

## Two Earthquakes and a Near-Miss Bombing Signal a Challenging 2010

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After the Massachusetts Senate vote, the Obama Administration must focus resolutely on jobs in the U.S. economy. But in 2010, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Iraq, and global terrorism each could explode into a major foreign policy crisis, the handling of which could shape his legacy as President.

The foreign policy of American Presidents is often shaped by some defining event. In the case of George Bush, it was the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Coming after less than eight months in office, the remainder of his two terms as President was devoted to waging a war against terrorism and ensuring that there was no second attack during his tenure.

For Bill Clinton, it was the mass murder of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica, Bosnia. Until that point, though the war raged, President Clinton sought to avoid getting the United States bogged down in Bosnia, diverting him from a domestic economic agenda. (Remember: “It’s the economy, stupid” was his campaign slogan.) But when European peacekeepers stood helplessly as Bosnian Serbs systematically murdered 7,000 men and boys over five days, it was impossible to stand aside any longer. Ending ethnic cleansing in the Balkans became a signal achievement of the Clinton Administration, and paved the way for EU and NATO enlargement. For George H. W. Bush, it was the fall of the Berlin Wall. Unexpectedly, President Bush had to focus his policies on supporting the half of Europe that was newly free, guiding the peaceful unification of Germany, and overseeing a peaceful end to the Cold War, as the Soviet Union lost its empire and eventually collapsed.

But for Jimmy Carter, though the events came late in his Presidency, it was the hostage-taking of American diplomats by Iranian radicals, which conveyed an image of American weakness and, just seven weeks later, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which drove the point home.

If there is one thing in common about all of these “defining moments,” it is that they were not planned. Rather, they were external events to which the United States had to react. And how the President led that reaction became a lasting image. Presidential Administrations work hard to develop long-term strategies and policies – as well they should. But it is usually events beyond their control that are the most significant.

It is too early to judge what will be seen as the events that define the Obama Presidency. He has three years to go in his first term, an eon in the age of globalization and the internet, and could very well be elected for another four years after that. Anything can happen.

But as he steps to the podium on January 27 to deliver his State of the Union address, after one year in office, one can already see the seeds of issues which may make 2010 a defining year.

2009 was a year of unrealistic expectations, followed by inevitable disappointment. It was a year of the biggest economic shocks the world has seen since the 1970's oil embargo and the 1930's Great Depression. And in foreign policy, it was a year of storm clouds gathering – whether in Afghanistan, Iran, Russia or North Korea. So far, none of these has a claim to defining President Obama's legacy in foreign policy.

But three events in the past month – a near-miss bombing and two earthquakes – are a warning that 2010 may be the year that counts.

On December 25, a Nigerian terrorist, sent by al Qaeda, failed in his effort to blow up an airplane over the Detroit airport. For an Administration that had worked hard to steer away from what it saw as the excesses of the Bush Administration, it was extremely lucky that the bomber failed. It was a reminder to the American public that terrorism has not gone away, and a signal to the Administration that – like its predecessor – it cannot afford a second attack.

On January 12, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti, killing perhaps 200,000 and leaving over 1.5 million people homeless. Though it was not something the Administration had planned on, only the United States could respond quickly and massively enough to save as many lives as possible. The amount of lasting devastation means that Haiti must remain a priority for the United States for years to come.

Then, on January 19, a political earthquake hit – the election of a Republican to fill what had been Ted Kennedy's Democratic Senate seat in Massachusetts. Practically speaking, this ends the Democratic Party's eight-month super-majority in the Senate, where it could reliably overcome Republican opposition. The Senate now reverts to normal, where cross-party alliances are essential to passing legislation.

But politically speaking, the Massachusetts election is far more significant. It shows that voters even in one of the most Democratic states in the country remain extraordinarily unhappy. Last year, that unhappiness was directly squarely at the Bush Administration. Now, with one year on the job, it is directed at the current incumbents.

There are just nine months before the mid-term Congressional elections, in which all the seats in the House of Representatives and one-third of the seats in the Senate will be decided. Many are safe. But enough seats could change hands that it could lead to a loss of Democratic control of the House, and a further weakening in the Senate. For the Democratic Party, the lesson to be learned from Massachusetts is that there must be a single-minded focus on one thing: jobs.

Yet 2010 is a year when more American attention to foreign policy will be required, not less. The surge in Afghanistan will be put to the test. American stewardship in Haiti will be judged. Iran will make critical progress on a nuclear weapon, while youthful protestors pose a growing challenge to the regime. The election in Iraq, followed by the withdrawal of U.S. forces, will test the sustainability of the end to Sunni-Shia violence. Russia will continue to solidify its "sphere of influence" – holding breakaway territories such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria while manipulating politics in neighboring states, using energy, treaty proposals, and opposition to missile defense as a wedge. Al Qaeda will try another attack.

Any one of these issues – and perhaps more than one – could explode into a full-blown foreign policy crisis in 2010. And how President Obama rises to that challenge, more than anything that has happened to date, and more than any of the best-laid plans his Administration will make, may end up being the event that defines our future image of his Presidency.

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