

Obama Administration Leadership

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Abstract

The Obama administration has been forced to deal with a number of challenges. Some of those have been inherited challenges while others have been manufactured or produced by the government itself. From passing health care reform to finishing two different international wars, the government has been busy in the policy realm. Likewise, the government has faced domestic political challenges in the form of opposition from the Republican party. Given the nature of politics in 2014, getting things done from a legislative standpoint has never been more difficult. Some believe that the administration has shown significant leadership experience in dealing with the challenges. Those individuals acknowledge President Obama's ability to command an audience and use political pressure to extract the result that he is seeking. Others criticize the president for weak leadership, laying at his feet blame for a host of the country's problems, including the economy and eroding civil liberties. The administration's leadership style is unique in many ways, but it also employs some of the leadership techniques that have been ballyhooed over the last few centuries. Specifically, Obama and his administration draw on some of the lessons from Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching. President Obama, for various reasons, has been a cautious President, trying to bring about balance in an age when peace is difficult. He has succeeded in many respects because of his ability to know when not to act rather than when to act. While his administration's actions, thus far, have not been fully reflective of the philosophies of Lao Tzu, they have been emblematic enough that the two deserve thoughtful comparison in this context.

Keywords: Obama's administration; Inherited challenges; Domestic political challenges; Weak leadership; Policy realm; Eroding civil liberties

Introduction

President Obama's leadership style and philosophy are consistent, but it can be best understood by separating domestic and foreign policy decisions. In foreign policy, the President's efforts have taken particular encouragement from Tzu L [1]. According to the philosophy laid out by Lao Tzu in his works, the goal of the leader should be to meditate over all decisions and do everything possible to maintain the natural order. In this way, Lao Tzu called for a thoughtfulness that runs counter to many of the foreign policy decisions often made by leaders who have been billed as "war hawks." Speaking of the need for introspection before making critical decisions, Tzu [1] asks, "Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles, and the water is clear?" This is a constant theme throughout his work, calling upon leaders to take the time to let their thoughts settle. According to him, the hastiest action is not always the wisest, and especially with matters of war, it is best for leaders to have a clear mind before they make decisions.

President Obama's foreign policy record reflects a certain level of thoughtfulness. One can point to the discussions that took place in the months leading up to the killing of Osama Bin Laden. While the event itself concluded with a furious mission and rushed into the bin laden compound, its planning involved many people, as President Obama solicited the advice of all of his major confidants. In making the decision, the President consulted with vice- President Joe Biden, who advised that the mission should not be ago because it presented too many risks. He got the opinions of some of the top ranking generals under his command, most of whom believed that they could put together a plan that would give the mission the best possible chance of success. Likewise, he called upon his secretary of defense and his secretary of state, Hilary Clinton, who advised him to go ahead with the mission. In a fashion reminiscent of Lao Tzu, President Obama understood that even after getting all of these different opinions, the decision would ultimately be his. Because, after collecting all of the necessary data, the President took a few days to make the final determination. It is important to note that this was not a popular decision. The team that

had been tasked with pulling off the mission was waiting for the word on when to strike, and the uncertainty began to cause some problems up and down the chain of command. People wanted the President to act hastily, but he did not pull the trigger on the mission until he was sure that he had come to a clear-headed decision on the matter. Lao Tzu's quote impresses upon leaders the importance of keeping their heads while all around them are losing their heads. He did just that with this decision, which turned out to be one of the most important decisions of his tenure.

Likewise, one can look to the decision-making process that led up to the situation in Libya. In his article entitled "*Obama's Way*", Lewis [2] wrote of the way that Obama handled a pressure-packed situation in the african nation. Then-President Muammar Qaddafi was using his army to kill and maim his citizens, and the international community wanted to do something to stop him. The idea of those European leaders, according to Lewis, was to set up a no-fly zone to try and stop the movements of the Libyan army. As Lewis writes, though, President Obama was more thoughtful, trying to find a real way to fix the conflict that would involve more than just a meaningless gesture.

Lewis writes, "European leaders wanted to create a no-fly zone to stop Qaddafi, but Qaddafi wasn't flying. His army was racing across the North African desert in jeeps and tanks. Obama had to have wondered just how aware of this were these foreign leaders supposedly interested in the fate of these Libyan civilians. He didn't know if they knew that a no-fly zone was pointless, but if they'd talked to any military leader

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for five minutes, they have” [2]. Eventually, President Obama helped to develop an actual plan that would provide some relief to the people of Libya, but Lewis’s story is emblematic of the leadership skills exhibited by the administration in the foreign policy realm. President Obama is a thoughtful academic who makes decisions only after considering the many implications that each decision brings. He prides himself on being the most informed person in the room, mostly because he surrounds himself with the kinds of people who are willing and able to keep him informed. This, it would seem, gives him the clear mind that Lao Tzu was writing about in his work. In addition to thoughtfulness, one of the fundamental concepts of Lao Tzu was that leaders should do everything in their power to ensure that they do not disrupt the natural order. By natural order, it is meant that they should avoid conflict and war when at all possible. While not exactly a pacifist, Lao Tzu understood that the war, like all conflict, creates dissension in the natural order, and it can be a dividing force among humanity, which should be united. In assessing the Obama administration in this regard, one must note that they have not completely aligned with Lao Tzu on the nature of war. President Obama’s record on this is mixed, and thus, one must view his leadership philosophy on conflict as being mixed. This is the nature of the beast for a man who oversees the most powerful military in the entire world. In one sense, the President has avoided prolonged new conflicts. Almost immediately upon taking office, he moved to pull troops out of Iraq, keeping a campaign promise to end that war. As of 2014, American military forces are almost entirely out of the country. A different situation took place in Afghanistan, however. President Obama increased the number of troops there, adding some fuel to the fire that was burning throughout that country.

In Libya and other parts of the world, President Obama has taken small actions causing some death and destruction in hopes of avoiding the need for larger military actions. At the same time, the administration has been more than willing to use drones an unmanned military plane to inflict attacks throughout countries like Pakistan for more than two years. This suggests a lack of adherence to the principles of Lao Tzu, but the drone example does show the propensity of President Obama and his administration to adhere to one of Tzu’s directives keeping the people ignorant of what is going on around them.

In the foreign policy realm, President Obama has operated under the radar more often than not. Lewis’s *vanity fair* story, which was referenced above, describes the ways in which many American citizens did not even know that America had led an attack against Libya. The President managed to keep things quiet, making decisions without giving the public any indication of what was taking place. Lao Tzu encourages leaders to not divulge information to the general public unless it is necessary to provide that information. This, according to Tzu, gives leaders the cover that they need to take action without having to provide an immediate explanation. time and again, the President’s actions have shown some respect for this idea. Also, the Osama Bin Laden seizure was kept under wraps until the deed had been done. President Obama only addressed the American people after bin laden had been captured and killed [3]. While he did disclose some of the details on how the attack took place, he neglected to do so until the time when communicating the information presented he or the mission no harm. The same can be said about the American drone program, which operates in the shadows and out of the attention of the American public. Certain American congress members, including republican Rand Paul of kentucky, have tried to expose the drone program, but the President and his administration have carried on with the program in spite of paul’s calls for attention. Drones themselves are designed for secrecy [2]. They are operated from a remote location, attack a

target, and get out of the area quickly. By not deploying actual troops into war, the President allows himself the ability to conduct military operations without drawing the attention of the American public. Lao Tzu might argue that the act on waging war abroad is counter to good leadership philosophy, but Lao Tzu would almost certainly praise the President’s ability to keep things from being exposed in the media or to the American public.

One of the principal tenets of Lao Tzu’s philosophy centers on the idea of doing too much. Lao Tzu prefers that leaders live their lives in a state of Zen, meditating in order to gain wisdom. He argues against acting just for the sake of acting. This is especially true when dealing with people who have done wrong. According to Lao Tzu, the simple man acts rashly and harshly, while the informed, enlightened man can think long and hard about the proper course of action [4]. One of the strengths of President Obama’s administration has been its understanding that harsh domestic punishments are not always the best way to approach problems. One of the great American traditions is the harsh treatment of crime and criminals. Among its western contemporaries, the united states are one of the few countries to charge children as adults in a criminal setting, employ the death penalty, or hand out long sentences for non-violent offenses. In fact, America is one of the few developed western countries to have harsh prisons that focus more on retribution than rehabilitation. This has led to a culture of mass incarceration in the USA, where more and more people are thrown into prison each day for offenses that might be very minor. Because of various racial issues and a long-standing tradition, it is very challenging for any leader to take on the criminal justice complex. Across the political spectrum, there is agreement that offenders need to be punished harshly when they cross the law. What President Obama has come to understand, though, is that harsh punishments often lead to poor results for the country at large. Lao Tzu argues that the smart leader does not impose these punishments, opting instead for mercy. Over the last few months, President Obama has shown that his leadership style accounts for this preference, as well.

In particular, President Obama recently announced that his office will begin to consider pardons for people who have been convicted under harsh sentencing guidelines for crack cocaine. During the 1980s and 1990s, sentencing guidelines for crack made it so that crack users received many more years in prison than people who used powdered cocaine [5]. This was significant for a couple of reasons. First, crack was found to be no less harmful than regular cocaine, and black people were more likely to use crack cocaine while white people were more likely to use powder cocaine. There was an explicit racial element involved in the discrepancy, and many people were given dozens of years in prison as a result of only possessing crack. The administration took the unusual step of encouraging those who had been convicted under the old laws to apply for pardons, giving the President and his attorney general eric holder the opportunity to commute their sentences and get them out of prisons.

Likewise, the President has come out in favor of fewer harsh restrictions on drugs like marijuana. As it currently stands, many states imprison people for possessing small amounts of the drug. This costs a lot of money, and it can rip up communities. President Obama rightly realized this, and though he does not have great power to make changes at the state level, he expressed his opinion that marijuana should not be punished harshly under in the modern age. Likewise, he has consistently been an advocate for programs that provide fairer sentences for a host of different crimes. His philosophy tends toward mercy and justice rather than vengeance, a departure from what usually takes place with Presidents in the criminal justice system. Also from a

national perspective, the President has developed his way of dealing with political opposition. Throughout his first five years, many have encouraged the President to lash out at his opponents. After all, they have kept him from accomplishing many of the things that he has hoped to achieve. His congress has stood in his way throughout his time in the oval office, even stating that their primary goal was to make him fail [2]. Moreover, the President has been forced to put up with a dialog that was racial in nature. While not all criticisms of the President stem from race, the American reality most certainly informs the disrespectful character of the dialog on race. Despite calls for the President to lash out, he has taken a very Lao Tzu approach to dealing with these issues. He has decided, in many cases, to do nothing. Lao Tzu notes that when a leader chooses to do nothing, the leader has no chance of messing something up. There is certain wisdom to this approach, especially for Obama. In many cases, by providing his political opponents with more rope, he has allowed them to hang themselves publicly. Ultimately, President Obama's leadership philosophy is complex and not easy to explain. It is not fair to say that he aligns perfectly with any of the leaders of the past. While he is at times pro-peace and willing to do the little things to maintain peace, he at times shows himself ready to wage

war, even when his nation is not directly threatened. Above everything else, though, he is a thoughtful man who does not make decisions until he has as much information in possible. Both in the domestic and foreign realm, this has been his primary strength throughout his time in office. Obama's capacity for strategic decision-making has set him apart, and it is one of the things that make him closely aligned with the philosophies of Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu argues that a leader should not act until that leader has a clear mind, and with the President's decisions over the last five years, he has made clear that he will not act when the waters are muddied in his mind.

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