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To: H
Subject: Fw: Fred Hiatt

----- Original Message -----

From: Posner, Michael H
Sent: Sunday, April 08, 2012 11:58 PM
To: Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J; Nuland, Victoria J; Feltman, Jeffrey D
Subject: Fred Hiatt

Uggh

Obama's lack of passion in supporting freedom By Fred Hiatt,

Sunday, April 8, 8:12 PM

More than three years into his term, it's possible to assess where the promotion of democracy and freedom ranks in President Obama's foreign policy: not high.

It's also possible to venture a theory as to why that's so.

This was a matter of uncertainty before his election. Not surprisingly, Obama was eager to separate himself from his predecessor's "Freedom Agenda," which had been oversold and yoked to an unpopular war in Iraq. Obama talked more about "dignity" than "democracy" and warned that self-government couldn't be imposed.

But he also portrayed himself as faithful to a tradition of American support for democracy. In a 2007 Foreign Affairs article setting out his worldview, Obama wrote, "Citizens everywhere should be able to choose their leaders in climates free of fear."

He has, at times, acted on that tenet. He's met with dissenters such as the Dalai Lama, responded deftly to democratic advances in Burma, praised freedom from a platform in Shanghai.

Overall, though, he has shown little passion for the cause.

Every president maneuvers inside a fairly narrow band. Circumstances, Congress and public opinion can force even the most indifferent president to promote freedom in some cases, while the most ardent believer has to balance the cause of democracy among many other priorities. A president's predilections emerge gradually, most notably in response to unexpected events.

The biggest unpredicted event of Obama's term has been the Arab Spring. He responded to it, case-by-case and overall, as if it were an unwanted distraction, not a historic opening.

In Egypt, the Obama administration embraced Hosni Mubarak until he was doomed, neglecting the secular democrats Mubarak was jailing, and then re-embraced the military regime that succeeded him, opening the military aid spigot despite many broken promises on democratization. Obama was tugged by the French and British into a military rescue

of Libya's revolutionaries, but offered little help to their Syrian counterparts, despite far greater human devastation. He has shown understanding for Bahrain's repressions, and Saudi Arabia's.

More striking than his country-specific hesitancy has been the absence of any high-level, overarching embrace of the strategic opportunity. Two decades ago, as the Iron Curtain shredded, the United States led a Western alliance that jumped at the chance to consolidate democracy from Slovakia to Estonia. The chance to nurture democracy in the heart of the Islamic world has not elicited a comparable response.

This is consistent with Obama's record elsewhere. He remained aloof from the Green Revolution in Iran. In Iraq, he failed to maintain a residual force that might have helped protect the democratic gains of the past decade. He bolstered U.S. forces in Afghanistan but portrayed their mission almost entirely as safeguarding U.S. security, rarely, even secondarily, as helping Afghans live in freedom.

In nations that received less attention, such as Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, the administration has been content to work with the autocrats in charge and has been forced to scramble when, as in Kyrgyzstan, democrats upended dictators who had become partners.

In Russia, when his bet on President Dmitry Medvedev soured, Obama swiftly made overtures to Vladimir Putin. In China, the tone was set early on when Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the administration would discuss human rights, "but our pressing on those issues can't interfere on the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis."

Obama's half-hearted advocacy of democracy reflects, his supporters argue, his hard-headed pragmatism. He needs a supply route through Russia to NATO troops in Afghanistan. He wants Chinese cooperation on currency rates. He's not going to let feel-good human rights advocacy get in the way.

But his stance also reflects his own brand of idealism, which values international law and alliances more than the promotion of freedom. The democrats' uprising in Iran threatened his hopes of negotiating a nuclear agreement with Iran's rulers. Aid to Syria's democrats requires approval from the U.N. Security Council, which is unattainable without Russian and Chinese acquiescence.

His instincts might have been predicted from the 2007 article, which was contemptuous of the "conventional thinking" of the Bush administration that viewed problems as "state-based." Obama promised to "rebuild the alliances, partnerships and institutions necessary to confront common threats."

There's no disputing the importance of alliances or President Bush's costly neglect of them, especially in his first term. But alliances are "state-based," and regimes that spit on the rule of law at home may not be reliable partners in creating a rule of law across borders.

That, in turn, may help explain why many key objectives Obama laid out in his vision statement — peace between Israelis and Palestinians, securing all nuclear materials, a global response to climate change — remain elusive. In the long run, a passion for freedom might do more to shape a world in which such problems can be solved.

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