



# Obama's New Engagement Policy Is Costing the U.S. Allies and Risking National Security

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# Executive Summary

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President Barack Obama began his term with a grand, more affable vision for U.S. relations with the world. The United States would no longer refuse to speak to rogue nations and the heretofore forbidden practice of negotiating without preconditions would be accepted policy. This new U.S. posture was certainly different. No other U.S. President had so publicly stated his intentions to engage the world's worst actors, but Obama viewed the policy of isolating rogue nations as "ridiculous"—an arcane policy much in need of revision.

In his short 12 months in office, Obama has fulfilled this promise to engage: beginning talks in Iran, bowing to Russian pressure on missile defense, chatting personally with Venezuelan President Chavez, and sending high-level delegations to North Korea and Burma. At the same time, the Obama Administration has shown a clear discomfort with declaring support for America's allies: abandoning Poland and the Czech Republic on missile defense, rigorously defending ousted Honduran President Zelaya over the Honduran officials working to preserve their democracy, staying silent after Iran's brutal crackdown on reform demonstrators, and publicly snubbing the Dalai Lama in favor of the Chinese.

As a result of these actions, the Obama Administration is alienating our allies, depressing opposition groups working for freedom in the world's most oppressive nations, and emboldening our adversaries to continue their provocative and dangerous activities.

The United States must maintain its role in the world as a voice for freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. If it doesn't, the world may forever view Obama as having a preference for dictators over democrats, which is hardly the legacy Obama hopes to leave.

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## Talking Points

- During the campaign, Obama stated his intention to engage some of the United States' most vocal adversaries without preconditions.
- Since taking office, Obama has initiated talks with some of the world's most dangerous countries at the cost of some of America's oldest and staunchest supporters.
- As a result, the U.S. has alienated allies, depressed opposition groups in oppressed countries, and emboldened dictators determined to harm the United States.
- Going forward, the Obama Administration must review its foreign policy strategy, reaffirm U.S. support for its allies, and remain a consistent voice for freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.



## Introduction

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As a candidate, Obama was asked if he would be willing to meet separately and without preconditions with the leaders of some of the United States' most vocal adversaries. Obama answered directly: "I would. And the reason is this: that the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them—which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration—is ridiculous."

Obama kept his word. Since taking office, the President has rejected the quiet isolation strategy of previous administrations. He has spoken personally and publicly to leaders openly hostile to the United States and has directed the State Department to begin high-level discussions with leaders of some of the world's most dangerous countries.

While President Obama viewed the Bush Administration's foreign policy as a strategy designed to punish misbehaving countries, engagement can also be viewed as a reward to be doled out to countries that pursue democracy and recognize their citizens' basic human rights. As this paper will argue, by speaking to rogue leaders, Obama has dealt the world a double whammy—empowering the world's belligerent dictators while discouraging America's allies and those developing nations working to create democratic institutions.

There is also a considerable amount of conflict between the Obama Administration's new foreign policy strategy and President Obama's publicly stated vision for the world. Soon after taking office, the President delivered a major foreign policy speech in Ghana in which he said "history offers a clear verdict: governments that respect the will of their own people are more prosperous, more stable and more successful than governments that do not [...] In the 21st century, capable, reliable and transparent institutions are the key to success—strong parliaments and honest police forces; independent judges and journalists; a vibrant private sector, and civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in peoples' lives." Yet he has been unwilling to make the distinction between those countries that pursue this vision and those that reject it.

As Vice President Joseph Biden predicted, President Obama's mettle has been tested since taking office, and the President has reacted by employing his new strategy of engagement. The results have been consistently disappointing. Instead of bowing to Obama's charm and persuasion, these countries have continued their dangerous actions, fiery rhetoric, and aggressive behavior.

This paper will examine what this new policy of engagement and openness has gained—and cost—the United States.



## Honduras: Supporting Dictators, Rejecting Democracy

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On June 29, 2009, Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was arrested by the Honduran military and sent into exile in Costa Rica after he defied Supreme Court orders to stop pursuing a constitutional change eliminating the one-term limit on presidential terms. Critics viewed the ouster of Zelaya as a coup d'état. Others judged it as a heroic move on the part of the Honduran government to save a weakened democracy.

Four years earlier, Zelaya was elected president after running on a pro-reform ticket that promised greater government transparency and a crackdown on narco-trafficking.<sup>1</sup> He won the election with less than a 4% margin of victory—the smallest margin ever in Honduran electoral history.<sup>2</sup> While slim, the margin was, by all accounts, considered legitimate.

Unfortunately, soon after taking office, President Zelaya rejected his promises of transparency and reform and put forth a number of industry-crippling, populist policies, including a 60% increase in minimum wage, which increased unemployment and plunged the already poor country into greater poverty. In addition, Zelaya eagerly began an alliance with anti-American Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro, who famously said of Zelaya after a March 2009 meeting in Havana, “To Zelaya, ‘the capitalist system is the most repugnant concept of justice that a human being may have.’”<sup>3</sup> Zelaya further codified these alliances by joining the anti-American Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a leftist, Latin American trade block that recently announced they would stop using the U.S. dollar for trade.<sup>4</sup>

Not long after Zelaya took office, the Honduran economy suffered. Hondurans experienced a steep decline in their standard of living as poverty, unemployment, and inflation increased. Violent crimes also increased.<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Development Program reported that Honduras' murder rate increased over 25% in 2008, making its murder rate one of the highest in the world.<sup>6</sup> Although Zelaya promised honesty and transparency, a number of government officials were forced to resign because of corruption charges. In addition, Zelaya's attempts at reform proved hollow as the transparency law passed by his Administration was found to be filled with loopholes.<sup>7</sup>

Zelaya's corruption also cost the country much needed development dollars. In 2005, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA)—a foreign-aid program created by President George W. Bush that provides funding to countries that respect human rights and civil liberties—gave Honduras a relatively high rating in political and civil liberties and awarded the country \$215 million for road infrastructure and agriculture diversification. But by

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2008, under Zelaya's presidency, Honduras failed the corruption indicator required for continued funding and the MCA withdrew the aid.<sup>8</sup>

Given these developments, it was therefore greeted by many in the U.S. as welcome news when Zelaya was ousted from office. The Honduran military's actions were, after all, supported by the Honduran Congress and Supreme Court. While the actual arrest and exile might have been handled with greater diplomacy, many saw the ouster as a chance for democracy to resume. The Obama Administration saw this situation differently. President Obama's reaction was swift. Unlike his calm and measured statements on the Iranian government's bloody crackdown on demonstrators, Obama was quick to condemn the peaceful ouster of Zelaya, stating that the removal from office of President Zelaya was "not legal" and that he remains the country's president.<sup>9</sup>

The Obama Administration also joined other countries around the world in punishing the Honduran government and its people. The European Union ended \$90 million in aid and U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced the suspension of \$30 million in non-humanitarian assistance.<sup>10</sup> In addition to cutting aid, Obama refused to recognize the new government and famously (and very publicly) revoked the visas of Hondurans "who are members and/or supporters of the de facto regime."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Secretary of State Clinton willingly met with ousted President Zelaya in Washington, D.C.

Late in 2009, a deal was brokered to return Zelaya to power pending a judicial review by the Honduran Supreme Court and a vote in that country's legislature. All parties agreed. A month later, Zelaya announced the deal was dead due to the legislature refusing to rush the vote. Given this latest setback, it is unlikely Zelaya will return to office.

Apparently, that does not matter to the Obama Administration. According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, Senator Jim DeMint was recently told by Secretary of State Clinton that the U.S. would recognize the outcome of the elections "regardless of whether Manuel Zelaya is reinstated."<sup>12</sup>

This is a significant shift from previous statements and policy and raises the question of why the United States was so quick to rush to try to help reinstate Zelaya, a corrupt, leftist, anti-American, Castro-loving, Chavez-imitating, increasingly dictatorial, Latin American politician. That strategy seemingly gained nothing for the U.S. and, in the process, alienated nearly every other politician in Honduras. It also libeled the Honduran Supreme Court, most members of the Honduran Congress, and nearly every member of the Honduran military.

The Obama Administration missed a golden opportunity to support a government trying to maintain its democracy. This also could have been a "teachable moment" as Obama likes to say—an opportunity to express to the citizens of Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, and other left-leaning Latin American countries with rulers pursuing Zelaya-like agendas that the United States continues to stand for freedom, transparency, the rule of law, and accountability for all elected officials.





## Meeting Russian Demands, Rejecting Poland and the Czech Republic

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In September 2009, President Obama bowed to Russian pressure and announced he would reverse the Bush Administration's plans to deploy missile interceptors to Poland and place radars in the Czech Republic in favor of an alternative program—the Navy's Aegis-based missile defense system.<sup>13</sup> According to many reports, Polish and Czech authorities were not notified of this move until the last minute and were shocked by the decision. In other words, there seemed to be no advanced tip-off from the Obama Administration of this major policy shift in the missile defense program.

The abandonments of Poland and the Czech Republic are particularly jarring, given their unwavering support of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite growing skepticism from the Polish public, 2,000 Polish troops are currently deployed in Afghanistan as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Fifteen Polish soldiers have been killed since 2002.<sup>14</sup> Poland has also supported the U.S. in Iraq by sending 2,600 soldiers in 2003 and remaining there until late 2008.<sup>15</sup>

The Czech Republic also continues to make significant contributions to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2008, the Czech Republic sent a Provincial Reconstruction Team to Logar Province, Afghanistan as well as an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team to work alongside the Afghanistan National Air Corps.<sup>16</sup>

Given these countries' clear commitment to assisting the United States, the Obama Administration's actions seem particularly insensitive and send the wrong message to countries considering whether to back U.S.-led measures. Senator Jon Kyl characterized the move by stating that it "turns back the clock to the days of the Cold War, when Eastern Europe was considered the domain of Russia."<sup>17</sup> Former Vice President Dick Cheney, discussing the move in an October 2009 speech, stated:

"It is certainly not a model of diplomacy when the leaders of Poland and the Czech Republic are informed of such a decision at the last minute in midnight phone calls. It took a long time and lot of political courage in those countries to arrange for our interceptor system in Poland and the radar system in the Czech Republic. Our Polish and Czech friends are entitled to wonder how strategic plans and promises years in the making could be dissolved, just like that—with apparently little, if any, consultation. Seventy years to the day after the Soviets invaded Poland, it was an odd way to mark the occasion."<sup>18</sup>

At the time of the announcement, the Obama Administration was aware of the growing concerns of Central and Eastern European leaders about Russia. In an open letter to Obama published in July (only months before the announced reversal on missile defense),

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a group of former Central and Eastern European leaders (including former Czech Republic President and Presidential Medal of Honor winner Vaclav Havel and former Polish President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Walesa) expressed their urgent concerns about an increasingly aggressive and militarized Russia.<sup>19</sup> The letter states:

“Russia is back as a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods. At a global level, Russia has become, on most issues, a status-quo power. But at a regional level and vis-à-vis our nations, it increasingly acts as a revisionist one. It challenges our claims to our own historical experiences. It asserts a privileged position in determining our security choices. It uses overt and covert means of economic warfare, ranging from energy blockades and politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation in order to advance its interests and to challenge the transatlantic orientation of Central and Eastern Europe.”<sup>20</sup>

Other Eastern European countries have taken note of the Obama Administration’s decision and it has shaken their confidence in the United States and the NATO alliance. Speaking at a meeting of Eastern and Central European leaders a month ago, Sandra Kalniete, a European Parliament Deputy from Latvia, said of the Obama Administration hitting the “reset button” on missile defense, “we take the withdrawal of antimissile plans from the Czech Republic and Poland as a signal that Eastern Europeans and Poles are no longer as high on the U.S. agenda as they used to be during the Bush and Clinton eras.”<sup>21</sup>

But it is not just Europe that has reason to fear Russia. Evidence clearly shows Russia’s interest in resuming Cold War tensions with the U.S. According to a Heritage Foundation report on Russian military escalation:

“A top Russian Air Force general this spring claimed that Venezuela could host Russian long-range bombers. This follows the visit of Russian bombers and a small flotilla to Venezuela last year. Cuba was mentioned as a possible home to Russian planes as well. Russia is also looking at reestablishing its Cold War naval base in Syria and is discussing basing rights in Libya and Yemen to forward-deploy warships. Russian strategic bombers are operating widely from bases across Russia, and some have conducted flybys near U.S. Navy aircraft carriers.”<sup>22</sup>

What has the United States gained from Russia in return for slighting its Eastern European allies? Shortly after the U.S. agreed to abandon its missile defense plans in Poland and the Czech Republic (ostensibly in return for Russian support on Iran), Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced just after meetings with Secretary of State Clinton, “We are convinced that threats, sanctions, and threats of pressure [on Iran] in the present situation are counter-productive.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, there has been no noticeable reduction in Russia’s commitment to providing weapons to Iran, Syria, and Venezuela. Russia also continues plans to build military bases in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.



## Silence on Iran

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Following Iran's contested presidential election in June 2009, hundreds of thousands of Iranian citizens protested publicly in the streets. Images of the demonstrations were widely broadcast all over the world as the international press immediately began to report the story.

Uncomfortable with the attention, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad expelled the press and ordered his security forces to crackdown on the protests. But the protestors continued to provide updates using email and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Amateur documentarians shot grainy cell-phone videos of police beatings; one even captured the death of the now iconic young protestor—Neda Agha-Soltan. Thousands of protestors were rounded up and jailed, many were beaten, and some were killed on the street. In the months since, reports have emerged of the rape and torture of the jailed demonstrators.<sup>24</sup> Some have been forced to provide “confessions” that have been broadcast on Iranian television. Three protestors have been sentenced to death.

In the days immediately following the election and early demonstrations, the White House was silent. A week after the protests began, President Obama briefly discussed the situation stating that it would not be productive “to be seen as meddling in Iranian elections.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, at a June 23, 2009, press conference—a full 11 days after the Iran elections—President Obama addressed the issue in more detail. While he condemned the “unjust actions” of the Iranian government and stated he mourned “each and every innocent life that is lost,” he downplayed the intentions of the protestors by saying “the Iranian people are trying to have a debate about their future.”<sup>26</sup> He was also quick to make clear that “the United States respects the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran and is not interfering with Iran's affairs.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite Obama's efforts not to “meddle” in Iranian affairs and his eagerness to prove he had established a post-Bush era in American foreign policy, Iran's rhetoric continued to be aggressive. Two days after Obama's June 23 press conference, President Ahmadinejad said of Obama on Iranian state television, “If you continue your meddlesome stance, the Iranian nation's response will be crushing and regret-inducing.”<sup>28</sup>

While the Obama Administration seemed careful not to highlight the outrageous human rights abuses during the protests (ostensible in an effort not to be seen as “meddling” in the process), even since the protests have been extinguished the Administration has continued to marginalize efforts to track human rights abuses in Iran. In October, the *Boston Globe* reported that “just as the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center was preparing to track the abuses of protestors in Iran, the organization received word that, for the first time since it was formed, its federal funding request had been denied.”<sup>29</sup>

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In addition, the Voice of America—the international broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government and charged with providing both news and the American perspective on world events—ended its Radio Farsi service.<sup>30</sup> While the Administration has refused to say why the funding was cut off, many Iran observers and some in Congress have concluded that the Administration's priorities for Iran have shifted from democracy promotion and human rights to nuclear disarmament.<sup>31</sup>

Obama's failure to more forcefully condemn the actions of the Iranian government after the June elections and his willingness to offer only flaccid support for the demonstrators was widely viewed as a trade-off for Iran coming to the negotiation table to discuss their growing nuclear program.

So, what has Obama's anti-meddling position gained the United States?

- **September 2009:** American intelligence reveals that Iran has enough nuclear fuel to make a nuclear weapon.<sup>32</sup>
- **September 25, 2009:** The existence of a secret underground uranium enrichment plant is announced by President Obama, Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain, and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. Iran admits the existence of the plant in a letter to Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>33</sup>
- **November 2009:** Senior Iranian lawmakers reject the U.N. brokered a deal to ship 1.2 tons of uranium (approximately 70% of the stockpile) to Russia by the end of the year.<sup>34</sup> The deal is seen as a stop-gap measure designed to buy negotiators more time in order to develop a more detailed settlement on the Iran nuclear issue.<sup>35</sup>



## Hearty Handshakes for Chavez

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Both during the campaign and since taking office, Obama has made several highly public overtures to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. During the campaign, Obama made headlines by stating publicly that he would sit down face to face and talk to President Chavez—without preconditions. After Obama took office, in April 2009 at the Summit of the Americas meeting held in Trinidad and Tobago, he made headlines again after being photographed smiling and giving Chavez a hearty handshake while accepting Chavez's gift, a book highly critical of U.S. policy in Latin America. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich accused Obama of bolstering the enemies of America. Senators Judd Gregg and John Ensign called the gesture irresponsible.<sup>36</sup> Yet President Obama dismissed the criticism by saying:

“It’s unlikely that as a consequence of me shaking hands or having a polite conversation with Mr. Chavez that we are endangering the strategic interests of the United States,” Obama told reporters at a news conference. “I don’t think anybody can find any evidence that that would do so. Even within this imaginative crowd, I think you would be hard-pressed to paint a scenario in which U.S. interests would be damaged as a consequence of us having a more constructive relationship with Venezuela.”<sup>37</sup>

Some agree with President Obama, dismissing the significance of the handshake by questioning whether Venezuela is even a strategic threat to the US. Perhaps today Venezuela is not an immediate threat to the U.S., but the evidence is clear that it intends to become one. Consider the following disturbing facts about Venezuela:

- **Ties with China:** On September 16, 2009, President Chavez announced a \$16 billion oil investment deal with China.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Venezuela ranked as China’s number one fuel oil import supplier in September.<sup>39</sup>
- **Ties with Russia:** Russia and Venezuela have been military partners for years. In addition to weapons agreements (most notably a \$1 billion arms deal in 2008),<sup>40</sup> last year Russia announced it would send a naval squadron and long-range patrol planes for joint military exercises with Venezuela.<sup>41</sup> More recently, Russia and Venezuela have concentrated on arms deals. In March 2009, Russian Air Force General Anatoly Zhikharev told the Interfax-AVN military news agency that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had offered to let Russian strategic bombers use a military airfield on La Orchila Island, a military base off the central area of the country’s coastline.<sup>42</sup> During a September 2009 visit to Moscow where he met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Chavez announced a \$20 billion oil deal with a



consortium of Russian companies to develop Venezuela's Junin 6 field.<sup>43</sup> Also in September, Chavez announced a major arms deal with Russia in which Russia will lend Venezuela \$2.2 billion to purchase tanks and anti-aircraft rocket systems.<sup>44</sup> At the time of the announcement, Chavez colorfully claimed the arms were for defending against a U.S. attack.<sup>45</sup>

- **Ties with Iran:** Perhaps the most dangerous of Chavez's international ties is with Iran. Venezuela and Iran's relations go back over a decade and include everything from agreements on banking and finance, development cooperation, and oil and gas exploration. Iran also manufactures cars, tractors, and bicycles in Venezuela.<sup>46</sup> However, over the past two years, Iran and Venezuela's interests have turned much more militaristic. While Iranian military advisers have been embedded with Venezuelan army units since 2006,<sup>47</sup> Evidence is growing that the two countries are now looking toward nuclear weapons development. Manhattan district attorney Robert Morgenthau has written and lectured extensively about this. In a recent Wall Street Journal opinion piece, Morgenthau examined their latest joint venture: mining uranium. Morgenthau writes:

“According to a report published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in December of last year, Venezuela has an estimated 50,000 tons of un-mined uranium. There is speculation in the Carnegie report that Venezuela could be mining uranium for Iran. My office has been told that that over the past three years a number of Iranian-owned and controlled factories have sprung up in remote and undeveloped parts of Venezuela—ideal locations for the illicit production of weapons. Evidence of the type of activity conducted inside the factories is limited. But we should be concerned, especially in light of an incident in December 2008. Turkish authorities detained an Iranian vessel bound for Venezuela after discovering lab equipment capable of producing explosives packed inside 22 containers marked ‘tractor parts.’ The containers also allegedly contained barrels labeled with ‘danger’ signs. I think it is safe to assume that this was a lucky catch—and that most often shipments of this kind reach their destination in Venezuela.”<sup>48</sup>



## Recommendation

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Winston Churchill once said, “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.” President Obama should review the results of his foreign policy and ask if it is working. Unfortunately, the answer clearly is no. The world is an increasingly dangerous place filled with failing states possessing dangerous weapons and cash-rich terrorist organizations willing to buy those weapons. The United States must stand strong against these threats.

Instead of engaging rogue dictatorships that have no respect for international law or norms, the Obama Administration should focus on supporting American allies while simultaneously demanding accountability from governments engaged in dangerous activities. The Administration should make the following changes to its foreign policy strategy:

- **Stop talking without preconditions:** History proves that dictators respect strength and exploit weakness. Talking to dictators without preconditions weakens the United States’ position, by allowing dictators a higher level of visibility on the world stage. Most importantly, it sends a terrible message to the opposition movements working within these countries that the United States stands with the dictators, not with the cause for freedom.
- **Condemn the actions of the world’s rogue dictators:** For decades, America has stood up to this violence and has demanded human rights for all mankind. Obama cannot abandon this tradition. He must stand up for those fighting for democracy around the world.
- **Declare support for America’s allies and pro-reform movements in non-democratic nations:** The Obama Administration must continue to vocally support opposition movements that operate within the world’s dictatorships. The Administration must also support governments that seek democracy, transparency, and respect for human rights.

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## Conclusion

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The Obama administration's diplomatic efforts are alienating allies, emboldening adversaries, and depressing freedom-loving opposition movements.

The Administration needs to send a consistent message to the world's dictators that if they thwart international norms and deny their people basic human rights, they will not be supported by the United States. The Administration also needs to send a message to America's allies and to the oppressed people suffering under dictatorial regimes that the United States stands with those countries that respect freedom, democracy, transparency, the rule of law, and the human rights of all their citizens.





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### **About the Author**

Julie Gunlock is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum. Before joining IWF, Gunlock served as a Professional Staff Member on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and on the House Homeland Security Committee, and on the staffs of Ohio Senators Mike DeWine and George Voinovich.

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Founded in 1992, the Independent Women’s Forum is a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) non-profit educational institution. IWF focuses on issues of concern to women, men, and families. Its mission is to rebuild civil society by advancing economic liberty, personal responsibility, and political freedom. IWF fosters greater respect for limited government, equality under the law, property rights, free markets, strong families, and a powerful and effective national defense and foreign policy. IWF is home to some of the nation’s most influential scholars—women who are committed to promoting and defending economic opportunity and political freedom.

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