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The values-free Obama Doctrine



Barack Obama delivers a speech to the Cuban people. (Carlos Barria/Reuters)

by [Richard Cohen](#)

We finally have an Obama Doctrine. It is the 223 words of [the White House statement on the death of Fidel Castro](#). It is blank of moral judgment, empty of indignation, blind to injustice, dismissive of history and indifferent to injury. A dictator has died, and Barack Obama sent him off with [lazy weasel words](#): “History will record and judge the enormous impact of this singular figure on the people and world around him.” History will also record Obama’s failure to condemn.

Fidel Castro was a killer. He came to power in a revolution and so violence was probably inescapable. But he followed it with [mass executions](#) — the guilty, the innocent, it hardly mattered. He imposed a totalitarian system on Cuba even harsher and more homicidal than the one that preceded it. [He persecuted homosexuals, dissidents](#), critical writers and journalists. He would not tolerate a free press, and his own political party was the only one permitted. In the end, he ruined his country’s economy while at the same time exporting terrorism. Venezuela today is a quasi-police state run with the invaluable assistance of Cubans.

Obama mentioned none of this. Instead, he cited “the countless ways in which Fidel Castro altered the course of individual lives, families, and of the Cuban nation.” If individual lives were altered by torture, imprisonment, execution or mere harassment, then I suppose the president is on to something and once again using language creatively. But this is thin gruel for Castro’s victims, some of whom might have expected the president of the United States to acknowledge their suffering. Alas, they got nothing.

I call this inert White House statement the Obama Doctrine because it nicely encapsulates the president’s lack of indignation. No-drama Obama, as he has been called, has an occasional moral moment, but not often. He has been offended by Donald Trump, but then the president-elect has trafficked in bigotry, asserting that Obama was not a native-born American, as the Constitution requires of a president. It was only with pained reluctance that Trump acknowledged otherwise — a perfunctory performance lacking all conviction.

But the president has abided [the Syrian slaughter](#) without showing much disgust. He drew a red line around Bashar al-Assad’s use of poison gas and then walked away from it. I understand. His use of the term “[red line](#)” always seemed accidental, just a term that came to mind, and he was boxed in by it. But his failure to enforce it was certainly purposeful, and he has allowed the [Syrian regime, the Russians and Hezbollah](#) to kill with impunity. The Obama Doctrine comes down to a shrug of the shoulders.

Trump, on the other hand, awoke on Saturday twittering. In a tweet, he remarked that Castro had died and in a statement he denounced him as a “brutal dictator.” It is an odd and sad day when I agree with Trump and disagree with Obama and feel, moreover, that the learning-unabled president-elect has expressed American values while the president has expressed no values at all. Here, once again, Obama ignored the past and all its complications and instead focused on the

future. “During my presidency, we have worked hard to put the past behind us,” the president said. The past, possibly. Memory, never.

Castro has always represented an odd litmus test for the American left. He assumed a kind of literary bona fide, the dictator who read Gabriel García Márquez and was in turn flattered by him. Castro became a literary invention himself, “The General in his Labyrinth” perhaps. García Márquez saw the invisible in his writing but could never see the reality of Castro.

Others, less gifted than García Márquez, also found extenuating circumstance in Castro. He had an excellent health service, they insisted, as if it were not possible to have good doctors *and* a free press or oppose racism *and* not persecute homosexuals or dissidents. For some on the left, it was enough that Castro loathed capitalism and was America’s enemy. Like Uncle Ho, Uncle Joe and even that charming beast Mao, those attributes put him on many a dorm-room poster.

In his statement, Obama looked forward to a “future” in which Cuba and the United States have a better relationship. But in not recognizing why that relationship has been so bad in the past — in not even acknowledging the vast crimes of Fidel Castro — Obama let the Cuban people know that the future can be just as bad. It’s the Obama Doctrine in a nutshell: Do what you want.

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