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Obama Word Tour 2008

by Michael Tennant

Ten-year-old girls at a Hannah Montana concert had nothing on our news media as they took in Barack Obama's July trip to benighted foreign lands. Obama World Tour 2008 T-shirts were, figuratively speaking, on the backs of practically everyone in his press entourage. This tour proved, we are led to believe, that Obama is serious about foreign policy, just as George W. Bush's ignorance of the names of leaders of then-obscure Asian countries was supposed to indicate his lack of concern about the subject back in 2000.

Why is it that our opinion-making class believes that someone who is running for the presidency of the United States also must be widely traveled and (at least giving the appearance of being) deeply knowledgeable about so many other countries? Why do so many voters seem to think that this matters, too? Democrats saw Obama's world tour as proof of his foreign policy bona fides, while Republicans pooh-poohed it as so much show business while touting John McCain's alleged foreign policy expertise.

When was the last time a *candidate* for prime minister of India or president of Peru visited the United States? For that matter, how often do the actual leaders of these countries feel the need to venture outside their borders, and especially to other continents, aside from attending international conferences and the like? Perhaps they are content just to deal with the problems of their own nations rather than sticking their noses into everyone else's business.

Alas! Such is not the case here in America, where the president, and anyone aspiring to the job, is expected not just to feel our pain, as Bill Clinton claimed to do, but to feel the entire world's pain — and to apply the appropriate analgesic. One would think that Obama, at the time of his trip having just over four months to canvass 50 states for votes, would have had his hands full, but apparently not. He had dozens of other countries to which he felt obliged to audaciously offer hope — or, if they reject "hope," a shower of explosives.

While there is much to be said for a broad knowledge of the world, from a constitutional standpoint it is far from a prerequisite for serving as president. The only responsibilities assigned to the president that involve foreign countries are to act as commander-in-chief of the armed

forces when Congress calls them into service; to make treaties, with the advice and consent of the Senate; and to receive ambassadors and other foreign officials. (Take note that only one of these is not qualified by deference to the legislative branch — a rebuke to the frequent neoconservative contention that foreign policy is the sole province of the executive branch.) Only the commander-in-chief role, which ought to be one of the least worn of the president's hats, requires any detailed knowledge of another country, and that kind of detailed knowledge isn't likely to be gleaned from a whirlwind tour such as Obama's anyway. Besides, when conducting a war the president is most likely to rely on military commanders and other officials for information on the terrain, military targets, and political situation in the country or countries with which the United States is in conflict. Unless we're fighting Liechtenstein, there's no way one man could be expected to know all of those details.

Of course, from a libertarian standpoint, the U.S. military would only be sent into battle for strictly defensive purposes, meaning that most of the war would be fought on U.S. soil, making detailed knowledge of foreign countries even less necessary for a president. There is nothing in the Constitution that prohibits Congress from calling the military into service for aggressive wars, but it's worth noting that America was involved in far fewer of these types of conflicts back when presidents didn't dare send troops into battle without a declaration of war.

While today we consider it perfectly normal for presidents to travel all over the world, no president for the first 117 years of this republic's existence ever left the confines of the Union while in office. Not coincidentally, our first openly imperialist president, Theodore Roosevelt, was the one to [break that tradition](#). Even less coincidentally, Roosevelt's trip had as its purpose the inspection of his pet imperial project, the Panama Canal — a project that would not have been possible at that time without T.R.'s earlier unconstitutional use of the U.S. military to effect Panama's secession from Colombia. Since then every president has felt the need to visit nations beyond our shores, often wielding Roosevelt's "big stick" to force those nations into compliance with Uncle Sam's wishes. Is it any wonder that we've been involved in so many foreign conflicts and suffered the resultant blowback in the last century?

In the America envisioned by the Founding Fathers, who had recently engaged in a war to escape an empire, the president's knowledge of foreign countries would not necessarily need to be either broad or deep, for it would be an America of "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliances with none" (Thomas Jefferson). All the president of the republic would have to know about foreign countries is how to treat them fairly and honestly, and that doesn't require any specialized information or world tours.

Unfortunately, we no longer live in that America. Today our government is entangled all around the globe, with troops in at least [144 countries and 15 territories](#) and a sitting president and presidential candidates, both Republican and Democrat, threatening new military action against Iran and stepped-up action against Afghanistan — and those are only the places they're

telling us they plan to attack. As one of the aspirants to the Oval Office, Obama knows he's going to be running — and, he hopes, expanding — a worldwide empire if he is elected. He just wants to get a head start on it now and is counting on a fawning press corps to treat his tour of the satrapies as an opportunity for his intellectual advancement, preparing him to fill the shoes of the many supposedly wise, altruistic Caesars who have gone before him in Washington.

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