end of June 2012 through the start of July 2012 by Rasmussen and Survey USA showed Romney with the lead over Obama. Myers showed a dead heat between the two candidates. PPP and Marist gave the advantage to Obama. In early August 2012, Rasmussen indicated that Romney was sporting a clear lead of six percentage points against the president. However, in the same period PPP had the president leading Romney by three percentage points. North Carolina

was turning out to be contested territory. Still, the conventional wisdom was that there was an inherent edge to Romney.

Meanwhile, Ohio was emerging as Obama terrain. June polling data by PPP, Marist, and Quinnipiac, had the president sporting leads over Romney. But those results were somewhat mitigated by polls in that period showing Obama trailing Romney slightly in Ohio according to Rasmussen and Purple Strategies. At the close of the month (June 2012), PPP and Quinnipiac reversed their earlier trends. Obama still had a lead, according to PPP, albeit of a more modest variety. Quinnipiac, though, was giving the president numbers on the level of a decisive victory in this state. By July 2012, Magellan gave Obama the edge over Romney, while both WAA and Garin-Hart-Yang had the president with a clear lead over Romney. At the start of August 2012, a poll by Quinnipiac/NYT-CBS mirrored those results by giving the president a decisive lead over Romney.

It should be noted that the president was holding his own in the former swing state of Pennsylvania, with polling data from June through July 2012 giving Obama the consistent lead of about six or seven percentage points over Romney. At the start of August 2012, a poll by Quinnipiac/NYT-CBS gave the president a double digit lead over Romney in this state.

In Virginia, polling data appeared to show Obama with a cautious advantage. In June 2012, the president had a dwindling but consistent lead, according to polls by Purple Strategies, Quinnipiac, Washington Post, and Marist. Only one poll -- WAA -- showed Romney with a lead in this state in June 2012. By July 2012, Quinnipiac and Rasmussen showed dead heats in Virginia between the two presidential contenders while PPP and Garin-Hart-Yang respectively showed the president winning this state against Romney. By August 2012, Rasmussen gave the president a small edge of a couple percentage points ahead of Romney while Quinnipiac/CBS/NYT

gave the president a clearer lead over Romney in this state.

It should be noted that the president was also seeing some success in holding onto his advantage in the former swing state of Wisconsin, according to PPP and Marquette, albeit not at the landslide level of his 2008 support.

The conclusion was that the president cumulatively had a moderate advantage on the electoral map.

As discussed below, President Obama does not need to win every battleground state to clinch victory, while Romney has to "run the table." That being said, with Romney within striking distance (a few percentage points) of the president in key states, the president's advantage has to be regarded as a precarious one. See below for projections of where the presidential race stands at this time.

Projections for the Presidential General Election:

For a candidate to win the presidency in the United States, he or she must carry at least 270 electoral votes (EVs) of a total of 538 EVs. In order to understand the pathway to that 207 EV victory, it is important to have a sense of the electoral landscape.

For purposes of clarity and ease, the "electoral math" in the United States presidential contest is going to be divided into three categories: (1) Democratic "blue base states" that have been won in the last three elections by this party's nominee (Gore in 2000, Kerry in 2004, and Obama in 2008); (2) the Republican "red base states" that

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have been won by this party's nominee (Bush in 2000 and 2004, and McCain in 2008); and the so-called "swing state" that have moved from one camp to another and remain in the so-called "purple toss up" terrain.

1. Democratic "blue base states" --

California (55), Connecticut (7), Delaware (3) District of Columbia (3), Hawaii (4), Illinois (20), Maine (4), Maryland (10), Massachusetts (11), Minnesota (10), New Jersey (14), New York (29), Oregon (7), Rhode Island (4), Vermont (3), Washington (12)

Democratic-leaning, blue-hued states that must be held (but possess inherent vulnerabilities) include --

Michigan (16), Pennsylvania (20), Wisconsin (10)

Assuming the trend continues and President Obama holds these traditional blue states, including the three most difficult one, he would begin with a baseline of 242 EVs.

2. Republican "red base states"--

Alabama (9 EVs), Alaska (3), Arkansas (6), Idaho (4), Kansas (6), Kentucky (8), Louisiana (8), Mississippi (6), Montana (3) Nebraska (5*), North Dakota (3), Oklahoma (7), South Carolina (9), South Dakota (3), Tennessee (11), Texas (38), Utah (6), West Virginia (5), Wyoming (3)

Republican-leaning "reddish: states that must be held (but possess inherent vulnerabilities) include --

Arizona (11), Georgia (16)

Assuming the trend continues and the Republican nominee holds these traditional red states, including the two most difficult, and he would begin with a baseline of 170 EVs.

*One word on Nebraska, which awards its EVs on a proportioned basis. In 2008, Barack Obama was able to win one of those EVs in the metropolis constituency of that state. It is considered unlikely that he would repeat that performance in 2012, however, it bears watching.

3. The swing states or "purple toss up states" --

Colorado (9 EVs), Florida (29), Indiana (11), Iowa (6), Missouri (10), Nevada (6), New Hampshire (4), New Mexico (5), North Carolina (15), Ohio (18), Virginia (13)

In total, these swing states offer 126 EVs. Obviously, a presidential contender would have to cobble together a coalition of some of these states to build on their base totals to get to 270 EVs and victory.

The quasi-landslide EV victory for President Obama in 2008 notwithstanding, the path to 270 EVs in 2012 would be more difficult. The political landscape aside (economic and political challenges, foreign policy dangers etc.), on a

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practical level, there has been a re-apportioning of EVs in several Democratic-leaning states in the aftermath of the recent census. Accordingly, Republicans would benefit from additional EVs in "safe" Republican states like Texas, while Democrats would lose EVs in states like blue base states like Massachusetts.

With that said, President Obama nonetheless starts off with an EV advantage as compared with the Republican nominee. Assuming he holds the most difficult Democratic-leaning states (the rust belt states of Michigan and Pennsylvania, as well as Wisconsin), President Obama would have 242 EVs and need only 28 additional EVs to get to 270.

The most obvious pathway for the president would be to hold New Hampshire (which was narrowly lost by Gore in 2000, narrowly won by Kerry in 2004, and secured by Obama in 2008) and its 4 EVs, add Iowa (which was won by Gore in 2000, shifted to Bush in 2004, and reverted to Obama in 2008) and its 6 EVs. This would take Obama to 252 EVs. He would then go after what is called the "Western Firewall" and try to recapture the three states he won decisively in 2008 that are part of the new Obama coalition -- Colorado (9), Nevada (6), and New Mexico (5) -- for a total of 272 EVs.

Polling data shows the president posting leads (albeit diminishing leads) in all of these states. It should be noted that the president's pathway to victory in this regard could be compromised by New Hampshire where Romney has a home; recent polling data shows that the president maintains a slim lead in this state but with Romney sporadically surging to a dead heat with him. It could also be compromise by the loss of Iowa, where the race was turning precariously close for the president as Romney nipped at his heels in this state in mid-2012.

Another pathway would be to grab some combination of the usual battleground states. The ultra-traditional swing states include Florida (29) and Ohio (18). While the president has been posting competitive polling numbers in both states, both Florida and Ohio have a history of heartbreak for Democratic contenders in the recent past, and will be at the top of the Republican nominee's "hit list" in 2012. No doubt a vice presidential selection from one of these states could increase the possibility that these states -- which were won by Bush in 2000 and 2004, by Obama in 2008 -- return to the Republican column in 2012.

One alternate option is North Carolina, which was narrowly won in 2008. Some pundits believe that this state is out of reach for the president in 2012; however, with the Democratic National Convention scheduled to take place here, there was hope that a strong campaign could secure North Carolina's 15 EVs for the president. The other alternative is Virginia, which was won a bit more decisively than North Carolina in 2008 by the president. No doubt President Obama was banking on those 13 EVs from Virginia... And no doubt the Republican nominee would consider putting the Republican governor of the state of Virginia on the presidential ticket as a way of securing this state for the red team. Both Virginia and North Carolina are generally regarded as "new Obama coalition states," which he will have to work hard to secure in 2012.

Of the swing states list above, both Indiana (which narrowly went for Obama in 2008) and Missouri (which narrowly went for McCain in 2008) are respectively regarded as out of reach for President Obama in 2012, as discussed below.

It should be noted that the Republican nominee would have 170 EVs to start off and would need a full 100 more EVs to get to 270. Still, the conventional wisdom has been that despite having been narrowly won by President Obama in 2008, Indiana's 11 EVs will likely return to the Republican column in 2012 due to current political trends. So with Indiana factored into the equation for a total of 181, the Republican would therefore need to garner an additional 89 EVs. Missouri has gone narrowly Republican in the last three successive elections, so there is good

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reason to believe that 2012 would spell a similar fate. Add another 10 EVs to the Republican nominee's tally for 191 EVs.

As noted above, Florida (29) and Ohio (18) would be high value targets for the Republicans in 2012, but even if those two states went into the "red" column, the Republican nominee would still be markedly short of 270 EVs. That would mean the Republican nominee would also have to look at returning the likes of North Carolina (15), Virginia (13), and Iowa (6) to Republican hands. Stated differently, for the Republican nominee to win, he would have to secure every swing state listed above, save the so-called "Western Firewall."

Summary Projection:

Despite the closeness of so-called "head-to-head match-ups" between Obama and Romney at the national level, polling data also showed the president leading Romney in several key states, albeit with diminishing advantages in certain battleground states. President Obama, therefore, has more pathways to victory (270 EVs) than the eventual Republican nominee.

That being said, his victory broadly relies on holding every one of the so-called Kerry states (including New Hampshire, and possibly problematic states such as Wisconsin and Michigan), including Iowa (which was won by Gore in 2000 and lost by Kerry narrowly in 2004), and then securing the Western Firewall states of Nevada, New Mexico, and Colorado. He has alternative pathways via traditional swing states, such as Florida and Ohio, or via new Obama coalition states, such as North Carolina and Virginia.

The Republican presumptive nominee -- Romney -- has a tougher road to traverse and will have to win almost every key battleground state in order to defeat President Obama. Romney started off the general election campaign in mid-April 2012 with improving poll performances at the national level, which naturally translated into better opportunities in swing states. A strategic choice of vice president could well help Romney secure one of the key battleground states in the general election, and advance his path to White House victory.

By the start of August 2012, President Obama and Romney were in a competitive race, according to national polls, with the president holding a slight advantage; the battleground map of states showed a somewhat more notable edge for the president. As noted above, with the president holding the Kerry-Gore states (including Iowa, Michigan, and New Hampshire), as well as the "Western Firewall" of Nevada and New Mexico, he approaches the 270 threshold with a total of 263 EVs. But with recent polling showing the president to be ahead in Ohio, he crosses the 270 threshold to 281 EVs. His lead is further augmented by his apparent advantage in Virginia for a total of 294 EVs. On the other side of the equation, Romney had the swing states of Indiana and Missouri in his column for a total of 191 EVs. Assuming Romney is also able to eke out a win in North Carolina, his total would increase to 206 EVs, and would therefore fall short of the 270 needed to clinch victory. At this time, Florida and Colorado remain unassigned due to contradictory polling in these states. Should both states be added to the Romney column (for a total of 244 EVs), that final number would yet fail to provide the Republican nominee with enough EVs to win the presidency.

In this way, President Obama at the start of August 2012 enjoyed a modest advantage to win re-election. That edge was precarious, as demonstrated by the closeness of the polls in key battleground states and was subject to change. As has been suggested here, Romney would have to "run the proverbial table" in the swing states in order to claim victory. While this would undoubtedly be a more challenging task, negative economic news could shift the momentum in Romney's direction.

The Congress

In Congress, Democrats controlled the Senate while Republicans controlled the House of Representatives. The Congressional leadership was as follows: Democrat Harry Reid was the Senate Majority Leader; with Richard Durbin holding the second-in-command position for the Democrats. Mitch McConnell (Republican) was the Senate Minority Leader. Democrat Nancy Pelosi made history in 2006 by becoming the country's first female Speaker of the House and was third in line for the Presidency. She was succeeded in 2010 by Republican John Boehner as the new House Speaker following mid-term elections of that year. Eric Cantor was the House Majority Leader. Pelosi was now Minority Leader.

In 2012, Republicans controlled 242 of 435 seats in the House, Democrats controlled 190. Three seats (all formerly held by Democrats) were vacant. 218 seats would be needed for control of the chamber, meaning Democrats need a net gain of 28 seats to retake the House. That was expected to be a tough hurdle for the Democrats to cross, even in a presidential year with a popular Democratic president at the top of the ticket. Accordingly, all expectations are that the Republicans would hold the House, albeit with a reduced majority.

In the Senate, following the 2010 mid-term elections, Democrats retained control of the upper chamber. Democrats and two Democratic-allied Independents controlled 53 seats; Republicans held 47 seats. In 2012, there were more Democrats up for re-election compared with Republicans. Accordingly, Republicans had high hopes that could take over the upper chamber of Congress. However, the reasonable possibilities for Democrats to pick up seats (in Massachusetts and New Mexico) could well off-set possible losses in states such as Nebraska. Meanwhile, Virginia, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Montana, which were all currently held by Democrats, were too-tight races that could go either way. It should be noted that the state of Maine was expected to be a solid Republican hold until its Senator Snowe decided to retire; the likely winner -- an independent -- was expected to vote with Democrats. Thus, the fight for control over the Senate promises to be battle right to the end.

With anti-incumbent sentiment being high, there were no good predictions of how the elections would fare. That being said, any party siding with the establishment might have a harder time at the polls than one seizing upon a populist message at a time of economic strife. To that end, the Republicans' insistence on protecting the richest echelons of the country from tax increases and their call for deregulation could serve them negatively at the polls - especially if the Democrats were able to craft a sharp and concise populist message. In the past, however, effective messaging has been a serious problem for the Democrats.

Note that the Republican-led Congress holds the worst approval ratings in United States modern history. Whereas in late 2011, Republicans led Democrats on the generic Congressional ballot, in the first part of 2012, Democrats had shifted the momentum to their advantage. In March 2012, while both political parties suffered from record low approval ratings, congressional Democrats were viewed more favorably than Republicans. By the start of May 2012, the tide had turned, though, and Republicans had the advantage of a few percentage points according to polls by PPP, Gallup, and Rasmussen. In late May 2012, movement had occurred yet again as the generic ballot showed a highly competitive race between the two parties running neck-and-neck against one another. As of the start of June 2012, Republicans had a slight advantage over Democrats in the generic Congressional ballot. But by mid-June 2012, the race was moving back to the middle with Democrats holding the slight advantage. In July 2012, the race was back to being a dead heat and by the start of August 2012, there remained little of a competitive advantage for either party.

-- August 2012

Written by Dr. Denise Youngblood Coleman, Editor in Chief, www.countrywatch.com.

See Bibliography for general research sources.

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