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# Leading by Example, Lighting the World: Open Government, Transparency, and Soft Power in Obama's National Security Policy

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout his presidency, Barack Obama promoted open government and transparency at home and abroad as instruments of American soft power. President Obama sought to improve the American people's confidence in democracy by making the executive branch of the national government more open and transparent. Through the power of its example, Obama further sought to encourage other countries to do the same and want what America wants: the strengthening of liberal democracy globally, greater openness and transparency in international relations generally, and reinvigorated American leadership of the liberal international order. This paper relies on Obama's own words, White House documents, and government reports to demonstrate why and how his administration sought to assert America's global leadership through the power of America's example. It identifies Obama's open government and transparency agenda as a critical tool of the administration's national security strategy to address growing disillusionment with liberal democratic governance in America and elsewhere and to counter the rising challenge to the liberal order by rival, authoritarian states – China and Russia especially.

## KEYWORDS

Open government; transparency; soft power; Barack Obama; national security

## Introduction

The notion that open government<sup>1</sup> and transparency<sup>2</sup> at home and abroad are crucial to American national security and specifically to America's continued leadership of the liberal international order bookend the Barack Obama presidency. Among its first official acts upon entering the White House in January 2009, for instance, the new administration issued three presidential memos and an executive order on open government. One memorandum identified the “guiding norms” that would inform its future open government initiatives: increasing government transparency, encouraging public participation in the policymaking process, and fostering collaboration between government officials and civil society experts. The memorandum further deemed the information in the possession of the federal government “a national asset,” and pledged the administration's commitment to the prompt disclosure to the public of information about governmental operations and decisions.<sup>3</sup>

Eight years later, in January 2017, Obama delivered his farewell address to the nation before thousands of his fellow citizens in Chicago, his adopted hometown. He evoked open government when he called upon the American people to counter mounting threats to American democracy. He identified one threat as the assault by “fanatics” and “autocrats” on the Enlightenment virtues of vigorous debate and the exercise of reason and scientific inquiry. These virtues, he stated, are crucial to the success of liberal democracy because they make open government a practical necessity. Policy solutions to complex political problems, he continued, require debate and dialogue, public engagement and participation in policymaking, and the exchange of information among a range of stakeholders in and out of government. These virtues, he continued, also help explain the success of the post-World War II liberal international order. At home, they help advance the rule of law, secure individual rights and liberties, and hold public officials accountable. Abroad, they help foster international cooperation, economic integration, and encourage global civil society. To defend democracy and the liberal values associated with it, which together, the president said, “make us who we are,” Obama challenged his fellow citizens to employ the full array of America’s national power and shoulder “global fights” against forces of authoritarianism. He identified the people’s declining trust in the institutions of government as another threat to American democracy, one that he attributed to the prevalence of powerful, big-money interests in politics. To restore the people’s confidence in government, Obama challenged the American people to “accept the responsibility of citizenship” and, by more fully participating in the country’s political life at all levels of government, “insist on the principles of transparency and ethics in public service.”<sup>4</sup> The president routinely championed the cause of open government in the United States and abroad – so much so that, in 2013, Obama famously declared his “the most transparent administration ever,”<sup>5</sup> much to the consternation of his critics on the right and on the left.

The scholarship on open government and transparency during the Obama years is heavily weighted toward the administration’s domestic initiatives – namely, issues of public administration (e.g., making government data more easily accessible to the public)<sup>6</sup> and political participation in the form of government-civil society partnerships.<sup>7</sup> By comparison, very little attention has been given to the connections between Obama’s open government and transparency initiatives at home and those abroad and how, together, they are pertinent to American national security.<sup>8</sup> This essay addresses this gap in the literature. President Obama deemed the strengthening of liberal democracy at home a vital national security goal. Obama further maintained America would lead by the power of its illuminate example and encourage other countries to promote open government and transparency in their domestic affairs and foster greater openness and transparency in international relations generally.

The purpose of this paper is not to assess whether Obama succeeded or failed in this endeavor. It is concerned instead with exploring the reasoning behind the administration's open government and transparency initiatives and demonstrating how they served as an instrument of American soft power at a time of growing uncertainty about American global leadership and the sustainability of the American-led liberal international order.

The paper is organized as follows. First, it outlines Obama's foreign policy ideology. Though Obama foreign policy views draw from both realism and idealism, his open government and transparency initiatives fall squarely in the idealist tradition, largely as an expression of political liberalism's commitment to individual freedom and liberal internationalism's vision of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and well-ordered world. Second, the paper demonstrates the logic of Obama's open government and transparency initiatives as a form of soft power and a mechanism by which the Obama administration sought to reassert global leadership and extend the liberal international order. Third, it surveys a wealth of evidence on the connections between the open government and transparency initiatives at home and abroad during Obama's eight years in the White House and demonstrates how the administration represented them as instruments of soft power. It also entertains criticisms of Obama's open government and transparency initiatives at home – and the connections between them and the administration's goal to assert global leadership and fortify the liberal international order. Lastly, the paper considers the fate of open government and transparency under Presidents Trump and Biden.

### **Obama's foreign policy realism and idealism**

Obama's thinking about foreign policy defies standard categorization. It is neither realist nor idealist.<sup>9</sup> To borrow an over-used phrase – it's complicated. Like so much else about his political beliefs, President Obama positioned himself betwixt and between opposing perspectives. Intellectually predisposed to see foreign policy in shades of gray and not in black and white, he crafted a hybrid model that draws from each.

In his 2020 memoir, *A Promised Land*, the former president underscores this blending of his idealist and realist inclinations. He writes that those who represented him as a “starry-eyed idealist ... had never been *entirely* accurate.”<sup>10</sup> He reasons, however, that his penchant for diplomacy and multi-lateral cooperation – as well as foreign policies that embody American values, such as democracy promotion and human rights, for instance – do not, in and of themselves, make him an idealist. “These tools and goals are valuable in the own right,” he maintains, “but they also serve the long-term national security interests of the United States.”<sup>11</sup> He maintains that his foreign policy views “owed at least as much to the ‘realist’ school,” which he defines as an approach

that “valued restraint, assumed imperfect information and unintended consequences, and tempered a belief in American exceptionalism with a humility about our ability to remake the world in our own image.”<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in *A Promised Land*, he suggests that, realism and idealism are both guiding lights of the foreign policies all countries. “At the end of the day,” he writes, “each nation’s foreign policy [is] driven by . . . the imperatives of those who had and sought to maintain power. It [is] the rare foreign leader who [is] susceptible to moral suasion alone.”<sup>13</sup> This fusion is also evident in his staffing and symbolic messaging. Obama attributes his decision to retain Robert Gates as secretary of defense to Gates’ foreign policy realism, which, he reasons, served as a critical counterweight to the idealism that animated his own thinking – and the thinking of so many of his young White House staffers, especially Samantha Power.<sup>14</sup> Obama also expresses admiration for realist statesmen like Dwight Eisenhower.<sup>15</sup> A week or so prior to accepting his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, Obama unveiled his long-awaited decision to adopt a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy and deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, on condition that the military also set a timetable for the withdrawal of a major U.S. combat forces and transition to a counter-terrorism (CT) strategy. Obama announced his plan before an assembly of cadets in the Eisenhower Auditorium at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. The choice of the venue was hardly serendipitous. It symbolized the realist virtues inherent in Eisenhower’s foreign policy of pragmatism and prudence, as well as the former general’s disdain for the use of military instruments to solve foreign policy problems.<sup>16</sup> It also echoed Eisenhower’s idealist conviction that the preservation of core American values, individual liberty and limited government specifically, as well as America’s republican form of government itself, are imperiled by what he called the military industrial complex, an informal alliance between the U.S. military and the defense industry that shapes public policy in ways that benefits their interests at the expense of the national interest. To this day, Eisenhower’s conservative admonition about powerful special interests in and out of government rings true, especially among civil libertarians and those on the progressive-liberal left with whom Obama identifies. Obama’s nod to foreign policy realism perhaps understates the depths of his realist predilections.

Obama’s representation of himself as a foreign policy idealist and realist frames the prevailing wisdom about his policy choices. This wisdom suggests that he is an idealist because his policy pronouncements and his vision of America’s leadership role in the world are couched in the lofty language of America’s liberal values, which, for idealists, serve as the wellspring of America’s interests and a source of its power. Yet, this wisdom continues, there is a dissonance between Obama’s words and his actions or policies, which are variously described as “pragmatic,” “prudent,” and “restrained,” which are realist virtues.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Obamais described variously as a

“pragmatic idealist” and “realistic idealist,” in the sense that his political predilections conjoin “an unsentimental realism about the realities of power with progressive goals.”<sup>18</sup> This blending of idealism and realism informs Obama’s worldview and policies.

### **Obama’s liberalism**

Obama’s open government and transparency initiatives combine his idealist aspirations for sustaining an ever-widening community of robust liberal democracies and his realist intuitions about the importance of power in the service of the national interest.

Obama’s conviction that America can lead the world by the power of its example as a dynamic, open, and transparent democracy begins at home and draws its inspiration from political liberalism. As it applies to politics within countries, liberalism, in its most elemental form, says the core purpose of government is to ensure human liberty, and that the authority of government rests on the consent of the people – all of whom are equal under law. There are two related, albeit distinct, strands of liberal thinking about politics.<sup>19</sup> So-called classical liberals hold that ensuring free speech and other basic, inalienable rights, such as those found in the Bill of Rights, is a central purpose of government. By prioritizing “negative rights” – that is, rights that oblige government inaction, individual freedom is secured because the power of government to interfere in their exercise is narrowly constrained. By comparison, social liberals honor individual liberty, but they are primarily concerned with promoting civil liberties and greater political equality. The fulfillment of “positive rights” requires an active role for government, which is a vital mechanism for countering – even vanquishing – the roadblocks that stand in the way of all people enjoying the fruits of liberty and greater political equality. Obama’s liberalism has both classical and social elements, but he gives considerable credence to social liberalism and, therefore, sees the government and civil society groups as institutions that strive to remove the societal roadblocks to human progress that are deeply entrenched in class, race, and gender, for instance. Hence, government and civil society must be ever vigilant in their shared effort to advance what Obama regularly called the goal of a “more perfect Union.”

Open government – and transparency as a mechanism to operationalize it – is a virtue that appeals to both classical and social liberals. It strengthens democracy by giving the people greater access to the workings of government and a greater “voice” in and influence over policymaking. Open government also strengthens democracy in another sense: as the subject of the people’s (and the media’s) scrutiny, public officials are more likely to carry out their official functions responsibly, thus protecting the people from possible government malfeasance and thereby boosting both their confidence that

government does not imperil liberty and functions an agent of social progress.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, with government information in their possession, the people are empowered – they are in a better position to make informed choices about all sorts of things, such as what they eat, the medications they take, and the consumer products they purchase. All political liberals are champions of open government.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham systematized open government. For him, transparency – back then he and others called it publicity – is a “political tactic” that regulates the activities of the members of legislative assemblies and is meant to ensure the passage of good laws and thereby fulfil the utilitarian maxim of the greatest good for the greatest number. Collectively, for Bentham the people are a “tribunal,” and their scrutiny of the goings on in the legislative chamber, such as the votes and the statements of legislators, is supposed to keep legislators honest and on task. Mistrust is at the root of publicity. Yet Bentham also stresses that publicity serves the critical function of legitimizing the legislative institution and empowers the people by giving them high confidence in their legislators’ commitment to doing what is right. Hence, legislators ought to welcome and encourage public scrutiny of their official activities.<sup>21</sup> Bentham’s insight is very much in evidence in the thinking of modern-day liberal thinkers. Jürgen Habermas says that publicity is the taproot of rational political discourse in the liberal polity and the formation of informed public opinion. Information sharing – within the government and between the government and the people – promotes understanding, which is essential to good governance.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, open government and transparency rest upon the principle of popular sovereignty, which says that government officials ought to be held accountable for the temporary grant of power given to them by the people and obliges public officials to disclose information to the people – the account holders, who enjoy a right to know what the government is doing and why.<sup>23</sup>

Obama accepts the liberal idea of open government and the maxim that transparency is essential to liberty and equality. In a 2010 speech before the United Nations General Assembly, Obama proclaimed: “[H]istory is on the side of liberty” and “the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies, and open governments.” Open government and transparency also foster political equality, since individually and collectively, people can petition government and, in an open polity, face few impediments to political participation and access to government information. “No one country has all the answers, but all of us must answer to our own people. In all parts of the world, we see the promise of innovation to make government more open and accountable . . . [W]e should [make] specific commitments to promote transparency . . .<sup>24</sup> In a liberal democracy, people are empowered – both free from undue government impingement on their liberty and when

they harness the levers of government and help advance policies that improve their everyday lives, which is impermissible in an authoritarian regime.

Obama's thinking about open government and transparency abroad are also informed by liberal internationalism.<sup>25</sup> International relations (IR) liberal internationalism is a diverse theoretical paradigm. Uniting them is the sense that institutional arrangements foster international cooperation and advances core liberal goals of peace, prosperity, order, and justice. As is clearly evident in Obama's statement above about liberal democratic governance within countries, republican liberalism says a country's internal political characteristics – whether it is a democracy or a dictatorship – have considerable bearing on interests and external behavior. The democratic peace theory argues that mature liberal democracies do not war with one another. Because their citizens eschew war, which impinges individual liberty, their elected representatives are therefore also reluctant to support war. An alternative line of argument says that, because these countries have a shared liberal identity, they respect one another and therefore pledge themselves to the peaceful resolution of disputes between them. Furthermore, because no such respect extends to countries with autocratic regimes, liberal democracies see them as enemies and therefore do not exercise the same restraint. A third line of argument says that liberal democracies are more reliable partners because of their openness (relative to autocracies), which increases the prospects of cooperation with one another. Given that open government and transparency are organic to republican liberalism, liberal IR theory says liberal democracies consider it a national security imperative and therefore prioritize it at home and advance it abroad. Sociological liberalism underscores the importance of transnational relations. States remain important, but due to the diffusion of power in international relations from states to non-state actors, and especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the latter are increasingly impactful. It is the openness among liberal democracies that gives rise to a wide range of citizen-based groups, what scholars call international civil society. The success of liberal democracy within countries and the maintenance of good relations among countries in the liberal democratic world depend in part on the activities of these groups in holding government to account and in serving as collaborators with government in the policymaking process. Institutional liberalism says international institutions encourage cooperation between states, each of which is pursuing its self-interest on a range of often thorny issues like arms control, trade, and climate change. Institutions promote transparency and help ensure states' accountability and compliance with international agreements by reducing the risks and costs of defection in international agreements. States are more likely to cooperate when they expect others to also cooperate. Moreover, institutions affect state preferences and policy choices, and when their interests are in close alignment, states are prepared to alter their policy preferences to attain “win-win” outcomes.



Finally, interdependence liberalism maintains that states depend upon one another for their wellbeing, especially when it comes to economic transactions, trade relations especially. Economic openness between states facilitates mutually-beneficial outcomes, and the closer ties that bind countries and people to one another reduce the incentives for militarized conflict. The international economic order forged by the United States after World War Two, as well as the ever-widening economic union in Europe that followed, are ideal illustrations of this thinking. Political liberalism and international relations liberalism are the wellspring of the Obama administration's open government and transparency initiatives at home and abroad.<sup>26</sup> As domestic and foreign policy goals and essential elements of American national security, these initiatives functioned as instruments in the administration's efforts to fortify American power and asset leadership on the world stage. As such, they are inspired by Obama's foreign policy idealism and are objects of his foreign policy realism.

### **Soft power and American foreign policy**

Much of our thinking about soft power in international relations hails from the scholarship of Joseph S. Nye, who maintains that the soft power concept informs both foreign policy idealism and realism.<sup>27</sup> Nye defines power as the "ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants."<sup>28</sup> He distinguished three pathways and types of power. Coercive power relies on a country's threat or use of its material resources against another to get what it wants. This power pathway is mostly commonly found in military power. One country can also induce another to do something the latter might not otherwise do by offering it payments of one form or another, such as a lucrative trade or arms deal, which is evident in a second type of power, economic power. Then there is the power to attract or co-opt. One country's successful use of this power depends on another's accepting its goals as legitimate. This is what Nye means by soft power – the ability of one country to achieve its objectives abroad because other countries – "admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it."<sup>29</sup> By shaping state preferences, soft power enables countries to be successful agenda setters in world politics. It is the power of attraction, for good or ill. Soft power, he claims, has been around since recorded human history and yet, for decades, it has been vanquished from international relations and foreign policy studies by a "truncated and impoverished" version of realism, which represents power merely as "measurable, tangible resources."<sup>30</sup> Yet soft power is making a big comeback, he argues, as the utility of traditional, hard power – military sticks and economic carrots – wanes, as power generally-speaking continues to diffuse from state to non-state actors, and the information revolution enables a range of actors to share their messages with the rest of

the world. Nye concedes that the integration of soft power into a country's foreign policy is problematic. A country's successful use of soft power is difficult to measure, and success hinges on whether its entreaties are deemed credible by the target country. The use of soft power is most effective – and certainly more effective than hard power, Nye argues nevertheless, when a liberal democratic country's "general value objectives" such as, democracy promotion, human rights, and individual freedom, "turns out to be superior to hard power" at enabling states to advance their interests.<sup>31</sup>

Nye identifies various sources of a country's soft power: aspects of its culture that are most attractive to others; its political values, when it observes them at home and abroad; its foreign policies, when other countries see them as "legitimate" and carrying "moral authority;"<sup>32</sup> and economic and military resources that attract others (rather than co-opting and coercing them). Two sources of American soft power bear mention here because they are critical to the Obama administration's open government and transparency initiatives.<sup>33</sup> American ideas and values are powerful sources of attraction. Their global appeal is evident in the reverence they enjoy in public discourse in the United States and abroad, and in the domestic policies that put them into practical effect. The United States is widely recognized as one of the world's most open societies and a country with a national government that ranks quite high for openness and transparency. America's history of welcoming immigrants, its multiethnic society, the freedoms individuals enjoy, and the progress it has made in advancing civil rights, among others, also appeal to people around the globe. Although it is hard to measure the effects of ideals and values on the ability of the U.S. to get others to want what it wants, public opinion toward the United States is favorable when American values are borne out in its behavior, in hard times especially. Leading by example is essential to the effectiveness of domestic values and policies as a source of soft power. Nye writes, "How America behaves at home can enhance its image and perceived legitimacy, and that in turn can help advance its foreign policy objectives."<sup>34</sup> Though American values are hardly universal, when they are widely shared, he claims, they function as a source of soft power that at once sculpt the attitudes and behavior of other states *and*, should the United States desire to "remain attractive" to others, affect its own behavior as it strives to fulfil its expectations for itself and others have for it. Nye cautions that the United States has inconsistently observed at home and advanced abroad its professed values, however, and when it has not America's attractiveness has suffered. For decades, Nye further warns, the United States has enjoyed a hegemony of soft power – what others represent as a "form of cultural imperialism" in which "American culture has created a liberal hegemonic dialogue."<sup>35</sup> Those days are over, which means that the United States must step up its soft power game if it wants to be successful abroad. Nye further cautions that integrating soft power into a country's foreign policy is no easy task. For instance, success

has a lot to do with the receptivity of the target country and results take a lot of time, suggesting that strategies that invest in soft power require patience and persistence, which in countries like the United States that experience regular elections and routine changes in administrations, requires buy-in among political elites with different partisan affiliations.<sup>36</sup>

America's attractiveness also depends on the substance and style of the policies America pursues abroad. For Nye, several things stand out here. First, when the meaning of the American national interest is broad and visionary, the policies that flow from it are likely to be more attractive to others. Second, when the values America seeks to advance overseas are shared with others, they stand a much greater likelihood of success. Third, the policy goals America seeks abroad are more likely to enjoy international support when the United States works through multilateral arrangements to promote them. To illustrate these hypotheses, Nye refers to international order as a public good – that is, something countries use and benefit from as they see fit while simultaneously not diminishing its availability to others. Since the mid-1940s, the United States has pursued “broadly inclusive policies and far-sighted definitions of the national interest”<sup>37</sup> that are based on widely-shared values. It benefits from its provision of public goods, both the goods themselves, such as trans-Atlantic security and an open world economy, and, often overlooked, “from the way that being a major provider legitimizes and increases its soft power.”<sup>38</sup> When the United States has advanced its values through multilateral means, he continues, it has also further enhanced its soft power because other countries have been obliged to adopt policies that reflect those shared values. The use of unilateral means by the United States to pursue public goods might at times be necessary to preserve shared values, but Nye cautions that, doing so has had the effect of diminishing America's soft power.

Nye further identifies several soft power behaviors. Positive attraction is a psychological term that gets at the notion that we hold favorable opinions of those who are similar to ourselves and with whom we share group membership. Here soft power through persuasion hinges on the nature of the influencing country and how other countries over which influence is being attempted perceive them. Relatedly, persuasion, a second soft power behavior, has to do with the rational discourse – the “use of arguments to influence the beliefs and actions of others”<sup>39</sup> in which there exists some prior degree of attraction. Agenda framing or agenda setting is a third soft power behavior. When one country's “attractively framed” arguments are accepted by others, he maintains, it has asserted power over them. It has successfully “shape[d] others' preferences by affecting their expectations of what is legitimate.”<sup>40</sup>

Soft power features prominently in Obama's foreign policy. One need look no further than the preface of *The Future of Power*, where Nye references words from Obama's First Inaugural Address, to discover the new president's favorable view of the role of soft power in American foreign policy. “[O]ur

power,” declared President Obama, grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.”<sup>41</sup> Inspired by Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Obama roots America’s legitimacy abroad in a set of international, American-inspired rules and institutions that function as “tools to project American ideas and authority into the global system and embed them there.”<sup>42</sup> When it works within this system, the United States legitimates its actions in the eyes of the international community of nations – even as it defends its sovereignty. Indeed, legitimacy is the taproot of America’s leadership abroad and, as Nye’s formulation of soft power makes clear, the effective global leadership that soft power inspires begins at home. Obama’s observation that, to “improve our standing in the world,” America must be committed to both “perfecting our democracy” and “leading by example” is consistent with this logic.<sup>43</sup> By “living up to the ideals that can light the world,”<sup>44</sup> Obama proclaimed in a 2010 speech before the United Nations General Assembly, the United States will lead the world by the power of its example and, in so doing, help the world meet its common challenges by reinvigorating the liberal international order. Like most Americans, Obama writes in *A Promised Land* that he grew up with the sense of the threats facing the U.S. from the U.S.S.R. and China. Also, as a child who lived for a time in Jakarta, Indonesia, he learned other lessons about America that have to do with “what America means to those in the world beyond it, the symbolic power of a country built upon the ideals for freedom,” which taught him how to view his country through “the eyes of others.” Obama writes that he experienced “firsthand the power of [America’s] example exerted on the hearts and minds” of others – as well as how America’s standing in the world suffered when its “actions failed to live up to our image.” Obama calls this a lived, “dual vision” – the example of America’s power and the power of America’s example – that differentiates him from previous presidents.<sup>45</sup> In this vein, Benjamin E. Goldsmith is spot on when he writes, “What is perhaps most distinct about Obama’s Liberalism is the strong emphasis on how the U.S. is perceived abroad, and the belief that that matters.”<sup>46</sup>

This liberal view of America’s legitimacy in relation to soft power as a foreign policy tool has little in common with the conservative view of legitimacy. Conservative nationalists root legitimacy on the domestic side – namely, popular sovereignty and the United States Constitution. Ikenberry writes that the “rectitude of America’s actions” abroad, such as the use of force, according to this view, “is ensured by the legitimacy of the nation’s democratic process.”<sup>47</sup> He quotes John Bolton, a foreign policy official in the George W. Bush and Donald J. Trump administrations, to illustrate this point: “The question of legitimacy is frequently raised as a veiled attempt to restrain American discretion in undertaking unilateral action, or multilateral action taken outside the confines of an international organization ... The fact,

however, is that this criticism would delegitimize the operation of our own Constitutional system, while doing nothing to confront the threats we are taking.”<sup>48</sup> According to this view, the legitimacy of America’s actions abroad is found at home only. The American Constitutional system gives the president wide discretion when it comes to the use of force abroad, for instance, and so long as the president acts within the confines of this system in the pursuit of the national interest, his actions are legitimate. How those abroad view them have no bearing on the legitimacy of America’s actions.

The importance Obama attaches to America’s legitimacy in the eyes of the international community resides at the core of his worldview. In his 2006 book *Audacity of Hope*, Obama affirms the post-World War II liberal internationalist consensus and the wisdom of the American statesmen – Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, George Marshall, and George Kennan – who built the infrastructure of the American-led liberal international order.<sup>49</sup> With their liberal and democratic character, the international institutions and rules advanced by the United States after World War II had the effect of legitimating American power and weakening resistance to America’s international-political aspirations, with the ultimate effect being a reduction in America’s reliance on its hard power assets to get what it wanted. Obama represents the circumstances that gave rise to the postwar international order using both realist and idealist logic. When it assumed a “dominant position” globally in the 1940s, Obama writes in *A Promised Land*, the United States pursued institution building because it advanced America’s core national interests – “to assure our own security,” to “open markets to sell our goods,” to “keep sea-lanes available for our ships,” and to “maintain[] the steady flow of oil for our factories and cars.”<sup>50</sup> Though the U.S. invested a lot into international institutions, it also “bent” and “ignored” them when doing so suited its interests. Yet Obama affirms the liberal view that, all in all, the U.S., despite possessing unparalleled material power, nevertheless “chose to bind itself to a set of international laws, rules, and norms” and, for the most part, “exercise[d] self-restraint” in its foreign relations, which had the effect of enhancing American influence abroad and “contributing to the system’s durability.”<sup>51</sup>

Obama also takes issue with contemporary critics of the liberal order, both on the right (conservative nationalists who maintain that this world order does not serve the national interest) and the left (progressives who see this order as a mechanism of American imperialism). Their criticisms of the liberal order and America’s leadership of it are deeply misguided, he maintains, and neither offers a viable path forward for the United States on the world stage. Obama wants a refashioning of the post-World War II liberal international order in ways that adjust it to the requirements of a changing world, similar to Nye’s calls a “realignment of national actions and international institutions with shared interests.”<sup>52</sup> Consequently, international institutions need to be augmented with new bilateral, multilateral, and global strategies that operate both

inside formal institutions and frameworks and through arrangements with a host of state and non-state actors – not just national governments – to address new threats and challenges. Together, existing and new mechanisms can bring to bear the diverse capabilities and responses required to make effective collective action possible. Furthermore, while the United States retains the sovereign right to act militarily and unilaterally to destroy imminent threats to its security, Obama insists that it remains in the strategic interest of the United States to act multilaterally whenever feasible to address them, because “nobody benefits more than [the United States does] from the observance of international ‘rules of the road.’” He also underscores the importance of international legitimacy to America’s continued global leadership in the 21st century world, arguing in favor of the United States’ exercise of soft power and results in “global buy-in.”

We can’t win converts to those rules if we act as if they apply to everyone else but us. When the world’s sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these are rules worth following, and robs terrorists and dictators of the argument that these rules are simply tools of American imperialism.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to working within the rules the United States itself created, Obama calls for a foreign policy in which American statesmen build broad-based global coalitions and listen to the points of view of our partners, thereby giving our allies “joint ownership” in a durable international order for the 21st century. Obama calls measures that enhance America’s legitimacy “a force-multiplier”<sup>54</sup> – a well of soft power that augments America’s already formidable material power.

Nye’s foresees in this century two power shifts among the great powers: the transition of power from West to East, and the diffusion of power from state to non-state actors. Though it will be more difficult to wield, America’s hard and soft power will remain formidable in the years to come. In and of itself, therefore, these power shifts and the declining utility of American military power specifically do not spell an end to the “American century.”<sup>55</sup> What matters is the sort of American leadership – if any – that might emerge to forge collective action as the power of others rise. America’s strategic choices matter a lot here. Obama’s way forward for the United States mirrors Nye advocacy for America to employ international institutions, forge international networks, rely on an expansive array of alliances. “The concept of ‘smart power,’ – the intelligent integration and networking of [the tools] of so-called ‘hard and soft power’” he maintains, “is at the very heart of President Obama’s . . . policy vision.”<sup>56</sup> Among other things, a grand strategy with smart power at its foundation, and based on core interests and values, will have the effect of ensuring America’s survival and providing public goods the world over, the

most important being a reformed and reinvigorated liberal international order that is widely welcomed abroad as legitimate.

### **Open government and transparency in the Obama presidency**

The Obama administration's national security strategies, of 2010 and 2015, call upon America to renew its global leadership by advancing universal values, including open government and transparency.<sup>57</sup> Critical to this goal is the strengthening American democracy in the form of strategic partnerships among the national government, the private sector, and civil society in ways that "depend on transparency," as well as the strengthening of democracy abroad and greater transparency internationally more generally. On the matter of values as a national security interest of the United States, Obama's national security strategy underscores to the importance of the power of America's example. "When we uphold our values at home," reads the 2015 *National Security Strategy*, "we are better able to promote them in the world."<sup>58</sup> Moreover, even when America falls short, the Obama strategy says the United States still signals to the world its steadfast commitment to universal values – and doing so serves as a wellspring for America's legitimacy as a global leader.

### **Open government and transparency at home**

Open government and transparency are signature features of Barack Obama's career in politics. In one of his first official statements as an Illinois state legislator, during a floor debate in the state Senate, Obama addressed an amendment to a crime bill that created the offense of aggravated domestic battery. He questioned criminal laws of this sort, arguing that to make them effective the government is obliged "to offer clarity and transparency to the general public" so "that people know when they're breaking the law and when they're not breaking the law."<sup>59</sup> Obama advocated on behalf of bills to reform Illinois' much maligned campaign finance system and supported requiring candidates to disclose more detailed information about their fundraising activities and sources. He passed legislation to address alleged police brutality of criminal suspects by mandating the video recording of interrogations, the first such bill of its kind in the United States.<sup>60</sup> Later, he shepherded passage of the so-called "driving-while-black-bill," which required police officers, in their routine traffic stops, to record the race of vehicle drivers for the purpose of monitoring for potential racial profiling.<sup>61</sup>

During his four years in the U.S. Senate (2005–2008), Obama ranked as the top Democrat in the frequency with which he used the words "transparency" and "transparent" in floor speeches,<sup>62</sup> and he successfully advanced various initiatives on open government and transparency, which included the

establishment of the web site USASpending.gov, the first-ever site containing detailed information on federal grants and contracts. Other initiatives dealt with opening the internal deliberations and activities of the Senate to greater outside scrutiny, including on earmarks and conference reports.

Throughout his eight-year tenure as President of the United States, Obama and other administration officials routinely touted the various benefits of open government and transparency for America. Among other things, the “Transparency and Open Government” memorandum, which the White House issued on the first full day of the Obama presidency, pledged the administration’s commitment to the prompt disclosure to the public of information about governmental operations and decisions.<sup>63</sup> This memorandum resulted in the Open Government Initiative of May 2009, which called upon the public to submit ideas on how to help make the national government more transparent, participatory, and collaborative.<sup>64</sup> The Open Government Directive followed in December 2009. It required most federal departments and agencies to undertake steps to open government, such as by placing information on a centralized government data platform and creating and institutionalizing a culture of open government.<sup>65</sup> It is also the inspiration for the administration’s three Open Government National Action Plans. The 2011 National Action Plan identifies a variety of transparency initiatives across three open government themes – increasing public integrity, managing public resources more efficiently, and improving public services. Among them are measures to facilitate the declassification of information held by government agencies, increased transparency of government spending, and the expansion of Data.gov, which is a portal to make government information (mostly in the form of large data sets) easily available to the general public in a timely and usable manner. The 2013 National Action Plan continues earlier initiatives and adds new ones, such as increasing the transparency of the Intelligence Community’s (IC) surveillance activities. The third and final National Action Plan, issued in 2015, is by far the most ambitious. It has seven new themes, several of which are transparency specific, such as Access to Information and Fiscal Transparency, and others that contain transparency mandates. It also includes various measures germane to America’s foreign relations, including greater transparency of U.S. foreign aid programs and U.S. trade policy and trade negotiations.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the administration published occasional National Action Plan “progress” and “end of term” reports.<sup>67</sup>

While civil libertarians and open government advocates applauded these steps, they also criticized the Obama administration for a lack of transparency on national security-related matters. In response, the administration took steps to counter charges of excessive secrecy by disclosing details about its use of drone strikes against suspected terrorists, for example, and it did so by invoking the common themes of good governance and America leading by example. Citing the president’s commitment to the American people to be



“as transparent as possible”<sup>68</sup> about U.S. counterterrorism operations and for the purpose of enhancing public confidence, setting standards for other countries to follow, and countering terrorist propaganda, in 2013 the administration issued a Presidential Policy Guidance that established standards for the use of lethal force against terrorist targets in areas where the U.S. military is not directly engaged in active hostilities, such as Yemen. Further, in 2016, the White House issued an executive order for the purpose of ensuring greater transparency and accountability about the uses of force, which included the disclosure of data on the number of drone strikes against terrorist targets and resulting casualties in these areas.<sup>69</sup> In a complementary presidential memorandum, President Obama affirmed the “importance of transparency and [his] commitment to making as much information as possible”<sup>70</sup> about U.S. military operations available to Congress and the American people. It also calls on the heads of government agencies and departments to issue to the president annual reports on the legal and policy frameworks that serve as the basis of national security operations involving the use of force – with the expectation that these reports would be made available to the public. In the first report, which appeared in December 2016, Obama reiterated that transparency about U.S. military operations abroad is necessary to ensure democratic decision making and legitimize U.S. counterterrorism operations in the eyes of the American people and the world.<sup>71</sup> These steps followed Obama’s 2013 decision to authorize the declassification of information related to the lethal drone strike against the American terrorist Anwar Awlaki, the chief of external operations of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and three others, to “facilitate transparency and debate” on the issue of drone strikes that target American terrorist operating outside the United States.<sup>72</sup> Though some aspects of counterterrorism remained highly secretive, due to national security imperatives, Obama insists that, as president, he had begun to repair the excessive secrecy that beset America’s counterterrorism policies and gave “highest priority” to “creating strong systems of transparency, accountability, and oversight” in all branches of the national government.<sup>73</sup>

Obama’s preference for transparency measures to advance his political agenda at times fell short of his own standards, however. Obama had reservations about the usefulness of an open and transparent process to advance health care reform, for instance. Though he preferred “an open and transparent process as possible”<sup>74</sup> on crafting a health care reform bill, such as hearings broadcast on C-Span so that “the American people can see what the choices are,” Obama nonetheless backed away, heeding his chief of staff’s advice that such a plan was “stupid.”<sup>75</sup> To succeed, the negotiation of health care reform indeed required “backroom deals,” Obama admitted, in retrospect, but he insists that at no time had he “gone over to the dark side.”<sup>76</sup>

### ***Open government and transparency abroad***

The Obama administration's open government and transparency record abroad has two major strands. One is the International Open Government Partnership (OGP). An outgrowth of the administration's domestic initiatives, the OGP seeks to promote open government and transparency among liberal democracies and countries transitioning to democracy. The other is efforts by the administration to institutionalize cooperative transparency in international agreements on pressing global issues for the purposes of confidence building and verification and, relatedly, building stronger, bilateral, strategic partnerships with major powers, such as China, in areas of shared interests.

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a prime example of the Obama administration's commitment to America's leading by example.<sup>77</sup> The OGP is meant to do for the global community of liberal democracies what the Obama administration Open Government Initiative sought to do for America – that is, enhance government performance and thereby build public confidence in democracy through transparency, participation, and collaboration. The OGP takes its inspiration from the liberal idea that democratic countries form a special global community and share a set of values that guide policymaking. Included in the administration's national security strategy under the banner of "American Leadership in the World,"<sup>78</sup> Obama championed the OGP's as fundamental to good governance and human freedom.<sup>79</sup> Unveiled in 2011, the OGP calls upon governments of states to "become sustainably more transparent, more accountable, and more responsive to their own citizens" and develop a "collaborative governance model" of shared power involving government and civil society.<sup>80</sup> The Open Government Declaration commits countries to four goals: (1) ensuring that citizens have access to a wealth of information about government activities; (2) supporting civic participation in government decision making and policy formulation; (3) requiring among government officials the highest levels of professional integrity as a hedge against corruption; and (4) harnessing and increasing access to new technologies to ensure openness and accountability.<sup>81</sup> Though the starting points toward open government are different for each country, all member countries nonetheless affirm the values of openness and transparency and commit themselves to working with their citizens to advance them. Participation in the OGP requires candidate countries to meet the Minimum Eligibility Criteria<sup>82</sup> and adopt a government-civil society action plan.<sup>83</sup> The Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) assesses whether OGP countries are meeting their open government commitments.

The Obama administration touted the OGP's many achievements. Membership grew from eight countries in 2011 to 75 in 2017. Also, by 2017, these countries made over 2,500 commitments to promote open and accountable government; all 75 had issued at least one National Action Plan, some

had issued a second, and the United States issued its third. Civil society networks grew in number, strength, and variety. Oftentimes led by these networks and national governments, member countries routinely shared with one another open government best practices. By the end of the Obama presidency, the IRM has added a monitoring function that made it possible for observers to track countries' compliance with their National Action Plan commitments. The OGP's open government initiatives also extended to the sub-national level of government in many participating countries.

In addition to working with other liberal democracies to promote open government and transparency at the national and sub-national levels of government, the Obama administration's national security strategy recognized transparency as a critical component of its ambition to lead the world in finding solutions to pressing global challenges. On nuclear nonproliferation, international trade, and climate change, Obama and other administration officials declared that America must lead by example.

On the matter of preventing nuclear proliferation, early on in his presidency Obama initiated steps to disclose more information about the U.S.'s nuclear weapons capabilities. In 2010, the administration issued the *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (NPR), the first such review by the United States since the end of the Cold War. The NPR spells out U.S. deterrence policy, strategy, and force posture and details the Obama administration's plan for reducing nuclear risks.<sup>84</sup> Transparency is prominently featured in two of the report's five objectives – maintaining strategic deterrence and stability at reduced nuclear force levels, and preventing nuclear proliferation and terrorism. First, the NPR says nuclear transparency is necessary for building mutual confidence and maintaining strategic stability between the U.S. and two other nuclear weapons states, Russia and China. As the U.S. and Russia contemplate even deeper reductions in nuclear capabilities beyond those attained under the Treaty of Moscow<sup>85</sup> and the New Start treaty,<sup>86</sup> the NPR points out that new verification and transparency provisions – both formal and informal – are critical to ensuring continued stability and predictability in the U.S.-Russia strategic relationship. The administration sees the U.S.-Russia relationship as a template for sorts for a possible U.S.-China strategic relationship. Though critical of China's lack of nuclear transparency, the reports calls for the opening of a U.S.-China dialogue on strategic stability, the goal of which is to “enhance confidence, improve transparency, and reduce mistrust.”<sup>87</sup> The NPR further maintains that, if successful, the administration's quest for China to be more transparent about its nuclear capabilities and intentions will improve U.S.-China security cooperation generally and serve as a signal of China's commitment to working within the existing international order.<sup>88</sup> Second, transparency is crucial to preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. Among the administration's various initiatives to this end are investments in new verification technologies and transparency measures to detect illicit

nuclear activities, as well as international cooperation to ensure closer scrutiny of the nuclear activities of so-called “countries of concern.” The administration maintained that progress toward both of these major objectives will help advance the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons, a pledge Obama made in a major speech in Prague in 2009.

The report also underscores the importance of American leadership, reasoning that, by reducing the role and number of its own nuclear weapons, the United States can place itself in a very strong position vis-à-vis other NPT countries to strengthen the global nonproliferation regime and secure nuclear weapons worldwide. This theme helps explain why, in conjunction with the publication of the report, the Obama administration announced that U.S. nuclear weapons would not be used against non-nuclear threats and publicized details about the American nuclear arsenal for the purpose of setting both “a standard for the rest of the world, including China, to be more transparent about their nuclear weapons programs” and “an example of transparency that will be helpful” to arms control efforts worldwide.<sup>89</sup> Publicity surrounding the NPR and reductions to the nuclear arsenal came on the heels of the first-ever Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, D.C., in which the United States and representatives of 46 countries agreed to a 12-point non-binding communiqué that identified nuclear terrorism as a grave threat to international security.<sup>90</sup>

For Obama, America’s nuclear transparency and the Iran nuclear deal are two sides of the same coin. By disclosing details about America’s shrinking nuclear arsenal, Obama reasoned that the United States fortified its global leadership role of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, it held that these steps lent legitimacy to the United States’ determination to reign in Iran’s illicit nuclear activities, which include compelling Iran to accept very close scrutiny of its nuclear facilities, capabilities, and activities. Signed in July 2015 and the product of years of contentious negotiations between Iran and the P5 + 1 group (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a grand bargain that requires Iran to dismantle its entire nuclear weapons-related programs and reduce its supply of enriched uranium by 98% and limit enrichment to 3.67%. In return, the P5 + 1 agreed to lift all United Nations sanctions imposed on Iran for its illegal nuclear activities, including its advanced enrichment of uranium. Moreover, all facets of Iran’s nuclear activities are subject to disclosure, and monitoring and inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The JCPOA permits the IAEA to inspect and monitor Iran’s production and inventories of uranium iron ore, as well as the ore’s transfer to legal uranium conversion facilities throughout the country and all aspects of the uranium supply chain. The deal requires Iran to place in storage all but 5,000 or so of its first-generation uranium centrifuges and disclose all information

requested of it about them. It requires Iran to allow the IAEA to continuously monitor all of Iran's centrifuges storage facilities, and grants the IAEA regular access to all buildings at the underground nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz where, for years, Iran had secretly pursued advanced uranium enrichment activities, as well as any site IAEA inspectors deem suspicious. The agreement says that for a period of 15 years, the IAEA is granted "continuous monitoring, including through containment and surveillance measures, as necessary" to verify that banned centrifuges and related infrastructure remain in storage. Cameras will provide 24-hour surveillance of the Natanz uranium enrichment facility and, says one expert, "Iran will permit the IAEA regular access, including daily access as required by the IAEA, to relevant buildings" at Natanz. Also, "round-the-clock monitoring" includes electronic seals and "other IAEA approved and certified modern technologies."<sup>91</sup> All of Iran's research and development activities related to uranium isotope separation are also subject to IAEA monitoring, and all of Iran's plutonium-related nuclear activities are similarly controlled and surveilled. Furthermore, working with international partners, the Obama administration pursued various measures to track Iran's efforts to obtain dual-use technology, focusing on greater transparency of nuclear-related financial transactions worldwide.<sup>92</sup> The JCPOA has built into it a one-year "break-out time" (up from three months before the agreement), which many in the arms control community consider sufficient for the U.S. to take decisive action before Iran would have enough highly-enriched uranium to produce a single nuclear warhead. In exchange, the international community gains high confidence that, at least for the next thirteen to fifteen years, Iran will not pose a nuclear threat.

The Obama administration deemed the JCPOA's transparency provisions critical to keeping Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon for years to come. Obama declared "unprecedented" the deal's transparency provisions. "Iran has . . . agreed to the most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime ever negotiated for any nuclear program in history," he declared. "So this deal is not based on trust, it's based on unprecedented verification."<sup>93</sup> Obama also said the Iran nuclear deal would strengthen the global nonproliferation regime by spurring research and development of new verification technologies and techniques and encouraging nuclear weapons states to strengthen their commitment to nuclear disarmament, such as by reducing their nuclear weapons stockpiles, signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and increasing nuclear transparency.

The Obama administration also gave high priority in its domestic and foreign policies to addressing climate change. True to form, Obama asserted that American leadership on climate change abroad starts at home with steps to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and to this end his administration set ambitious fuel economy standards for automobiles (the National Fuel

Efficiency Policy) and sharp cuts to carbon dioxide pollution produced from power plants (the Clean Power Plan). With these initiatives in hand, the Obama administration sought to assert American leadership globally in the negotiation of a binding, international climate change agreement. A call for other countries to significantly reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, Obama maintains, required America to lead by example and put in place domestic legislation. The administration adopted a target to reduce its national greenhouse gas emissions, what the treaty refers to as an intended nationally determined contribution (INDC), and it agreed to update its INDC every five years with increasingly ambitious emission reduction targets. The Obama administration pledged the United States would reduce its greenhouse gas emissions 17% below the 2005 level by 2020 and between 26 to 28% below the 2005 level by 2025. Critical to the administration's climate change policy was its stance on emissions transparency – that is, the creation of a mechanism to verify countries' compliance with their emission reduction targets. At the Copenhagen conference in 2009, Obama called on all countries to accept the establishment of a verification system that included both the self-reporting of emissions reductions data and the independent auditing of that data. Obama made a direct appeal to China and India, two leading emitters that opposed transparency. On the one hand, he sought to reassure them, saying monitoring “measures need not be intrusive, or infringe upon sovereignty.” On the other hand, he reasoned that these measures “must . . . ensure that an accord is credible, and that we are living up to our obligations. For without such accountability, any agreement would be empty words on a page.”<sup>94</sup> Obama won a commitment from developed and developing countries alike, including China and India, for the sharing of information about “national actions and mechanisms” to combat climate change, as well as “national communications, with provisions for international consultations and analysis under clearly defined guidelines.” Although this language fell short of the administration's expectations, the Copenhagen Accord represented a “first important step toward true transparency and accountability in an international climate agreement,”<sup>95</sup> because it provided for a system “to regularly know whether or not countries are making progress toward their [emissions reduction] commitments.”<sup>96</sup> Discussions about how transparency would be made operational followed and resulted in the establishment of two transparency mechanisms. The International Assessment and Review (IAR) requires developed countries to issue biennial reports and enhance reporting in national communications related to their progress in achieving emission reductions.<sup>97</sup> The International Consultations and Analysis (ICA) provides for measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) of the emissions of developing countries.<sup>98</sup>

At the Paris Climate Change Conference, in November of 2015, the Obama administration aired its objections to a differentiated transparency regime, arguing, as it had unsuccessfully at previous climate change conferences, that

the goal ought to be a common transparency mechanism, whereby all countries – developed and developing – would provide the same set of information in several key areas, especially inventories of greenhouse gas emissions and reporting on actions to meet national pledges to reduce emissions. Though the Paris Agreement did not include a common transparency mechanism, it affirmed the goal of eventually putting one in place. To this end, countries established the Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency, which aims to strengthen institutions within developing countries for reporting compliance information, and it also obligates developing countries to assist developing countries in building their capacities to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, including information gathering and the use of technology, in the form of a 100 USD billion fund. Obama accepted the compromise, stating that the deal has “a strong system of transparency, including periodic reviews and independent assessments, to help hold every country accountable for meeting its commitments,”<sup>99</sup> one that, over time, he predicted, would improve as technology advances. Furthermore, the president heralded the treaty as an affirmation of American global leadership and a victory for both the global environment and a world that is safer and more secure, prosperous, and free.

Transparency also featured in the Obama administration’s economic foreign policy. As president, Obama championed free trade, arguing that lower barriers to trade between the United States and other countries would, among other things, add jobs at home, lower prices for American consumers, and promote innovation in the American economy and the economies of its trade partners. Early on in his administration, Obama endorsed the creation of the world’s single-largest free trade zone, one that would further integrate the economies of twelve countries on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, many of which are, like the United States, developed, liberal democracies. In October 2015, after seven years of negotiations, the twelve signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The TPP proved to be a nonstarter, however. Opposition to free trade in the United States – on the right and the left – surged as the negotiations played out. More prescient, Obama hoped that by including into the negotiating process a wide range of civil society and private sector groups in an advisory capacity, the final deal would serve as a model of his open government mandate to promote transparency, participation, and collaboration, and thereby win the endorsement of a broad cross section of the American people. Indeed, early on Obama underscored his administration’s commitment to “ensuring the maximum possible transparency throughout the negotiations.” Once negotiations reached their successful conclusion, moreover, Obama promised the American people that they would “be able to look at every comma and period and semicolon in this deal,”<sup>100</sup> having already claimed that the administration had taken unprecedented steps to increase the openness and transparency of trade negotiations.<sup>101</sup> This thinking backfired. Critics

determined that by restricting information about the trade deal's negotiations to key stakeholders only, the administration had in fact double-crossed the American people to the benefit of nefarious special interests. With good reason, however, the Obama administration referred to the TPP "the most progressive trade deal in history" and its "transparency standards [as] the strongest . . . of any trade Agreement in history."<sup>102</sup> The text of the treaty explicitly addresses transparency. Chapter 26, Section B, titled "Transparency," declared that all twelve countries must "promptly publish" "laws, regulations, procedures and administrative rulings" on treaty-specific matters "in a manner that enables interested persons and Parties to become acquainted with them." Further, "to the extent possible," all twelve signatory countries are called upon to publicize, in advance, such information and give one another – as well as corporations and non-governmental groups, for instance – "a reasonable opportunity" to comment on them. Countries are required to publicize this information in an official journal or website. The TPP's transparency provisions also allow affected parties "a reasonable opportunity" to comment on countries' trade-related administrative actions before final decisions are taken on them. Finally, each country is obliged to inform other countries when it has reasons to believe they will be "material[ly] affect[ed]" by measures it executes under the treaty, and to give affected countries ample opportunity to ask questions with the clear expectation that information and answers will be provided to them "promptly."<sup>103</sup>

Obama's open government and transparency agenda abroad is also evident in the United States' bilateral relations. There is no better example than the Obama administration's calls for China to be more open and transparent on a wide range of matters affecting Sino-American relations. Whereas, under the George W. Bush administration, appeals for China to be more open and transparent functioned largely as a political weapon to cast doubt on China's motives and intentions, especially on military-security matters, the Obama administration framed its appeals as a challenge or test of China's readiness to assume a leadership role in international affairs. For instance, in December 2013, the White House praised an understanding reached by Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping that their two countries intended to work more closely together to ensure "energy market transparency and security." Specifically, Obama framed Xi's decision that China would agree to America's request that it report detailed energy statistics on a frequent basis as affirmation of China's willingness to assume partial responsibility for reducing global oil price volatility.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, in September 2015, Obama and Xi issued a special Joint Presidential Statement on Climate Change in which, among other things, both countries pledged to put in place an "enhanced transparency system"<sup>105</sup> for building trust and confidence (between them and among all countries) pertaining to each signatory state's compliance with their greenhouse gas emissions targets. At the Paris Summit later that year, Obama



represented the United States and China as partners in advancing the shared goal of a low-carbon global economy. Obama observed that, by agreeing at Paris to greater transparency about its greenhouse gas emissions, China had affirmed its commitment to world leadership on combating climate change. Chinese officials frequently expressed reticence about Obama's transparency initiatives, however, and were highly sensitive to charges that China had not gone far enough in its disclosing information about emissions. Yet they nevertheless regularly affirmed their commitment to greater transparency in the bilateral relationship and international relations generally. For its part, the Obama administration interpreted this development favorably, as an affirmation of China's willingness to assume greater responsibility for managing the existing international order as opposed to it either shirking responsibility or challenging and possibly upending the order altogether.

### ***Criticisms of Obama's open government and transparency initiatives***

Various criticisms have been lodged against the Obama administration's open government and transparency initiatives, and the most damaging have had to do with how deficiencies in them at home have undermined American legitimacy abroad.

Perhaps the most problematic criticism is that Obama simply failed to deliver on its promise of more open and transparent government at home. The administration did make plain early on that open government is neither "unqualified" nor "unconditional" and "must not be misunderstood as a blind pursuit of transparency for transparency's sake."<sup>106</sup> Further, it reasoned that the goal of more robust democracy and a more efficient government also means protecting competing values and interests such as national security, the needs of law enforcement, and privacy, which require government secrecy.<sup>107</sup> In this larger context, the administration's record is at best "mixed."<sup>108</sup> The Obama administration is given some credit for prioritizing open government and putting in place well-intended initiatives to promote transparency, participation, and collaboration. Yet it is criticized for its routine use of well-established government secrecy practices, such as the overclassification of government information, the routine denial of Freedom of Information Act requests, and limited media access to the president. They were especially censorious of the administration's more egregious secrecy practices. For instance, the Department of Justice used the Espionage Act of 1917 to pursue a record-breaking number of prosecutions of government employees and contractors for "leaking" classified information and threatening to imprison a journalist for refusing to disclose his sources for leaked information. Open government advocates lambasted the administration's decision to withhold intelligence information from Congress on the use of harsh interrogation practices (during the George W. Bush presidency), such as

waterboarding and CIA drone strikes against suspected terrorists.<sup>109</sup> Further, critics say the Obama administration dragged its heels on disclosing to Congressional leaders the depth and breadth of National Security Agency (NSA) domestic electronic surveillance, which resulted in federal court rulings against the administration.<sup>110</sup> On international trade, Obama's opponents on the left and the right were incensed with the administration for having limited the government's information sharing about the TPP negotiations to members of domestic advisory groups, both business and labor, and for having restricted access among members of Congress to the text of the treaty. After the Iran nuclear deal came into effect, Republicans alleged that the Obama administration allowed a "veil of diplomacy" to obscure from Congress Iran's technical violations of some aspects of the JCPOA for the purpose of keeping the deal from unraveling. In sum, critics maintain that, where it mattered most, President Obama did not come close to fully delivering on his open government and transparency pledges at home.

A second criticism follows from the first. If the Obama administration's record on open government and transparency is indeed mixed, then America is hardly leading by example – at least in a way President Obama imagined. When it comes to the United States promoting universal values abroad, other countries are quick to charge it with hypocrisy. Such has been the case for decades on a range of foreign policy issues, and Obama's open government and transparency agenda abroad is essentially no different. The candor with which Obama has looked critically on the United States failing to live up to its cherished, liberal values, critics contend, is no panacea for the administration's own secrecy practices. If the United States finds reasons to block open government and withhold information from the American people, such as by invoking national security, then it is compromising its legitimacy in the eyes of other countries. The irony here is that the Obama administration perhaps set the wrong example for other countries to follow. Moreover, to the extent Obama's mixed record on open government and transparency has inspired others to follow America's lead, critics maintain it is not as unclear as to how, if at all, America's open government and transparency practices have positively affected the behavior of other countries and impacted international relations. China is credited with modest progress in its transparency practices at home and abroad, for instance, but even here the Obama administration concedes that China has a long march ahead of it to catch up with the United States and the liberal democratic world and that China's transparency practices are also inspired by factors that have nothing to do with American pressure. For its part, moreover, China interprets America's calls for it to be more open and transparent – with its people and the rest of the world – as blatantly hypocritical and a gross, if not indecent, violation of its sovereignty.<sup>111</sup>

Another criticism says Obama's open government and transparency agenda does not serve the national interest. The administration is faulted for signing

off on major international agreements that lack the required transparency provisions that some believe are necessary to prevent other countries from cheating, which, if serious enough, might jeopardize the national security of the United States. Critics site many examples. Among the various reasons for their strident opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, Republicans in Congress criticized the administration for failing to secure “round-the-clock” monitoring of all elements of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, and that the agreement does not prevent Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons capability clandestinely. The Obama administration’s responses – the deal’s transparency provisions are unprecedented, “round-the-clock” monitoring is unnecessary to verify Iran’s compliance with its treaty obligations, and the IAEA has the authority to demand access to any suspicious site, which Iran can delay for no more than 24 days<sup>112</sup> – are cold comfort for its critics, given Iran’s history of skirting its obligations under the NPT. Interestingly, Congressional Republicans championed their own measures vis-à-vis Iran, two transparency bills targeting Iran’s financing of terrorism and the financial holdings of Iranian political leadership, in response to the perceived shortcomings in the JCPOA’s transparency measures. Partly related to the Iran nuclear deal, critics allege that Obama’s decision to unilaterally disclose information about the American nuclear stockpile and declare the United States would no longer use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear threats did not serve the national interest – and might have jeopardized it.

Similarly, the Obama administration also came under fire for the failing to secure an intrusive and universal emissions transparency scheme in the Paris climate treaty. Though they welcomed the agreement, environmentalists expressed disappointment that Obama did not manage to have included in the treaty a common transparency mechanism to verify that all countries are indeed meeting their emissions targets. Intent on blocking the deal and America’s compliance with its emission reduction target, climate change skeptics concluded that the less stringent transparency requirements for developing countries left the door wide open for countries like China to cheat as developed countries, like the United States, fulfilled their reporting requirements at the cost of higher energy prices and lower levels of economic growth.

A slightly different criticism has been lodged against Obama’s handling of the negotiations of the TPP. The Obama administration viewed the TPP – its negotiation and the treaty itself – as fulfilling its national security goal of strengthening the American economy. The emphasis on transparency – again, in the treaty’s negotiation and its various provisions – was intended to lend credence to Obama’s assertion that America’s global leadership begins at home.<sup>113</sup> Consequently, the failure of the TPP to gain traction with the American people problematized Obama’s national security strategy and the importance of transparency in it. Had the American people had better information about the TPP during its negotiation, critics allege, greater pressure

would have been brought to bear on the administration to bargain harder for a deal more favorable to the United States. On the flip side, critics also allege that the administration poorly served the national interests by being too forthcoming with sensitive national security matters. Obama made promoting greater transparency of America's nuclear arsenal a top priority.

A final criticism address the connections Obama made between his open government and transparency agenda and the liberal international order. The central purpose of open government and transparency at home and abroad is to revitalize and extend the liberal international order, which for Obama is a national security imperative because, with America at the helm, this order will continue to yield major dividends for the United States (and the world). Yet the notion that this order is sustainable is in doubt. Neoconservative foreign policy scholars insist this order is at risk because more and more foreign policy elites question whether the big investments that are necessary to maintain it are forthcoming.<sup>114</sup> For foreign policy realists, however, the looming demise of the American-led, liberal international order is not a function of America's willingness to make hard choices. It has to do instead with America's relative decline in material capabilities, such that the national interest compels it to scale back – even abandon – its provision of public goods and sacrifice the mantle of global leadership. Obama's liberal internationalism rejects these lines of thinking, of course, arguing that the American people and their leaders are committed to their country's leadership role abroad and that America's hard power remains formidable. As noted above, Obama's thinking about the dynamics of world power borrows from Nye's insight that power dynamics are indicative of the rise of others – and not the decline of America. Moreover, the deft use of the right mix of hard and soft power – what Nye calls smart power, can sustain the liberal order and American global leadership for some time to come.<sup>115</sup> In this formulation, therefore, open government and transparency is a critical component of America's legitimacy in the eyes of others and, therefore, America's ability to lead the world, which has its taproot in Obama's political liberalism.

### **Open government and transparency under Trump and Biden**

Open government and transparency debates have informed the presidencies of Obama's successors. Yet, whereas Trump has largely rejected Obama's logic that openness and transparency are critical to American national security, Biden has for the most part embraced it.

President Trump deem his government open and transparent. Yet his administration rejected the notion that open government and transparency at home sets an example for others and, therefore, demonstrates America's global leadership. Instead, to the extent it matters at all, America's legitimacy abroad, its guiding light, emanates from putting "America First" and the

patriotism of the American people, who exercise their liberties, in a strong, secure, prosperous, and sovereign republic. Not to be outdone by his predecessor in the White House, in May 2019 President Trump claim for himself the title of the “most transparent president”<sup>116</sup> in the history of the republic. Perhaps the Trump administration’s most publicized policy initiative is its June 2019 executive order on transparency in health care. In an effort to foster greater competition and lower health care costs to consumers, the president mandated that medical and insurance providers must “disclose real prices”<sup>117</sup> for their services, arguing that the complexities of the current pricing system complicate the ability of consumers to make accurate estimates of their out-of-pocket medical expenses, which means that they could end up paying more for health care and contributing to price inflation. The administration also pointed to its declassification of government documents to affirm its commitment to open government and transparency. Likewise, in February 2018, Trump and top administration officials pledged their support for the disclosure of a classified House Intelligence Committee memo alleging bias on the part of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in its examination of Russia’s alleged involvement on the president’s behalf during the 2016 presidential election. The White House chief-of-staff at the time, John Kelly, stated that “the president . . . wants everything out, so the American people can make up their own minds, and if there’s people to be held accountable, then so be it.” Vice President Mike Pence echoed the president and Kelly, affirming the administration’s commitment to the principle of “the public’s right to know” about possible misdeeds by high-ranking FBI officials.<sup>118</sup>

Other examples stretch incredulity, however. Referring to the call as “perfect” and that he had “nothing to hide,” in November 2019 President Trump made much of his decision to disclose the not-verbatim transcript of the his now infamous phone conversation with the President of Ukraine in which he asked Volodymyr Zelensky to “do us a favor” and launch an investigation into alleged corruption involving dealings by his political rival, Joe Biden, and his son Hunter Biden with Borisma Holdings, a Ukrainian energy production and exploration company.<sup>119</sup> The White House also has cited the frequency with which the president takes to his Twitter feed and his willingness to engage the media in impromptu press appearances as examples of his accessibility to the public and the media. Ironically, the president’s opponents marvel at the president’s claims to openness and transparency, and especially his brazen and highly-publicized requests for Russia (during the 2016 campaign) and China (during the 2020 campaign) to share dirt they might have on his political opponents. For them, the president’s corruption is entirely out in the open.

Independent, open government-advocacy organizations voiced skepticism of the Trump White House’s claim that the president is a patron of open government and transparency, claiming the administration did not abide by

established policies and practices that require executive branch agencies – and the White House itself – to make government more open and transparent. Specifically, critics point to the Trump administration’s lackluster response to Freedom of Information Act (FIOA) requests.<sup>120</sup> In the year 2018, for instance, federal government agencies either rejected public information requests or redacted disclosed documents in numbers higher than at any year of the Obama administration.<sup>121</sup> The White House also allegedly obstructed Congress’ right to classified information.<sup>122</sup> Under Trump, the United States lagged in its implementation of its open government commitments as set out in the Obama administration’s Third National Action Plan of 2017 – so much so that “U.S. performance under the third action plan resulted in backsliding toward less open government.”<sup>123</sup> The Trump administration also missed the deadline for its issuing the United States’ fourth action plan – though originally expected in August 2017 and after repeated delays, it released the five-page memo a full year and a half later, in February 2019.<sup>124, 125</sup>

In other areas of international relations under President Obama where transparency featured prominently, the Trump administration reversed course. By announcing its withdrawal from the Paris climate treaty, the United States rescinded its pledge to report information on its greenhouse gas emissions, which, for Obama, was a major selling point of the treaty because, for the first time, it obligated other major emitters, China and India specifically, to report their emissions. Likewise, President Trump withdrew the United States’ participation in the P5 + 1 deal that strictly limits Iran’s nuclear activities and, by all estimates, contains unprecedented transparency measures. The Trump administration has also scaled back the Obama administration’s disclosures on the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

In addition, while acknowledging that all presidents have struggled with them, one critic captures the consensus among open government advocates that open government and transparency in the Trump administration fell short: “The Trump administration from the top down hasn’t had an affirmative embrace of the public’s right to know unless it has been specifically attached to the president’s political interests.” The more accurate reading of the president’s record rests instead on his “weaponization of the rhetoric of transparency and accountability in good government and corruption” for political gain, such that he serves as both the judge and jury in accessing the executive branch’s (including the White House) performance.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, another prominent critic writes that the Trump administration has weakened democracy and the “right to know” principle – and thus undermined American global standing – because of the egregious behavior of federal security forces it deployed to Portland, Oregon, in July 2020, to defend the federal court house there from attack by protestors. “When paramilitary-style units have no identifying insignia,” and apprehend and detain people, writes Roger Cohen, “there is no transparency, no accountability – and that means

impunity. Democracy dies.” This sentiment also found adherents abroad. A “catastrophe” is how some German elites have interpreted this authoritarian turn in America’s national political life under President Trump.<sup>127</sup>

Unlike its predecessor, moreover, the Trump administration made no connection between open government and transparency at home and abroad as a matter of national security. Pillar IV of President Trump’s 2017 *National Security Strategy* outlines the administration’s efforts to spread American influence abroad by, among other things, serving as a “champion of American values.”<sup>128</sup> Underscoring the central place of liberty, equality, and the rule of law in American life, these stated values are the civil and political rights established in the U.S. Bill of Rights, specifically religious freedom. To defend these rights abroad, the administration committed itself to a range of tools – diplomacy and economic sanctions – to target and punish autocrats who suppress individual rights and liberties in their countries. Defeating terrorists, empowering women and children, advocating on behalf of persecuted religious minorities, and reducing human suffering through humanitarian assistance are the administration’s various “priority actions.” No mention is given to the promotion of open government and transparency at home and abroad. Nye takes strong objection to the stated importance of values in Trump’s strategy, however. He argues American soft power has “eroded” under President Trump. Those abroad find America increasingly *unattractive* as a model. Indeed, top administration officials, no less than former chief-of-staff Mick Mulvaney, dismissed the importance of soft power in American foreign policy when he explained away the deep cuts proposed by the White House for the State Department as indicative of the administration’s commitment to a “hard power budget.”<sup>129</sup>

Interestingly, however, Trump’s national security strategy did represent America as an example for others. The mantra of Trump’s foreign policy is “America First.” For Trump, putting America’s interests first *is* leading by example. As the former president stated before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, “wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first.” Doing so is the basis of peaceful international relations, he declared, because states interact with one another as “strong, sovereign partners who control their own destinies,”<sup>130</sup> as opposed to semi-sovereign states that depend on one another for their own security and prosperity. With this as a guiding principle, peaceful international relations, he declared, is rooted in nationalism, what he calls the vision of “patriots” the world over – not in the liberal internationalist vision of Obama-style “globalists.” Finally, though some of his foreign policy choices affirmed it, write Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, “Trump remained ideologically and temperamentally committed to *unraveling* American-led international order”<sup>131</sup> and bargained that the U.S. would be better off pursuing a set of bilateral arrangements and relying on American hard power. Nonetheless, the

Trump presidency, they argue, is more a consequence of the “process of hegemonic unraveling” that exposes the “weakening [of] the American international system.”<sup>132</sup>

President Joseph Biden has resuscitated the core elements of President Obama’s thinking about open government and transparency in relation to American global leadership and the liberal international order. Candidate Biden asserted that restoring American leadership on the world stage starts with enhancing security, prosperity, and values at home. Among other things, the notion that America will lead by the power of its example – and not just by the example of its power – translated into campaign promises to strengthen American democracy, such as steps to improve transparency and accountability in government generally and the country’s campaign finance system in particular.<sup>133</sup> The foreign policy companion of this pledge committed Biden, if elected, to convene a conference of the world democracies for the purpose of these countries working together to strengthening their shared, democratic institutions against rising illiberal forces and democratic backsliding. Biden also declared that advancing his pledge to seek greater transparency of America’s campaign finance system would give weight to his call for European democracies to sign The Pledge for Election Integrity, which likewise commit them to campaign finance transparency. The importance of this issue is based on public opinion polling throughout the West that the decline in support for democratic institutions stems in no small part from the corrupting influence of “big money” in elections. Indeed, the notion that the best response of the world’s democracies to internal and external threats to good governance is “more openness, not less”<sup>134</sup> served as a core theme of candidate Biden’s foreign policy vision.

This same thinking has featured prominently in the early months of the Biden presidency. Biden repeated the “leading by the power of America’s example” theme in his inaugural address and in his speech, one month later, at the (virtual) Munich Security Conference.<sup>135</sup> He also acted to advance campaign pledges on open government and transparency to strengthen American democracy.<sup>136</sup> For instance, a February 2021 presidential memorandum identified transparency as one of six principles guiding the administration’s initiative to strengthen the operations of the country’s foreign and national security policy institutions.<sup>137</sup> President Biden lent his unequivocal support for H.R.1., the For The People Act of 2021, calling it an essential and urgent piece of legislation to better assure free, fair, and uncorruptible elections in the United States.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps most telling, in his first press conference as president Biden identified the goal of restoring “dignity, honor, honesty, [and] transparency to the American political system”<sup>139</sup> as one of the three reasons why he ran for president, which, he continued, is necessary for securing liberal democracy in America and abroad against the challenges posed to it by illiberal, autocratic regimes that have a very



different vision of international order in the twenty-first century world.<sup>140</sup> Jen Psaki, Biden's press secretary, set the tone for the new administration's priorities when, in her first news briefing several months prior stated that "the power of the United States" rests, in part on "the importance of setting an example of engagement and transparency."<sup>141</sup>

Needless to say, Biden's pledge to open government and transparency at home and abroad has generated criticism. Some of it is trite,<sup>142</sup> but others underscore tensions between transparency and accountability, and the extent to which the Biden administration intends to prioritize open government and transparency abroad compared to other interests. For instance, the new administration has been applauded for declassifying an intelligence report on the murder of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, which directly implicates the country's crown prince. Yet those who welcomed the move also expressed disappointment that the disclosure included neither a public admonition of the crown prince nor an announcement of some sort of recalibration of US policy toward the kingdom. In effect, transparency without accountability is a missed opportunity for the new administration to reassert global leadership in a manner consistent with its values.<sup>143</sup> Biden has also come under pressure to call out the left-wing populist president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, for his efforts to gut Mexico's freedom of information institute, which is considered as keystone achievement in Mexico's consolidation of democracy that followed the end of one party rule in 2002 and features prominently in Mexico's free trade agreement with the U.S. and Canada.<sup>144</sup> For their part, top administration officials have echoed Biden's claim that engagement with the world – and especially its democratic allies – is vital to America's national security. In their first overseas trip as Biden administration officials, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin affirmed that America and its two closest Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and South Korea, "stand together in support of democratic values," share a common commitment to ensuring that the region is "free and open," and are determined to stand up to countries, like China, that seek to challenge the liberal international order. They referred to these bilateral and multilateral relations as "force multipliers" that enable America to lead the world by the power of its example.<sup>145</sup>

## Conclusion

Scholars typically characterize the American liberal international order as combining open economic arrangements, international institutions in which states are valued stakeholders and American power is constrained, and shared liberal values and representative government. As for the latter, there has emerged in recent time among the world's liberal democracies a normative commitment to open government and transparency.

This paper demonstrates why the Obama administration advanced open government and transparency as a critical piece of its national security strategy – by strengthening democracy at home the U.S. hoped to lead by its example and, as an instrument of soft power, assert global leadership and thereby fortify and extend the American liberal international order. This effort illustrates Nye argument that the “American century” still has a lot going for it, because American power – both hard and especially soft – is robust and adaptable to the threats and challenges that await the United States in an increasingly dynamic global political environment.<sup>146</sup> It is by no means clear that Obama’s initiatives have strengthened American democracy and served as an effective source of American soft power. What is more certain, however, is that a similar initiative in the post-Trump era by President Biden, who, like Obama, is committed to both advancing liberal values like open government and transparency at home and abroad and extending the liberal international order, offers scholars another opportunity to assess the veracity of the claim that, taken together, open government and transparency is an American soft power asset, one that helps to make it possible for the United States to lead the world by the power of its illuminate example.

America’s unipolar moment is coming to an end – as a power transition away from the United States has been underway for some time. Moreover, the 9/11 attacks, the 20-year war in Afghanistan, the Iraq War imbroglio, the financial crisis of 2007– 08, the Trump presidency, and, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic unrest, and the Capitol insurrection reveal an America that is increasingly insecure and either unable or increasingly unwilling to lead the world. This power transition and these events makes it more difficult for the US to maintain the current international order, which in turn, leads some countries to lose confidence in America and encourages others to change this order and, perhaps, upend it altogether. Obama’s open government and transparency initiatives are a partial response to this so-called “hegemonic unraveling.”<sup>147</sup> As a national security matter, the goal is not to salvage American hegemony. Rather, it is about renewing and revitalizing the liberal international order through the power of America’s example. Success hinges on both progress at home at building a more open and transparent national government, one that effectively responds to the challenges of the times and therefore is enjoys the people’s confidence. Success also critically depends on buy-in among other countries, both mature and new liberal democracies, about the benefits and virtues of American leadership such that the renewal of the liberal international order serves as bulwark against the challenges to it coming from revisionist, illiberal great powers, Russia and China specifically. In this sense, leading by the power of its illuminate example is inspired by Obama idealism and operationalizes his realism.

## Notes

1. By open government is meant “Public Scrutiny and Oversight with an Emphasis on Government Accountability.” Opensource.com, “What is open government?” <https://opensource.com/resources/open-government> (accessed January 25, 2017).
2. Transparency, which operationalizes open government, is commonly defined as the government’s disclosure of information in its possession so that the people have a good sense of what the government is doing and why.
3. “Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies: Transparency and Open Government,” The White House, January 21, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/transparency-and-open-government> (accessed June 24, 2013).
4. Brent Griffiths, “Full text: Obama Farewell Speech Transcript,” Politico, January 10, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-obama-farewell-speech-transcript-233916> (accessed June 27, 2020). In his speech, Obama identified two other threats to American democracy: an economy that fails to provide opportunity for all, and racial divisions and animosity.
5. Jonathan Easley, “Obama Says His is ‘Most Transparent Administration Ever,’” *The Hill*, February 14, 2013, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/283335-obama-this-is-the-most-transparent-administration-in-history> (accessed July 10, 2020).
6. Clare Birchall, “‘Data.gov-in-a-box’: Delimiting transparency,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 18, no. 2 (May 2015): 185–202; Gary Coglianese, “The Transparent President? The Obama Administration and Open Government,” *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 22, no. 4 (2009): 529–544; Sharon, S. Dawes, “Stewardship and Usefulness: Policy principles for information-based transparency,” *Government Information Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 2010): 377–383; Teresa M. Harrison, Santiago Guerrero, G. Brian Burke, Meghan Cook, Anthony Cresswell, Natalie Helbig, Jana Hrdinova, and Theresa Pardo, “Open government and e-government: Democratic challenges from a public value perspective,” *Information Polity: The International Journal of Government & Democracy in the Information Age* 17, no. 2 (2012): 83–97; Paul, T. Jaeger and John Carlo Bertot, “Transparency and technological change: Ensuring equal and sustained public access to government information,” *Government Information Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 2010): 371–376; Eric Lichtblau, “The Obama Administration’s Commitment to Transparency: A Progress Report,” *Social Research* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 975–980; Patrice McDermott, “Secrecy Reform or Secrecy Redux? Access to Information in the Obama Administration,” *Research in Social Problems & Public Policy* 19 (2011): 189–217; Ben Wasike, “FoIA in the age of ‘Open Government’: An analysis of the performance of the Freedom of Information Act under the Obama and Bush administrations,” *Government Information Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 2016): 417–426.
7. Thomas A. Bryer, “President Obama, Public Participation, and an Agenda for Research and Experimentation,” *International Journal of Public Participation* 4, no. 1 (January 2010): 5–11; Thomas J. Catlaw, and Billie Sandberg, “‘Dangerous Government’: Info-Liberalism, Active Citizenship, and the Open Government Directive,” *Administration & Society* 46, no. 3 (April 2014): 223–254; Angela M. Evans and Adriana Campos, “Open Government Initiatives: Challenges of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of Policy Analysis & Management* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 172–185; Stephen P. Konieczka, “Practicing a Participatory Presidency? An Analysis of the Obama Administration’s Open Government Dialogue,” *International Journal of Public*

- Participation* 4, no. 1 (January 2010): 43–66; and Patrice McDermott, “Building open government,” *Government Information Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 2010): 401–413.
8. See Markus Fraundorfer, “The Open Government Partnership: Mere Smokescreen or New Paradigm?” *Globalizations* 14, no. 4 (June 2017): 611–26 and Suzanne J. Piotrowski, “The ‘Open Government Reform’ Movement: The Case of the Open Government Partnership and U.S. Transparency Policies,” *American Review of Public Administration* 42, no. 2 (2017): 155–171.
  9. The scholarly literature on realism and idealism in Obama’s foreign policy is vast. For a sampling, see Madeline Albright, “Obama’s Realist Idealism,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2009); Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Scoring Obama’s Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 3 (May/June 2012): 29–43; Benjamin E. Goldsmith, “A Liberal Defense of Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy,” E-International Relations, October 6, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/10/06/a-liberal-defense-of-barack-obamas-foreign-policy/> (accessed October 20, 2020); Sean Kay, *America’s search for security: the triumph of idealism and the return of realism* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2014); James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013); Ronald E. Powaski, “Barack Obama, the Idealistic Realist, 2009–2017, Part II: Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Global Problems,” in *Ideals, Interests, and U.S. Foreign Policy from George H. W. Bush to Donald Trump*, ed. Ronald E. Powaski (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Adam Quinn, “The Art of Declining Politely: Obama’s Prudent Presidency and the Waning of American Power,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (July 2011): 803–824; Bradley A. Thayer, “The Continued Relevance of Realism in the Age of Obama: Plus Ça Change, Plus C’est La Même Chose,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, no. 1 (January 28, 2010): 1–4.
  10. Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 216–17. Emphasis added.
  11. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 217.
  12. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 217. Humility is a core feature of ethical realism. See Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America’s Role in the World* (New York: Pantheon, 2006).
  13. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 450.
  14. Obama, *A Promised Land*, 214–218. Power is the author of a highly-regarded history of genocide in modern times, *A Problem from Hell*, and worked for a time on Obama’s Senate staff. She coordinated the Obama administration’s policies on humanitarian issues on the National Security Council during Obama’s first term and served as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. during the second term.
  15. Derek Chollet, *The Middle Way: How Three Presidents Shaped America’s Role in the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
  16. Lee-Ann Broadhead, “Exorcizing Eisenhower: The Imperative of Critical Remembrance in Obama’s Search for Foreign Policy Renewal,” *Peace Research* 41, no. 1 (2009): 45–80.
  17. Albright, “Obama’s Realist Idealism.”
  18. Mark Leonard, “The Man with Two Brains: Realism and Idealism in the Obama Presidency,” *New Statesman* 141, no. 5130 (2012): 47.
  19. Timothy J. Lynch, “Obama, liberalism, and U.S. foreign policy,” in Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, eds., *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
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28. Nye, *Soft Power*, 2.
29. Nye, *Soft Power*, 5.
30. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 82.
31. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 84.
32. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 84.
33. For Nye’s discussion of the sources of American soft power, see *Soft Power*, chapter 2.
34. Nye, *Soft Power*, 56–57.
35. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 87.
36. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 87.
37. Nye, *Soft Power*, 61.
38. Nye, *Soft Power*, 61.
39. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 93.
40. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 12.
41. Nye, *The Future of Power*, ix. See also Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Smart Power,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (April 2009): 7–9.
42. G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 264.
43. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thought on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 321.
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47. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 267.
48. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 267–68.
49. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, chapter 8.
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56. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 209.
57. See *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, May 2010 and *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, February 2015, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf) (accessed July 18, 2020).
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