

**Special Issue: In the Name of Security**

## **The Arab Spring:**

### **The Contradictions of Obama's Charismatic Liberalism**

[Arthur Kroker](#)

*The tripartite character of Obama's charismatic liberalism -- his remixing of the potentially potent themes of salvation, security, and freedom into a compelling vision of global politics -- is what both differentiates Obama's liberalism from received interpretations of liberal theory as well as from conservative estimates of religion and politics.*

Suddenly the Arab Spring is upon us. Courageous citizens of autocratic societies -- Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen -- take to the streets in active dissent against the politics of tyranny and in defense of that most seemingly elusive of all political regimes, the right of individuals to assemble without fear of reprisals, to speak without danger of imprisonment, to dissent without the terror of violence, to vote for a future that is distinguishable from the past. While the spring of 1989 marked the eclipse of Soviet domination of Eastern and Central Europe, the spring of 2011 marks the beginning of a resurgent Arab politics formulated from the hard historical matter of poverty, unemployment, oppression, and inequality. While contemporary western governments have closed their collective eyes to popular Arab demands for social justice in favor of the bunker archeology of the "War on Terrorism," the irrepressible human demands, the Arab demands, for real solutions to mass poverty, innovative strategies for employment, political redress against the politics of oppression, and the most basic rights to equality will not be silenced. While western culture has celebrated the technological futurism of network society, another global network has silently, irresistibly formed, a network of bodies that, from the cynical perspective of empire politics, do not count -- a network of Egyptian bodies, Afghan bodies, Iraqi bodies, Iranian bodies making that most fundamental of all human demands, the right to full democratic inclusion. For the centers of real power, for the masters of the abstract geo-strategic logic of empire, for the logic of the West, the uprising that is the Arab Spring creates an immediate credibility crisis. This is nowhere more evident than in the halls of power in Washington where the Arab Spring instantly exposes the major fault lines in American liberalism generally, and in the charismatic liberalism of Barack Obama specifically. In this most promising of political upsurges, in this most immediate of political crises, which side of the American liberal story will prevail: its grisly illiberal side marked in the past as in the present by unwavering American support for oppressive regimes in Algeria and Egypt as core military satraps of the US

National Security Strategy as mapped out by the Pentagon's AFRICOM as well as convenient designations for the forsaken bodies of rendition; or its genuinely liberal side represented in all its idealism, complexity and charisma by Obama's recent speech in Cairo.

## **The Cairo Speech**

*President Obama ignored unfolding events in Egypt in his State of the Union speech last night (while praising the popular uprising in Tunisia that has created the chance for democratic reform there). Response from the rest of the US government has been muted.*

*Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday: "The Egyptian government has an important opportunity to be responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people, and pursue political, economic and social reforms that can improve their lives and help Egypt prosper." In a statement today, US Ambassador Margaret Scobey slightly upgraded that talking point to include "we call on the Egyptian authorities to allow peaceful public demonstrations.*

Dan Murphy, *Christian Science Monitor*, January 26, 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaxZPiiKyMw>

Delivered on June 4, 2009 at Cairo University, this speech provided Obama with an opportunity to address the world community of Muslims. The setting of the speech was politically volatile, with Egyptian faculty and students in attendance taking careful note of the American occupation of Iraq as well as the American invasion of Afghanistan. In the United States, powerful media voices demanded a new crusade against Islam while in the Muslim world the most violent forms of political resistance against American soldiers were widely viewed as morally justified. To the highly selective targeting of Muslims by all the policing strategies involved in the War on Terror, the Islamic counter-response was as sudden as it was terminal -- the destruction by suicide bombs, by IEDs, by the sword, of American targets of opportunity. To the American military's documented acquiescence in war crimes by the Shia-dominated security forces against Sunni Muslims, young Arab resistance fighters sought out opportunities for revenge killings that would have maximum media impact. In all this, Obama was no innocent. His endorsement of the concept of a "Just War" motivated his strong and persistent support for the invasion of Afghanistan. While he may have decried the use of extra-judicial procedures such as the rendition of political suspects to torture chambers in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Eastern and Central Europe, his concern with American security led him to support

draconian surveillance and policing tactics in America, including bunkering North America in a Perimeter Defence. For all his protestations against Bush's Guantanamo, the prison has still not been closed, and Obama has proved reluctant to provide the full measure of judicial protections for CIA nominated terrorist suspects. All this to say, the Obama that rose to speak in that sun drenched Cairo day was a fully contradictory figure, compromised by a war raging not only in America itself but in his own liberal heart--ideals versus realities, reason versus passion. As the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre might have said, Obama was entangled in the "practico-inert" of the War on Terror with all its political nomenclature concerning bodies that needed to be secured by the power of government and bodies that don't matter and, hence, could be disavowed, excluded, marginalized. At the same time, by force of political conviction Obama was driven to transcend the limitations of his political predicament. In this sense, his speech in Cairo was a way of throwing his general political project into the future, breaking with the past in order to negotiate new pathways through a fully uncertain future.

This is evident in the first measures of the speech that began with a political confession of responsibility:

We meet at this time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world -- tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate. The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of coexistence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.

There we have it: colonialism as the source of political disenfranchisement of Muslims and a Cold War that resulted in many "Muslim-majority countries" being treated as pawns in the larger games involved in the clash of imperial powers. Political history of this order surely sows the seeds of distrust and suspicion among subject populations, providing fertile ground for the growth of resistance networks among those who refuse to bend to the will to colonial domination. For Obama, the results are as self-evident as they are dangerous.

Violent extremists have exploited these tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims. The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians has led many in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights. All this has bred more fear and more mistrust.

If the aim of effective political rhetoric is to frame the interpretation of events in advance, implicitly defining what is considered to be intelligible and consequently within the boundaries of moral acceptability and what is considered to be unintelligible and thus to be disavowed, marginalized, and excluded, Obama's opening statement is noteworthy. Rather than side with majoritarian American opinion that continues to hold that the events of 9/11 had no historical context, representing an irrational act of extremist violence against an unsuspecting nation, Obama does something different. He brings into intelligibility the events of 9/11, noting that the story of domination and power that was implicit to the history of colonialism and the Cold War finds its inevitable result in what the historian, Chalmers Johnson, once described as "blowback." [1] Of course, Chalmers went to his death noting that America was caught up in a fatal mythological spiral associated with the rise and fall of empires. From Chalmers' perspective, the migration of the United States from Republic to Empire has inevitably fatal consequences, committing American future to the classic rhythms of political mythology whereby the project of grasping for power, particularly the power of global domination, creates in its wake unpredictable historical consequences: melancholic subjectivity as the keynote of American subjectivity, gathering hints of nemesis abroad, followed by spectacular acts of revenge-taking by subjected populations.

Perhaps it was with something like this in mind that led Obama to break with the harsh policies of the Bush regime, encapsulated in all its bitterness and sense of American exceptionalism in the phrase -- "You're either with us or against us." Presiding in the bleak aftermath of the Bush administration with poll after poll confirming profound mistrust of American intentions in Muslim countries, Obama chose not to evade issues of mistrust, fear and skepticism but to do the opposite, namely to turn directly into the wind of Islamic discontent. In doing so, Obama's Cairo speech is a lesson in the metaphysics of power. While the Bush administration implicitly operated on the basis of a theory of power that held that power must always expand, must always seek out new opportunities for control, that the world must be subjected to military policies aimed at "full spectrum dominance," Obama's theory of power is different. Perhaps at some point he might have reflected on Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* wherein Nietzsche argued that power always seeks external resistances in order to thrive, that power establishes boundaries and limits in order both to test its strength as well as to mobilize its energies. In the most mature stages of the development of power, a period that Nietzsche described as "completed nihilism," the will to power, finding itself without external enemies of merit, turns back on itself, making of itself its own opposition. Considered in terms of political theory, while the Bush administration represented the highpoint of American will to power before its political fortunes stalled in the face of gathering global opposition, the Obama

administration may be the quintessential expression of power as the will to will, that point where power, having tested its outer limits, turns back upon itself.

In retrospect, the Bush political administration probably represented the last bacchanalian feast of power in its purest form. Here, the power of American empire having no manifest enemy was finally liberated to be power in its final stage -- power as a pure sign. Globally hegemonic in its military claims to "full spectrum dominance" of time and space as well as "metabolic domination" of the world population, the feast of American power expanded with implosive energies -- a financial sector that transformed the machinery of capitalist transactions into an economic landscape where money in the form of credit finally floated free of any solvency requirements; a housing sector that increasingly operated on the basis of purely virtual value standards, with the value of homes measured by aesthetic standards; and a consumer sector where the delusional economy of zero credit requirements made individual over-indebtedness a structural requirement of the operation of the system as a whole.

Like many Democrats before him, Obama's fate was to be elected *after the party* when the bills for the feast come due and the treasury of the state is effectively bankrupt. Probably by force of circumstance, Obama's interpretation of international politics is based on a realistic understanding of the limits and precariousness of American power. Confronting their moment of inevitable historical decline after wild bouts of over-expansion and hyper-contraction, empires, like individuals, are definitely not above reacting badly -- lashing out against convenient scapegoats as projected sources of their own internally constituted troubles. While the grim politics of reaction-formation was the everyday language of the Bush administration with its War on Terror, secret detention facilities, and the mobilization of the domestic population into a constant state of anxiety based on an increasingly phantasmagoric fear of terrorism, Obama has chosen a different pathway. Here, American power begins to acknowledge its limits, recognizing its contingency and, indeed, political vulnerability in a swiftly changing world, seeking out "conversations" with its opponents rather than exercise brute force.

It is not so much that Obama's political circumstance is to preside over the decline of American power, but quite the reverse. If Obama can speak earnestly and enthusiastically about America as a "young country" based on innovation, creativity, and hard work, it is perhaps because he wishes to reanimate American power in the context of a radically altered world situation, that point where power begins to play the game of seduction, not force. In the game of political seduction, shared aspirations, the reality of mutual implication, and the assumption of co-responsibility are everything. The transition of American power from a command philosophy of military force to a theory of international relations based on political seduction begins with mutual recognition.

## "Islam is a Part of America"

That is why Obama immediately remarks in his speech in Cairo that Islam and the West share a common heritage, that "Islam is part of America."

As a student of history, I also know civilization's debt to Islam. It was Islam -- at places like Al-Azhar -- that carried the light of learning from so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra, our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed. Islamic culture has given us majestic arches and soaring spires; timeless poetry and cherished music; elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation. And throughout history, Islam has demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality.

Not only part of America in terms of the participation of Muslims in government, sports, architecture, labor, education, but something deeper, more autobiographical. It is as if Obama's worldview is not so much a reinvocation of American exceptionalism, but a projection of the founding story of *Obama's exceptionalism* onto the political canvas of America and thereupon onto the skin of the globe.

Now, much has been made of the fact that an African American with the name of Barack Hussein Obama could be elected President. But my personal story is not so unique. The dream of opportunity for all peoples has not come true for everyone in America, but its promise exists for all who come to our shores -- and that includes nearly 7 million American Muslims in our country today who, by the way, enjoy incomes and educational levels that are higher than the American average.

So then, a new politics based on common aspirations towards a "common humanity."

So then, let there be no doubt: Islam is a part of America. And I believe that America holds within her the truth that regardless of race, religion, or station of life, all of us who share common aspirations -- to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God. These things we share. This is the hope of all humanity.

Two propositions follow from this: mutual implication in an increasingly interdependent world; and a politics of shared responsibility:

For we have learned from our recent experience that when a financial system weakens in one country, prosperity is hurt everywhere. When a new flu infects one human being, all are at risk. When one nation pursues nuclear weapons, the risk of nuclear

attacks rises for all nations. When violent extremists operate in a stretch of mountains, people are endangered across an ocean. When innocents in Bosnia and Darfur are slaughtered, that is a stain on our collective conscience. That is what it means to share this world in the 21st century. This is the responsibility we have to one another as human beings.

And this is a difficult responsibility to embrace. For human history has often been a record of nations and tribes -- and yes, religions -- subjugating one another in pursuit of their own interests. Yet in this new age, such attitudes are self-defeating. Given our interdependence, any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another, will inevitably fail. So whatever we think of the past, we must not be prisoners to it. Our problems must be dealt with partnership; our progress must be shared.

The particular challenge confronting Obama's charismatic vision of a liberal world -- interdependent, responsible, shared, intermediated -- is twofold. First, how does he convince the Muslim world of the good intentions of the United States when facts appear to move in the opposite direction? How does Obama persuade the world that what is in the particular (security/economic) interest of the United States is in the general interest of the global community? Secondly, how will Obama accomplish what surely must be his major objective, namely migrating American political thought to a more complex understanding of Islam? After all, at the same moment that Obama rose to speak in Cairo the empire politics of the United States were in full motion: the garrisoning of the globe with a multiplicity of American bases; the violent occupation of Iraq; mass casualties among the Iraqi civilian population as a result of American air attacks; a decade-long war against Muslim guerilla forces in Afghanistan; aggressive containment policies against Iran; and American support of Israel. While Obama may deny the efficacy of the politics of power as "self-defeating" and, moreover, insist in his Cairo speech that Muslim "stereotypes" of the United States as a "self-serving empire" were false, at least to the extent that such stereotypes did not take into account the progressive quality of the American political experiment, nonetheless his reanimated liberal vision seems to be short-circuited by the real world of American empire. This is made all the worse because in Obama's estimation the events of 9/11 continue to traumatize the American psyche. In excluding "violent extremists" from the moral pact that is charismatic liberalism, Obama is adamant: "These are not opinions to be debated; these are facts to be dealt with." In other words, the interpretation of the liberal framework with its calculus of friends and enemies, bodies that matter and bodies that do not matter, is not an opinion open to debate, but "facts to be dealt with." So then, a skeptical Islamic world outside and traumatized American subjectivity within, an Islamic world that is mistrustful of its place in the American interpretation of power, and an American population filled with animus about any

challenges to the hegemony of "facts to be dealt with." These are seemingly intractable obstacles to a charismatic liberal politics that would privilege complexity, yet if not dealt with obstacles that possess such virulent psychological force that they would quickly deliver the world to a new dark age of mistrust, suspicion, and violence. While the American exercise of imperial power has reduced many Muslim-majority countries to abuse value, the inevitable blowback from such political subjugation has reinforced the most atavistic tendencies in American politics.

The strength of Obama's perspective on Islam and the West is that he approaches the question on the basis of a personal autobiography shaped by the three dominant mythologies of contemporary politics -- *security, salvation, and freedom*. In his Nobel Prize Speech, Obama made a special point of contrasting his perspective with Gandhi and Martin Luther King. While affirming common cause with their struggles for political and racial equality, Obama affirmed not only his belief in the concept of "Just War," but elaborated the religious grounds for this belief. Noting the presence of implacable evil in the world as another of those "facts to be dealt with," Obama described his political mission specifically and that of the United States more generally as a profoundly moral struggle between good and evil. In this interpretation, the defining precepts of the New Testament's Sermon on the Mount could not be realized in the world without struggle -- a struggle of ideas, movements, politics, but sometimes violent struggle as well. Consequently, the two wars that have thus far defined his presidency -- Afghanistan and Iraq -- are both tinged with the religious language of redemption. Thus understood, the question of salvation is not of simply personal interest, but cast as a global struggle between forces of good and evil becomes a way of understanding America's military missions in the world. In this regard, Obama is not that different from his predecessor on the question of the politics of salvation. Both understand Afghanistan and Iraq through a double prism: the real politics of controlling fossil fuel supplies in an age of diminishing resources; and the putatively moral character of both military campaigns. Here, security and salvation are blended together in a homogenous story concerning evil "facts to be dealt with." In this sense, the larger theme of good and evil is everywhere present in American discourse, from Reagan's targeting of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" and Bush's description of the "axes of evil" to Obama's equation of evil with "violent extremists" -- whose "actions are irreconcilable with the rights of human beings, the progress of nations, and with Islam."

Where they differ is on the question of racial justice. For Obama, the question of racial oppression and the continuing struggles against the bitter politics of racism has deeply influenced his political perspective. While Reagan, Bush and Obama could possibly find common ground in a moral interpretation of American exceptionalism in the context of a world threatened by different orders of "evil," Obama's perspective

has been deeply touched by the question of freedom, specifically by the struggles of African-Americans to achieve the human rights of democracy on the basis of non-violence. Consequently, the tripartite character of Obama's charismatic liberalism -- his remixing of the potentially potent themes of salvation, security, and freedom into a compelling vision of global politics -- is what both differentiates Obama's liberalism from received interpretations of liberal theory as well as from conservative estimates of religion and politics. That this tripartite sense of charismatic liberalism is politically powerful is indicated by Obama's ability to simultaneously justify American military missions against Muslim-majority countries while calling Islam to find common cause with America not only on abjuring "violent extremists" but on a range of critical issues including nuclear weapons, democracy, education and innovation, women's rights, education and development, and religious freedom.

For example, speaking to a Muslim audience with whom he is trying to establish common cause, Obama is both self-critical about the aims of American power and, for the first time in recent, introduces limits on its uses. Rather than avoid areas of tension between Islam and the West -- Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq -- Obama insists that the renewal of understanding between Muslim-majority countries and the West will only succeed on the basis of a reasoned discussion of key areas of "tension." While the central tension in Obama's charismatic liberalism might be viewed as that between an ethics of reconciliation and a politics of national security, his actual assessment of the key tensions in world politics is decidedly more complex. While strongly defending America's "unbreakable bond" with Israel and noting the "tragic history" of the Holocaust, Obama is equally emphatic about the moral right of an independent Palestinian state.

Around the world, the Jewish people were persecuted for centuries, and anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in an unprecedented Holocaust. Tomorrow, I will visit Buchenwald, which was part of a network of camps where Jews were enslaved, tortured, shot and gassed to death by the Third Reich. Six million Jews were killed -- more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, it is ignorant, and it is hateful. Threatening Israel with destruction -- or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews -- is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis the most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that the Palestinian people -- Muslims and Christians -- have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than sixty years, they've endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure daily humiliations -- large and small -- that comes with occupation. So let there be no doubt: The situation for Palestinian people

is intolerable. And America will not turn its back on the legitimate Palestinian aspirations for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.

If charismatic liberalism is about taking account of hard, seemingly intractable, political facts on the ground while expanding possibilities for social justice, that is precisely what Obama's realignment of Middle East policy seeks to achieve. From an understanding of the shared trauma of Palestinians and Israelis, everything follows: American support of a two-state policy, demands for Arab acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist, condemnation of Israel's "continued settlements," an appeal to Palestinians to "abandon violence," and an insistence on an immediate expansion of the Arab Peace Initiative. While most political leaders in the West are quick to rush to an automatic defense of Israel with accompanying denunciations of Palestinian struggles, that is definitely not the case with Obama. Breaking with received ideologies of the past, he eloquently articulates a new pathway forward based on Israel's acknowledgement of the "human rights" of Palestinians and the latter's renunciation of "violence as a dead end." As Obama argues, judged by freedom struggles from

... South Africa to South Asia; from Eastern Europe to Indonesia: It is a story with a simple truth: That violence is a dead end. It is a sign neither of courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That's not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered.

In a world where politics is grounded in narrow considerations of self-interest and enduring cleavages based on race, religion, class, and ethnicity, Obama's perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian question is illuminating. Here, the supposedly opposing interests of security and reconciliation are actively blended together, with long-term security for Israel's existence clearly viewed as dependent on social justice for Palestinians. While this perspective will not attract support from established political interests, neither from Hamas nor the present Israeli government, Obama's ambition is to cultivate a new community of shared understanding between Islam and the West. Rising beyond a narrowly policy-driven, conflict-based interpretation of the situation, Obama's analysis is as comprehensively historical as it is religious:

Too many tears have been shed. Too much blood has been shed. All of us have a responsibility to work for the day when the mothers of Israelis and Palestinians can see their children grow up without fear; when the Holy Land of the three great faiths is the place of peace that God intended it to be; when Jerusalem is a secure and last home for Jews and Christians and Muslims, and a place of peace for all the children of Abraham to mingle peacefully together as in the story of Isra, when Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, peace be upon them, joined in prayer.

Here we are firmly in the realm of cosmology with the story of Isra -- the famous "night journey" of Mohammed as its central element. If the Koran can speak so mystically about the ascent of Mohammed to the heavens on a winged horse and his meeting with other prophets -- Moses, Jesus, and Adam -- then surely there are religious grounds for new pathways of understanding among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Of course, the larger question is whether or not the cosmological domain of religious reconciliation can survive the immediacy of political conflict, whether the search for shared truths in the Koran, the Bible, and the Torah can overcome the bitter legacy of internecine political struggle. Can what Obama likes to describe as the "divine spark" in each individual overpower the collective anger generated by "states of injury?" If this proposition were to be advanced by a religious leader, it would probably be greeted as naïve optimism. Advanced by a political leader with the means to translate new pathways of understanding into actual political practices, it is a courageous attempt to reframe the religious base of contemporary politics, linking religious cosmology with the language of social justice and in the process providing a way of overturning implacable historical antagonisms into possibilities for tolerant cohabitation of clashing perspectives.

## **The Liberal Spirit in Islam**

Obama provides an inspiring vision of common truths among the Torah, the Koran and the Bible as a way of evoking the liberal spirit in Islam. Repudiating political extremes in the United States that transformed the tragedy of 9/11 into actions that were "contrary to our traditions and our ideals" as well as Islamic extremists who stereotype the United States as only a "self-serving empire," Obama appeals directly to the rising class in Muslim-majority countries throughout the world who find common cause with charismatic liberalism on key issues including human rights, democracy, women's rights, education and innovation, civic tolerance, and an end to nuclear weapons. While this might immediately raise the critical, but reasonable, counter-response that the United States has backtracked, if not offended, egregiously on each one of the above issues, this would miss the larger point, namely that the cultural values of charismatic liberalism from democratic participation and education to women's rights, are set in motion by the forces of technologically-enabled globalization. In this case, the triumph of digital technology has created seemingly everywhere new relations of communication in direct opposition to old modes of economic and political production. While the clash of interests in the West between emergent relations of communication and superseded modes of production often assumes the form of political struggles over the future of technology, in many Islamic countries the inherent biases of communication towards openness, in-depth participation, and global citizenship run directly counter to orthodox religious belief, undemocratic governments, and economies based less on achievement than on

ascription. Of course, this raises the larger question concerning the future of charismatic liberalism in contemporary history. Are the values of charismatic liberalism inalienably linked to the imperial power of the West, with the struggle between democracy versus oppression, women's rights versus women's subjugation, educational achievement versus inherited status, essentially the form of ideological consciousness created by the triumph of technological capitalism? Or does the promise of a transformation in human values towards democracy, innovation, education, human rights speak to something more fundamental, and indeed common, in humanity at large? In other words, is charismatic liberalism the last, inspiring ideology of an empire in decline or does charismatic liberalism, for all its faults and contradictions, have the power to transcend differences of class, ethnicity, race, and nationality by speaking to something elemental in the story of humanity, namely the right to choose your own individual pathway among the great mythologies of freedom, salvation, and security?

While denying American naming rights to the values of charismatic liberalism and, in effect, evoking the possibility of charismatic liberalism in many countries, Obama's aim is nothing less than to encourage a decisive value-transformation in Muslim-majority countries. After all, in the context of an oppressive Egyptian state, his appeal for governments "to maintain your power through consent, not coercion" and "to respect the rights of minorities" is as fundamental as it is revolutionary. Equally, in the context of very real oppression of women and minorities in many Muslim-majority countries, Obama's declaration on gender equality and human rights speaks directly to the great tension lines of contemporary international politics. Finally, given the bitter reality of the oppression of the democratic will of Iranian citizens by its theocratic government, Obama's recommendation that governments "place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party" situates charismatic liberalism not only on the progressive side of history, but at the cutting-edge of real social change. In a contemporary global politics increasingly dominated by the most atavistic of religious tendencies, the most oppressive of political practices, and the most revenge-seeking of ethnic and class resentment, charismatic liberalism offers the opposite. As Obama concludes his speech in Cairo:

It's easier to start wars than to end them. It's easier to blame others than look inward. It's easier to see what is different about someone else than to find things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There's one rule that lies at the heart of every religion -- that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends nations and peoples -- a belief that isn't new; that isn't black or white or brown; that isn't Christian or Muslim or Jew. It's a belief that pulsed in the

cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. It's a faith in other people, and it's what brought me here today.

## Notes

[1] Chalmers A. Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2010; and Chalmers A. Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*, New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2004.

Arthur Kroker is Canada Research Chair in Technology, Culture and Theory, professor of political science, and the director of the Pacific Center for Technology and Culture at the University of Victoria. His most recent projects include the monograph *Born Again Ideology: Religion, Technology and Terrorism* (New World Perspectives, 2008), and *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader*, co-edited with Marilouise Kroker (University of Toronto, 2008). He is the co-editor of the Digital Futures book series for the University of Toronto Press, as well as the peer-reviewed, electronic journal *CTheory*. [www.krokers.net](http://www.krokers.net) [www.ctheory.net](http://www.ctheory.net)