



POLITICS/USA

Game on

Obama's right-hand man talks Trump and assesses the Democrats' chances come 2020. Is he feeling hopeful?

By Ed Stocker
Photography Jared Soares

From a picture on the living-room wall of one of his children playing in the Oval Office to Pete Souza's White House photobook, Ben Rhodes' home is replete with nods to Barack Obama. As the 44th president has started to carve out the role of his foundation, Rhodes is now advising him on his international outreach, the continuation of a working relationship that began when Obama assumed office.

The native New Yorker was hired by Obama in 2009 to serve as deputy national security advisor for strategic communications and speech-writing – a title that doesn't quite explain the breadth of the work. As well as helping to shape Obama's message, Rhodes was involved in diplomacy, playing a role in both the Iran nuclear-deal discussions and the secret meetings over the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba, overseen by the Vatican. He's now readjusting to having his life back after the heights of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue but he's still Obama's defender in chief, perturbed by attempts from Donald Trump to dismantle his legacy. — (M)

MONOCLE: How hard has it been seeing Obama's achievements deconstructed before your eyes?

BEN RHODES: It was hard and at times sad but you kind of expect that sort of frontal assault on our scorecard: Cuba, Paris [climate agreement] and Iran. What's been harder has been seeing the completely opposite world view become the governing principle.

M: Do you believe that the Iran deal will fall apart?

BR: I think what Trump runs into every time he takes a whack at this is that Germany, France, the UK, the EU, China and Russia have no interest in blowing this thing up.



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M: Is the damage Trump is doing to institutions reversible?

BR: Trump's election has a cost for the US around the world because America elected Trump. That's why the scale of Trump's rebuke matters. In other words, if the Democrats win in the mid-term elections and decisively win the next presidential election in 2020, I think it will be easier to recalibrate because the world will see that Trump was an anomaly.

M: How do you think Democrats will do in mid-terms?

BR: I would be confident about the House of Representatives. In 2006, the Democrats took back the House and in 2010, the Republicans took back the House – the opposition party over-performs. [The backlash against Trump] is already feeling bigger based on public-opinion polling and special elections – big enough to overcome structural advantages Republicans have in congressional districts. The Senate is more difficult.

M: Do you think the Democrats are having a generational crisis?

BR: Democrats win presidential elections when they have younger people running: Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were all younger candidates. Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer are great tacticians in Congress and that's important. But if you're going to have people like that as your leaders then you have to go out of your way to push forward some younger faces – and this is one of the reasons that Obama is not out there all the time; he thinks we need some younger faces to emerge in the party.

M: There's no temptation to have Obama comment more given that he's a unifying figure for the Democrats?

BR: I think he's going to have to be out there in the context of the election – and I think he will be. But I think day to day, if he was slugging it out with Trump, in a way that would just diminish him.

M: You've said that the decision not to intervene militarily in Syria was one of Obama's best choices.

BR: I'll be debating that for the rest of my life. We saw in Iraq and Afghanistan the limits of our ability to change events in Middle Eastern countries and the complexity was even worse with Syria.

M: Who are the Democratic stars of the future?

BR: Everybody is going to run [in the 2020 primaries]. I think there are some good young people in the House, such as Seth Moulton and Joe Kennedy. I think in the Senate it will be interesting to see what Kamala Harris and Chris Murphy do. We have some good former governors, such as Deval Patrick from Massachusetts, and then there are going to be the established people such as Elizabeth Warren. I'm not just saying this to make myself feel better as a Democrat but I think that a wide-open primary is going to be a good thing.