



## **Munk Debate on Obama's Foreign Policy – commentary by John Stackhouse**

Barack Obama is a hard man to defend these days — unless you're in Toronto.

At the latest Munk Debate, arguing the failure of Obama's foreign policy, you wouldn't know that the President was deeply unpopular at home and abroad, or that his party had just been routed in midterm elections. The wheels of his foreign policy — democratic reform in the Middle East, carbon caps globally, free trade in the Pacific, a reset with Russia — can be found in the ditch, deflated, punctured, in some cases shredded, as "Yes, we can" has given way to "No, you don't."

Except in Canada.

Against worse odds than a Democrat would face in Missouri, Fareed Zakaria and Anne-Marie Slaughter convinced more than two thirds of the audience that Obama's foreign policy had not emboldened America's enemies and had not made the world a riskier place. They even persuaded one in ten to change their minds.

Consider the evidence that they had to overcome:

- He went to Cairo in 2009 and proclaimed a new dawn for the Arab world, an age in which free speech and human rights would triumph. Today, Syria and Iraq are in free fall, Libya is in chaos, Yemen is on the verge of sectarian civil war, Egypt is in the military's grip, and Jordan and Lebanon hang perilously in the balance.
- Iran has more nuclear weapons materials than ever
- Russia is an adversary of America again, and an aggressor again
- Japan, America's most significant ally in the Pacific, is starting to go its own way

— the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change this week sounded its most serious alarm yet, because nothing significant had been done to curb carbon emissions

As Foreign Policy magazine noted this week, “Obama will reap the results of his political and policy narcissism in a way that will not only be difficult for him personally but will be bad for America and its role in the world.”

You’d think the pro side — conservative stalwarts Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution and Bret Stephens from the Wall Street Journal — would have a walk in the park.

They didn’t account properly for the Canada-side bias. At the entrance, before the vote, 57 per cent said they opposed the resolution that the President had made the world more dangerous. After 90 minutes of evidence and argument, 68 per cent stood with the opposition.

What gave?

In many ways, rhetoric won the evening, as is so often the case with Obama. Zakaria waxed wit and optimism for an American century that gives more than it takes. Yes, there are serious pockets of instability. Always have been, always will.

Slaughter was less sure on her feet, having written many condemnations of Obama’s foreign policy, but she managed to cling faithfully to the “dealt-a-bad-hand” argument. She compared Obama’s foreign policy to a Caribbean island that’s blamed for being hit by a hurricane, a clever twist on the school of root causes. Hurricane Sikes-Picot, perhaps. For good measure, she also rolled out a “he’s trying his best” argument, citing climate change and free trade as policy initiatives that deserve A for effort.

Kagan countered with a litany of the President’s failures. A premature withdrawal from Iraq. The ridiculed red line in Syria. Mayhem in the maidan. To the point of the resolution, who could dispute that America’s enemies — Assad, Khamenei, Putin — are bolder today than five years ago? The former red army is on the move, the mullahs of Tehran have nuclear materials, the Assad regime has chemical weapons, so surely the world is less safe.

Is that Obama’s fault? The counter-factual arguments got less debate than they should have. What if Obama had not been in power? What if the White House was run by a unilateralist, or an isolationist? Would American forces in Iraq or

Syria make the world safer, or even discourage the enemy? Conversely, would a stay-at-home President make Ukraine less tempting to Putin?

The audience didn't buy it. They seemed to see muddling through as a reasonable option, even at the cost of some chaos. Foreign policy analysts have called it "messy-lateralism," the Obama preference for ad hoc coalitions that put the goal of minimizing damage ahead of all else. Inspiring to all, no. Securing to some, yes.

Slaughter stressed her side's point with an incisive critique of the Great Man school, the one espoused by those who want linear strategies and singular outcomes. The 21st century, she said, is too crowded and complex for single actions, and single actors, to prevail. It is an age of networks, and non-state actors, from jihadis and private armies to multinationals and oligarchs. Presidents, at best, can coordinate and referee.

Zakaria may have won the evening with a more sweeping view, his speciality. Yes, Syria is a mess, and Obama has not done anything to make it better. But Syria is not the world. A majority of people today are in a more secure spot than they were in 2008, politically, socially and economically. China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South America, Nigeria, East Africa, Southern Africa are all largely out of the news because they're doing okay.

So even if the evidence is compelling that America's enemies have been emboldened, and global security jeopardized, a pro-Obama room needed more to turn. It needed to be persuaded that his absence would have made things worse.

In the end, there was no need for a count. The crowd's mood was obvious during Stephens' arguments, in which he paid tribute to the Canadian bombing runs underway in Iraq, a note of thanks from an American that might have drawn some patriotic cheers elsewhere. Instead, the applause line garnered only a polite response.

Like Obama, the Munk audience seemed content with caution, even on the way to the exit.

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