Response to Maria Ryan and Scott Lucas
Bevan Sewell
University of Nottingham

Two strong arguments, both of which could have sounded mildly controversial eighteen months ago, emerge out of these two essays: first, that Barack Obama is a small-c conservative, and second, that America is no longer at the centre of the world when it comes to driving international events. Rather than pick out elements that I agree with and those that I don’t, I’ll use my space here to draw out some broader considerations regarding these two arguments and offer a few thoughts thereon.

Obama the centrist, the conservative, or the weak leader?

With respect to Obama, I’m not sure that his centrism is as noteworthy as Maria Ryan argues. Obviously, it is important in fixing American political debate on the centre-right. So, too, with respect to the level of continuity in the domestic and foreign policies pursued by both Democrat and Republican presidents alike since the 1980s. Yet I wonder to what extent recent events in the US have made discussions about Obama’s ideology of secondary importance to discussions about Obama’s leadership. To put it another way, the nature of his political ideology might have partially created the situation he finds himself in, but it is doubtful if it is that which is going to be the major factor in the 2012 election.

Obama, like all presidents, is a politician first and foremost; his primary goal upon gaining office — though it has not, perhaps, always seemed that way — is to ensure that he gets re-elected for a second term.¹ In the current American political climate that means hewing to a line that, for the most part, is seen as uncontroversial and that appeals to those voters in the all-important middle ground. Thus, in December 2010, the decision to extend President Bush’s tax cuts, despite what you felt about it in moral and social terms, was viewed as a smart political move in terms of Obama’s re-election prospects. Such a move, commentators across the political divide averred, ensured that those moderate Republicans, who remained wary of the party’s increasing move to the right, would be tempted to vote Democrat. This was, of course, a highly simplistic reading — one that, in the last few weeks, has been blown
out of the water as Obama’s political standing has come under intense pressure. For in the wake of the disputes with Congress over first, the national budget, and second, raising the debt ceiling, Obama has floundered in his attempts to broker a solution. This has led, moreover, to strong criticism of the president from those who would previously have been counted among his closest supporters. These sentiments have intersected with ongoing concerns over the health of the American economy to create a febrile situation when it comes to Obama’s re-election prospects.

Bipartisanship is all well and good if both sides are compromising to achieve common goals. Yet in the recent discussions over raising the debt ceiling, both Obama and Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, found themselves unable to negotiate a deal that the Democrats in the Senate would accept on the one hand, and that the Tea Party Republicans would accept in the House on the other. In fact, despite only numbering some fifty Congressmen and controlling one house of Congress, it was the Tea Party and their allies that were driving the discussions. Citing their desire to stymie the role of big government and its reckless behaviour, and with some such as Michelle Bachmann arguing that default by the federal government would be a good thing, the Tea Party were able to ensure that the Republican position in the negotiations was inflexible and tough. Such determination, irrespective of whether or not you support the Tea Party’s stance, was not in evidence on the Democrat side. There, Obama was seemingly willing to accept most things to get a deal; his simmering anger at Republican intransigence hardly translated into meaningful or effective governance. In the Senate, leading Democrats were constrained by their sense that a deal had to be reached even if it favoured the Republicans more. The outcome was political squabbling of the worst kind, with partisan politics being played with America’s financial security. In the wake of these torturous negotiations and the downgrading of America’s credit rating that followed, Ezra Klein questioned how well the entire US political system was functioning: “Our dysfunctional political system just forfeited our sterling credit rating, and doubts about our governing capacity are roiling global markets.”² If this is the case — if America’s political system is not working — then the president’s intellectual approach to government becomes secondary to his capacity to govern.

Both Obama and Nancy Pelosi might still assert that they are committed to rule through cross-party agreement; but the events surrounding the debt ceiling were
so febrile that much more was needed from the president. Since a bill was finally passed — one that gave the Democrats pretty much nothing of what they wanted and committed the federal government to massive spending cuts — the commentariat on both the right and the left has slammed Obama. To be sure, some remain sympathetic, arguing that Obama is a potentially superb president with impeccable moral credentials who is being brought down by a rabble-rousing Tea Party movement inspired by little more than their hatred of America’s first black president and right-wing jeremiads with only a very loose basis in reality. For others, though, this is only part of the story. True, the Tea Party have come to exert an influence on American politics and have skewed the national debate; and true, plenty of the rhetoric of the Tea Party is fanciful and hyperbolic. Nevertheless, it is argued even by his supporters, Obama needed to exercise more leadership. The battle over the debt ceiling, Eugene Robinson argued in the *Washington Post*, was a retreat by the Democrats, which meant that they lived to fight another day. Even so, this contained a stark warning: “Progressives lost this battle. They retain the capacity to win the next one, if they are smarter and tougher. If they fight.”

In the last few weeks this has become a debate, then, not about whether Obama is a small-c conservative, a centrist, or just much too fond of bipartisanship, but rather, it has become a debate about whether or not he is effective as a leader. For many, the answer now is no. Crucially, with an election looming next year, this lack of leadership is being tied to America’s continuing economic malaise with unemployment figures proving stubbornly high. For Eliot Spitzer, in fact, the whole debt ceiling crisis and the debate it has provoked is symptomatic of Obama’s lack of leadership and of his White House’s lack of political astuteness:

Why, as a condition for extending the Bush tax cuts, which President Obama repeatedly said he opposed, did he not require the Republicans to raise the debt ceiling *then?* Why didn't he make raising the debt ceiling part of the transaction that extended the Bush tax cuts? Why did he give the Republicans a second bite at the apple, cutting the revenue first, and then a chance to hold the government hostage again in the summer?
His answer, simply, is that “this administration really doesn't know how to negotiate.” And such charges are hugely damaging for Obama, and reawaken some of the allegations made against him during his campaign about his lack of experience. Frank Rich has been equally forthright. Obama’s refusal to go after the bankers that caused the 2008 crash, Rich has argued, has led to him being tarred with the same brush and to allegations that he doesn’t care about Main Street America:

For all the lurid fantasies of the birthers, the dirty secret of Obama’s background is that the values of Harvard, not of Kenya or Indonesia or Bill Ayers, have most colored his governing style. He falls hard for the best and the brightest white guys. He stocked his administration with brilliant personnel linked to the bubble: liberals, and especially Ivy League liberals. Nearly three years on, they have taken a toll both on the White House’s image and its policies. Obama arrives at his reelection campaign not merely with a weak performance on Wall Street crime enforcement and reform but also with a scattershot record (at best) of focusing on the main concern of Main Street: joblessness. One is a consequence of the other. His failure to push back against the financial sector, sparing it any responsibility for the economy it tanked, empowered it to roll over his agenda with its own. He has come across as favoring the financial elite over the stranded middle class even if, in his heart of hearts, he does not.5

In this quote we can see what I think has become the extension of the argument made by Maria Ryan: that a political culture firmly tied to the centre-right has become entrenched in the national dialogue, but that it is Obama’s ideology coupled with his lack of dynamic leadership that is causing his presidency to flounder. Centrism and small-c conservatism, therefore, are undoubtedly both in evidence here. Yet it is not those, in themselves, which may lead to the president’s downfall. Indeed, Obama would likely secure a comfortable re-election if those were the only charges he faced. The notion that he is an ineffectual and timid leader, however, is much more poisonous — especially given that huge areas of the US economy continue to suffer in the fall-out of the 2008 crash. American voters will ask themselves whether or not
Obama is the president to reinvigorate the US economy. If they decide not, then someone like Texas Governor Rick Perry — with a strong record of solving unemployment problems and hugely popular among the Christian right — may begin to look like an attractive prospect.

The broader issue, which again I think is an extension of the point made by Maria, is whether any Democrat will prove willing in the short-term to adopt a more aggressive left-wing position. Obama had the opportunity, as she notes, to push for a more extensive fiscal stimulus package when the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress. It would have been controversial and been attacked in some quarters, to be sure, but it would also have provided an opportunity to set out his stall and proclaim that he was going to be setting the policy agenda. The same was true on healthcare, as it was on foreign policy. Yet the safe conclusion — undoubtedly being pushed by Obama’s strategists at the time — was that rocking the boat too much, and adopting policies too far away from the norm, might erode elements of his support base. If presidents don’t prove willing to take political risks, however, then there is little chance of this cycle being broken. In the last two years, Obama has allowed the American right to ride roughshod over his policies and over his presidency. Ruling by consensus, no matter how committed he is to the idea, will not work if his opponents believe him to be weak. Unless he does something — and quickly — to arrest this notion then the Republicans will continue to push him. Furthermore, he has hardly come out swinging since the budget and debt ceiling disputes and the downgrading of America’s credit rating. When pressed recently, by members of the public representing both sides of the political debate, the president provided an insipid justification for his actions:

The bottom line is we’re moving in the right direction. But I know it’s frustrating, because the other side is unreasonable. And you don’t want to — you don’t want to reward unreasonableness. Look, I get that. But sometimes you’ve got to make choices in order to do what’s best for the country at that particular moment, and that’s what I’ve tried to do.⁶
There is, finally, some indication that Obama has recognised the nature of the spot that he now finds himself in. The recent announcement of a new deficit reduction plan, which called for the raising of $1.5 billion in new revenue primarily through taxing the richest sectors of American society, has seen the president attempt to give his base—and the Democrats—something to fight for. Predictably, this has provoked a febrile response from the Republicans. Speaker of the House, John Boehner, not only described it as “class warfare”, but also told an audience in Cincinnati that “giving the federal government more money [is] like giving a cocaine addict more cocaine.” In taking on the Republicans so directly, though, the president seems to have recognised the need for him to be seen to be leading his country. Picking a fight with the Republicans over the contentious issue of taxes, however, can only alleviate Obama’s problems for so long; proving that he can implement policies that lead the American economy back into rude health would be a much greater boon to his hopes of re-election in 2012.

Decentering America?

Scott Lucas adopts a different tack in discussing contemporary America. Rather than dealing with the state of the nation, he focuses on America’s standing in the world. The United States, he argues, is no longer at the centre of the world; the world, to put it another way, no longer marches to an American beat or is in thrall to American power. In particular, he notes, this can be seen in the wave of events that have been taking place in 2011, as revolutionary movements in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have mobilised themselves and set their own agendas.

Again, as with Maria’s piece, the context for this has changed slightly since I read the first draft. Though not too much has changed since then, the aforementioned downgrading of America’s credit rating provided further evidence of what a number of commentators have been calling American decline. The subsequent criticism from India and China, the latter of whom as a substantial holder of US debt called on America to get their financial house in order, did suggest a shift in the international system. Nonetheless, I want to unpack some of this and consider it in a bit more depth and tackle the idea that new media has changed the world and America’s place within it.
This relates, first of all, to the notion that America was ever the centre of the world. A change in methodology and approach, after all, does not alter reality; it merely suggests that we are seeing the world in a new way or through different lenses. As scholars — and, especially, as American Studies scholars — we have a natural tendency to view our topics in an American-centric way because that is the way we examine things. Yet that is not the same as America actually being at the centre of the world. There are all sorts of complex questions regarding the ways that we assess power, success and leadership that need untangling here. But to take just one example, the proliferation of academic work that is now being done on the way that decolonisation influenced the shaping of the world in the second half of the twentieth century is compelling scholars to consider the centrality of the US-Soviet struggle in the post-1945 era.

As Matthew Connelly has noted in his examination of the Algerian war for independence from France, this was a movement that took place, and which should be examined, outside of the Cold War framework. “The reason we ought to remove the Cold War lens,” he argues, “is not simply that the world needs a new prescription. It is that we need more than one way of looking at the world if we are not to be captive to categories like ‘the West’ and ‘the rest.’ Examining events like the Algerian War for Independence through different optics reveals how these categories are constructed and endowed with analytical and political power, patterning the way we think about international politics even after the demise of the Soviet Union.” Increasingly, scholars have taken these sentiments to heart — developing a picture of the post-1945 era that, while still far from complete, is now much more detailed and richer than it once was. The broader point here, therefore, is that works such as these are not only enriching our sense of the post-1945 era; they are also starting to challenge our preconceptions about the United States and the global reach of its power.

If we extend this line of argument to the contemporary era and the argument made by Scott Lucas, we can see certain parallels between the points being made. America was not the sole force shaping world events in 1945 and in the years afterwards. But nor was it in 2001 and the years afterwards. Much of the rhetoric put forth by the George W. Bush administration and leading commentators at the time was unilateral in tone and invoked notions of unipolar power. This was not, however, the reality. American power was still constrained as it has always been, and events
still continued apace outside of the US orbit. The agonising interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq provide convincing case studies of this. In both instances, US forces — aided and abetted by willing allies — invaded in an attempt to overthrow incumbent regimes and install friendlier and democratic governments. Much of our understanding of these wars has come from our assessment of the way that the decision to go to war was taken and, latterly, by the way that it and the post-war operations evolved. At the same time, though, the utilisation of US force was reacting with a fluid situation on the ground: predictions of American forces easily overturning incumbent regimes were pretty accurate, but predictions of America nation-building onto pliant recipient nations proved to be way wide of the mark. To frame this in terms of a question: was the period of reconstruction after Saddam Hussein’s fall in Iraq being driven by the US or by the Iraqis? Both? One some of the time and then the other?¹² We didn’t have access to the social networking capabilities in Iraq that, say, we’ve seen so prominently in Iran. But that does not mean that grass-roots movements were not as widespread; it means, rather, that we were less aware of it and had less immediate access to the information.

It is at this point, then, that I differ from Scott Lucas’s argument that the emergence of new media such as Facebook and Twitter, and the accessibility of new media groups from countries around the world, has dramatically altered the international landscape. In terms of the information we receive and the immediacy of our understanding, the situation now is clearly transformed from that of yesteryear. Equally, they also provide a new forum for ‘negotiation’ and understanding. Nevertheless, it is less clear to me that it has dramatically changed the way grassroots movements operate in far-flung countries or that this has fundamentally altered the way we understand America and its place in the world. What would be interesting to know, for example, is whether the rise of new technologies has altered the sort of communication networks — such as who talks to who, and how events are organised — that are apparent in nations in the midst of political foment? Were the outbreaks of political violence in Algeria in 1957 and that in Egypt in 2010/11 fundamentally different in the way that they mobilised? Was new media crucial in this, or is it just a new form of communication? Is it for the benefit of those in these nations or for those observing from afar? Does the electronic — and highly visible nature — of these mediums increase the risk of activists being caught? Answers to these questions are
important because it enables us to assess for whom, and to what end, new media can be used. A counter-argument to its utility might be that, really, it is used to spread the message to those in the West rather than to mobilise protest movements at home. That is, of course, still useful in some ways; but at the same time, it cuts against the idea somewhat that this is about “decentering” the US and the West. If a scholar or analyst wants to understand the US and its actions then, at first, they will look toward organs like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Uprisings in the Middle East and Africa, and the information about them that we can garner from new media, do not alter this salient fact. They tell us more — perhaps more than we’ve ever known — about the discourse characterising these movements and, maybe, the way they are organised; they enable us to become more intimately acquainted with their successes and defeats and to get more immediate, and unmediated, access. But they do not reorient our focus away from the United States. Indeed, it remains compelling — at least to me — to continue studying the United States and chart their engagement with the movements outlined by Scott Lucas. Given the enormous proliferation of information and details regarding these movements, why can’t US analysts and policymakers “conceive of negotiation or outside influence or of transformation apart from US order”? They wouldn’t need to look very far, after all, to get a more multifaceted view of the contemporary world and to factor this into their considerations. Lastly, scholars need to consider how these emerging movements and networks fit in with what we are now beginning to learn about the patterns of international history in the twentieth century. Once that starts to happen we will have a much fuller understanding of the sweep of global history since 1900, and the way that terms like “Cold War” and “War on Terror” can be broken down, as well as much richer understanding of the United States and the way that it interacts with the world.

**Endnotes**


As a term this is problematic, but for some discussion of these ideas see, Niall Ferguson, “Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos,” Foreign Affairs, Volume 89, No. 2, (March/April 2010), 18-32; Stephen Walt, “When Did the American Empire start to Decline?”, Foreign Policy, 2 August 2011, http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/01/when_did_the_american_empire_start_to_decline [Accessed 16 August 2011].


