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Author

Rumbaut, Rubén G

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Obama and the World: Cuba, International Politics, and the Impact and Potential Legacy of the Obama Presidency

Rubén G. Rumbaut

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One cannot grasp eight years of a historic presidency in eight minutes of talk. It’s like trying to catch lightning in a bottle. But nonetheless...

At this point on the 8th year of his presidency eight years ago, on a farewell visit to Baghdad, President George W. Bush had two shoes thrown at him by an indignant Iraqi journalist—a symbolic act applauded around the world (which also made a fortune for the Turkish maker of those shoes, the demand for which went through the roof). President Barack Obama, by contrast, on a recent farewell visit to Canada, was applauded by its Parliament, who chanted in wishful unison: “four more years!”

Back then Bush’s approval rating was in the low 30s; Obama’s is now in the 50s. Just as Obama benefited by the contrast to the global calamity that was the presidency of his predecessor, so now he rises in comparison to his would-be successor, a man whose campaign of fear and loathing has in turn generated fear and loathing among many around the world, astonished by the rise of a figure unabashedly unleashing such nativist, racist, and proto-fascist impulses: the anti-Obama, the leading “birther” who sought incessantly for years to delegitimize him. Poetic justice: The rise of Trump has led to the revival of Obama (and possibly, when all is said and done, to the reviling of Trump).

In 2008 Obama’s election was met by global elation—people from Sierra Leone to Cuba danced in the streets; and if the world could have voted, Obama would have won in a worldwide landslide, 3 to 1. The global expectations were so high that just months into his first year in office he was prematurely bestowed the Nobel Peace Prize—a grand projection of the hopes of others for the possibilities he might bring to a world ensnared by war and intractable conflicts.¹

¹ Obama’s 2009 Nobel Lecture at the Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo is among the most important of his presidency; see: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html

But today we are not “grading on a curve” in this preliminary appraisal of President Obama’s potential legacy, focusing on his impact on international relations. Setting aside the subjective mood of “then,” what is to be made of the objective residue of “now,” looking forward?

I am struck by the ironies and paradoxes of Obama’s presidency, and particularly by two glaring contradictions: In contrast to his Republican opponent, Obama campaigned unequivocally in 2008 as the anti-(Iraq)-war candidate, and as a progressive comprehensive-immigration-reformer who would make it a priority to achieve a path to citizenship for the “Dreamers” and help to regularize the status of undocumented immigrants.

Yet when he leaves office next January 2017, he will be remembered as the “Deporter in Chief,” under whose eight-year tenure some 3 million people will have been deported, by far the most of any president in history.

Just as ironically, the Nobel-Peace-Prize Commander-in-Chief has been at war longer than any president in U.S. history (Landler 2016). He will have presided over what are now the two longest wars in the country’s history, in Afghanistan and Iraq—though in fairness, he will leave behind far fewer troops on those battlefields than those he inherited from Bush—and taken military action in at least five other countries (Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen), including an unprecedented campaign of secretive assassinations by remote-control drones.

In May 2016, in a highly symbolic and historic visit, President Obama traveled to Vietnam, a country on which the U.S. dropped many more bombs than it did in all the theaters of World War II, seeking to bind still lingering wounds and close a tragic chapter of a “war nobody won.” But Obama’s announcement while there that the U.S. would suspend its embargo on the sale of weapons to Vietnam (Brooks 2016) clashed symbolically with the high purpose of a visit that had been aimed to bury a past based on war and celebrate a new relationship based on peace.

On the next leg of that same Asia tour, Obama became the first U.S. president to visit Hiroshima, where he declared that a worldwide “moral awakening” was needed to shed nuclear weapons. Yet reports from the Pentagon and the Federation of American Scientists show that the Obama Administration has reduced the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal *less* than any other president of the post-Cold-War era; and his government has a billion-dollar program in the works to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and to develop a new generation of tactical nuclear “mini-bombs” for use in the battlefield (Brooks 2016).

Certainly Obama’s international legacy will also reflect his reasoned, steady and persistent leadership and diplomacy in securing a historic global climate change agreement in Paris last year, as well as the Iran deal to reduce the odds of a nuclear-armed Iran.

And perhaps most astonishing has been his symbolic and historic reset of U.S. policy toward Cuba, seeking to “normalize relations” that for over half a century had been trapped in the time warp of the Cold War... and for two centuries in the “mental mold” (Shoultz 2011) of U.S.

policy toward Cuba specifically and Latin America generally, dripping with a presumption of entitlement and moral superiority: of imperial aims masked as selfless moral purpose (Pérez 2016).

Theodore Roosevelt said in 1905, in the middle of his eight-year presidency: “It is manifest destiny for a nation to own the islands that border its shores.” And then this, in 1906 (quoted in Schoultz 2011): “I am so angry with that infernal little Cuban republic that I would like to wipe its people off the face of the earth. All that we ever wanted from them was that they would behave themselves and be prosperous and happy so that we would not have to interfere.” That has been the “default template” of U.S. policy toward Cuba—from John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to John Quincy Adams, from the Monroe Doctrine to the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-48 (in which the U.S. took half of Mexico) to the so-called Spanish-American War of 1898 (which ushered in the era of U.S imperialism), and all since (Rumbaut and Rumbaut 2007, 2009, 2015).

Obama brought a very different message last March (2016) when he became the first U.S. president to visit the island nation since Calvin Coolidge in the 1920s (Fidel had just been born; he turned 90 last week²). He began his speech in Havana by quoting, in the Spanish original, the first line of one José Martí’s best known poems from his *Versos Sencillos* (written during Martí’s years of exile in New York), instantly recognizable by any Cuban, old or young: “*Cultivo una rosa blanca.*”³ It was a momentous occasion—as had been the surprise simultaneous announcements by both Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro on December 17, 2014, declaring their goal of normalizing relations, and the subsequent reopening of embassies in the capitals of both countries in summer 2015.

One palpable measure of the change is seen in U.S. public opinion toward Cuba: Gallup started asking Americans about Cuba in 1996, when public opinion was 81% unfavorable and only 10% favorable (that was the year that the Helms-Burton law was passed to deepen the blockade of Cuba and make the U.S. embargo removable only by an act of Congress, not by presidential order). A decade later in 2006, under Bush, it was 71% to 21%: the negative differential was still 50 points. But in February 2016 (before Obama’s visit to Havana), a majority now saw Cuba in a favorable light for the first time: 54% positive, 40% negative (with the trend showing rapid improvement)—and the majority-favorable included Cuban Americans in Florida. Public opinion, in turn, reflects

² Fidel Castro, born on August 13, 1926, died on November 25, 2016, three months after this paper was presented.

³ The poem is at: <http://www.damisela.com/literatura/pais/cuba/autores/marti/sencillo/xxxix.htm>

Cultivo una rosa blanca,
En julio como en enero,
Para el amigo sincero
Que me da su mano franca.

Y para el cruel que me arranca
El corazón con que vivo
Cardo ni oruga cultivo:
Cultivo la rosa blanca.

a shift not only in the conversation but in political power: the hardliners no longer dominate the policy discussion. To be sure, significant differences remained by political affiliation: the biggest shift in opinion was registered by Democrats, 73% of whom viewed Cuba in a positive light—compared to 53% of independents and only 34% of Republicans (although a majority of Republicans now favored an end to the embargo despite viewing Cuba mostly negatively).

In that regard U.S. public opinion is moving toward the nearly universal view shared by all but two of the nations in the world. Every October for the past quarter of a century, the United Nations General Assembly votes to condemn the U.S. embargo against Cuba. The vote in 2015 was a whopping 191-2. Three countries who had abstained in previous years now voted in favor of the resolution: Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. Once again, the sole two naysayers were Israel and the United States (contradictorily, since Obama himself had called for an end to the embargo in his State of the Union speech earlier that year). Instead of isolating Cuba with its blockade, the United States has itself been isolated by it in the eyes of the world.

It is still the case that formidable obstacles remain in the way of “fully normal relations” between the United States and Cuba (*cf.* Pérez 2016, Rumbaut and Rumbaut 2015):

- The embargo (or blockade as it is called in Cuba) remains in place, as does the 1996 Cuban Adjustment Act. Obama’s executive actions of December 2014 cannot repeal the embargo; only Congress can do that (under the provisions of a 1996 law). It remains to be seen if a Republican-dominated Congress would yield to public opinion and end the longest and most counterproductive embargo against any country in the world.
- The United States still controls the Guantánamo Naval Station (built on territory seized from Cuba in 1901, under terms coercively imposed by the U.S. on the Cuban Constitution via the Platt Amendment, which gave the United States *carte blanche* to intervene militarily and otherwise in Cuba’s internal affairs, which it often did since).
- Radio and TV Martí continue broadcasting, as do AID programs aimed at Cuba.
- And that “default template”—the one casting the U.S. as arbiter of Cuban destiny, always in the name of what is “best” for the Cuban people as determined by U.S. political and business interests, with scarcely a respectful thought for Cuban sovereignty—may not be quick to disappear.

A change in leadership is in the offing in both countries. Obama leaves office in January 2017. Raúl Castro steps down in 2018. Havana, founded 257 years before American revolutionaries signed the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, turns 500 in 2019. And the two countries will remain 90 miles from each other.

Other than that, who knows what may come next... except perhaps that there won’t be a dull moment.

But improbably, Barack Obama, who entered the presidency knowing little about Latin America (and perhaps caring less) may yet come to be lastingly remembered for cultivating that white rose (*la rosa blanca*) with the infernal little Cuban republic.

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