



# WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

A Monograph Series

## **The Obama Administration at the Midterm**



A Conversation with  
Stephen Wayne



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## *Worldviews for the 21st Century: A Monograph Series*

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### *Program Offices:*

University of Central Florida  
Howard Phillips Hall, Room 202  
4000 Central Florida Blvd.  
P.O. Box 160003  
Orlando, Florida 32816-0003  
U.S.A.  
(407) 823-0935/0688  
(407) 823-0716 (fax)  
global@mail.ucf.edu

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**Question: What did President Barack Obama's 2011 State of the Union address suggest to you regarding his intentions for the near future as well as 2012?**

Stephen Wayne: Obama steered a middle course, but he also indicated the priorities on which he will not compromise: innovation, education and renewable energy. The address was consistent with his 2008 campaign oratory, and it was the first speech of his 2012 re-election campaign. What was missing, though, was a realistic notion of the foreign-policy decisions he will have to make and problems he will face. He lauded the ongoing withdrawal from Iraq and the impending departure from Afghanistan, but he did not discuss the three areas where he thought he would focus in 2008: North Korea, Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

**Q: How do you assess Obama's standing at the midterm?**

A: He is suffering the plight of most presidents who were elected because their predecessors were thought to have done a bad job, presidents such as Ronald Reagan after Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton after George H.W. Bush. At the midterm, those presidents were essentially where Obama is today. However, he has had a much more active and successful presidency in legislative terms.

**Q: What accounts for his progress?**

A: It can be attributed to the overwhelming Democratic majorities on the Hill that stayed with him; the depth and breadth of the recession since – in times of crisis – Congress plays follow the leader; and the fact that he had a very successful transition. Remember, we still describe his presidential election as historic. There was an opportunity for him to act, and act he did. However, the legislation has not yet had the desired impact during his first two years in office. Unemployment has increased. The bill to help families save their homes has not been particularly successful (there are still a lot of foreclosures). And the recession, despite what many economists say, is not over for many people.

**Q: Are the president's communication abilities part of the issue?**

A: No, his public approval has not declined for that reason. As he amply demonstrated in the State of the Union address, he is an excellent communicator. However, he is not warm and fuzzy like Clinton or a good guy to have a beer with like former President George W. Bush. It is not how he communicates but what he has had to communicate; he has not had good news to report. His campaign raised expectations to unrealistic heights, ones that even a president with a large Democratic majority could not meet in a crisis. Some 87 percent of people were dissatisfied with the economy, Iraq and other issues. They wanted conditions changed. But there was no consensus on the policy to make those changes. The moment Obama started making decisions, people began to disapprove of them.

**Q: Are there other factors?**

A: Yes, one is the fact that even though Obama has said that he has tried to change politics as usual, he has been singularly unsuccessful in trying to do that. There is another matter that became evident after the stimulus and investment bill. The overall problem is that having a successful activist government in an age of Reagan is not

an attribute but a liability. Obama has used the government in a very aggressive way to regulate, to stimulate and, with health care, at least in most people's minds, to redistribute social resources from the wealthy to the poor. Some regulation which has been proposed has been supported by the public, particularly with respect to Wall Street. But if you look at public polls, most people think government should do less regulating. They have lots of suspicion, even mistrust of government.

**Q: Is that deserved?**

A: Well, Obama spent over \$1 trillion, adding to the deficit, and has little to show for it. He also helped people who caused the problem, the executives and their firms on Wall Street, but not so much the people on Main Street. Public opinion was mildly supportive of the stimulus package. It was divided more negatively than positively on health care. He went against the grain of public opinion, which has been skeptical for decades about requirements such as purchasing insurance.

**Q: So how does the future potentially shape up for Obama?**

A: In a certain sense, the future is out of Obama's hands. He has done what he can and will be able to do to stimulate the economy. The Fed doesn't have too many options left either, because of the low interest rates, although it is buying government bonds. If the economy comes back, it will be because of what Obama has done, not what he will do during the period before the 2012 election. The signs are hopeful, but certainly not 100 percent, that unemployment will go down measurably or that housing values will go up appreciably in the next two years.

**Q: In light of such circumstances, where do you expect Obama to focus?**

A: More on foreign policy. He is still mired in Afghanistan and without much leverage. He said at the beginning of his term that

he had two years, no more. He is right. I expect there will be incremental legislation on energy and the environment. There will be a discussion about immigration but not necessarily action. He will have to spend some time doing what he does not like to do: managing the government. Indeed, Republicans will push for this. Of course, we still have the nuclear problem in Iran, tensions on the Pakistan border and trade differences with China. In fact, the only two places you can point to where U.S. relations have truly improved are Europe and Russia.

**Q: What about Obama’s leadership potential?**

A: His challenge to date is that people have had difficulty identifying with him. They do not see him reaching out. He is very analytical, very much a philosopher king. He is distant rather than personable. That is a problem, not critical, but a problem. Second, for the first two years of any new presidency, presidents are compared with the image that they projected during their campaigns. He said that he would be a transformational leader, with a “Yes We Can” attitude. Beginning in 2011, he is going to be compared more often to some real people, including the Republican leadership. He will look better than when he is compared to an idealized image.

**Q: What do you anticipate for 2012?**

A: Obama’s fate is tied largely to the economy. If it is coming back, and most people agree that it is happening, he will have solved his major challenge. Also, if people see some benefits from health care, it will help. Presidents win or lose on the basis of how people perceive conditions and on the extent to which they view the president as responsible for them. People do not blame Obama for the recession, but they blame him for the lack of a recovery – spending a lot and showing little. That said, I have every expectation that he will run again. He has no serious challengers in the Democratic Party, and he’s a great fund-raiser. On the Republican side, a lot of people are running right now: Newt Gingrich, perhaps Sarah Palin, the unsuccessful from the last round, various governors and a distant

possibility – Marco Rubio, the Republican Barack Obama.

*Stephen Wayne is an expert on the American presidency, having written twelve books, several in multiple editions, and over 100 articles, chapters, and book reviews. His major works include The Road to the White House, now in its eighth edition, The Legislative Presidency, Presidential Leadership (with George C. Edwards), 8th ed., two co-authored introductory texts on American government, The Politics of American Government, 3rd ed., and the most recent, Conflict and Consensus in American Politics, published in 2006. In addition, Wayne has authored or edited the following works: Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Election?, 4th. ed., The Election of the Century (with Clyde Wilcox), and Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Government? ed. with contributions from graduate students, faculty and alumni of the Government Department of Georgetown University. He has completed a new book on President Obama, titled Personality and Politics: Obama For and Against Himself. Wayne has served as President of the Presidency Research Group and The National Capital Area Political Science Association. He regularly lectures to international visitors, senior federal executives, and college students in the United States and abroad on the presidency and electoral politics. He has testified before Congress, advised both the Republican and Democratic National Committees on the presidential nomination process, and worked as a consultant on various film documentaries on the American Presidency. This interview was conducted by Worldviews Editor John C. Bersia on January 26, 2011.*