

YEAR ONE One Year Later

A look at the first 12 months of Barack Obama's presidency

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In Obama's speeches, one favorite phrase: 'Let me be clear'

On a few occasions in the presidential race, he used the phrase to protect himself against attacks or misunderstandings, as a sort of preemptive strike. When he declared in March 2008 that [ending the war in Iraq](#) would save the country billions of dollars, he first said: "Now let me be clear: When I am president, I will spare no expense to ensure that our troops have the equipment and support they need."

And he employed it to [minimize the damage](#) from his comments in April 2008 about ["bitter" working-class voters](#) who cling to guns or religion: "Let me absolutely clear. It would be pretty hard for me to be condescending towards people of faith since I'm a person of faith and have done more than most other campaigns in reaching out specifically to people of faith."

But more often than not, the phrase sought to amplify a straightforward point. Amid swirling talk about [his patriotism](#), Obama fired back in August 2008, "Let me be clear: I will let no one question my love of this country." As the financial system collapsed the next month, [he moved to capitalize](#) on the moment: "Let's be clear: What we've seen the last few days is nothing less than the final verdict on an economic philosophy that has completely failed." And in October, he [fended off the "redistributionist" label](#): "I heard Senator McCain say I'm more concerned with who gets your piece of the pie than with growing the pie. But let's be absolutely clear: After eight years of Bush-McCain economics, the pie is shrinking."

Two weeks later, Obama was elected president, and matters that were once clear suddenly became less so.

Instead of making bold declarations, Obama was now setting policies that threatened to conflict with campaign promises, such as his vow not to raise taxes on anyone except the wealthy. Very quickly, "let me be clear" went from offense to defense, becoming a rebuttal on points where the facts were not that evident. To his opponents, it became a sign of obfuscation or indecision to follow.

"Now let me be clear -- let me be absolutely clear, because I know you will end up hearing some of the same claims that rolling back these tax breaks means a massive tax increase on the American people," he said in his [joint address to Congress in February](#). "If your family earns less than \$250,000 a year, a quarter-million dollars a year, you will not see your taxes increased a single dime. I repeat: not one single dime." Since then, several proposals have muddied that assertion, including the Obama-approved tax on costly health insurance plans.

As the health-care debate heated up last summer, Obama's calls for clarity intensified. "Let me be absolutely clear about what health reform means for you," he [said in July](#). "... It will keep government out of health-care decisions. It will give you the option to keep your insurance if you're happy with it." In fact, the government's role in health care would increase under the legislation, and the changes would, in all likelihood, result in many people ending up with different coverage through reasons not of their own choosing.

The way Obama has deployed the expression during the first year of his presidency underscores its limits as a communication tool. "The risk in using the phrase is that it could imply there are times when

VIDEO



Obama's favorite phrase

The Washington Post's Alec MacGillis explains what President Obama means when he uses the phrase "let me be clear."

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he's not being clear," says the Brookings Institution's Stephen Hess, who worked in the Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. "The corollary of that is one big fog."

Consider Obama's [remarks at his jobs summit](#) last month, where uncertainty loomed over how he would balance the competing imperatives of creating jobs and controlling the deficit. "So let it be clear," he said. "I am open to every demonstrably good idea, and I want to take every responsible step to accelerate job creation. We also, though, have to face the fact that our resources are limited." Translation: I want to try more job creation, but it can't cost too much -- a message that could have been said more clearly.

But it has been in the realm of foreign policy where hazy realities have differed the most from the cut-and-dried notions of the campaign, and where the president's "let's be clear" have been flying the thickest.

In his [April speech in Prague](#), where he called for a world free of nuclear weapons, Obama sought to preempt accusations of naivete. "Let me be clear: Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile activity poses a real threat, not just to the United States, but to Iran's neighbors and our allies," he declared. He went on to note that the Czech Republic and Poland had agreed to host a defense shield against long-range Iranian missiles, saying, "We will go forward with a missile defense system that is cost-effective and proven."

Just five months later, though, the issue proved less clear, as the administration [announced that it was replacing the long-range missile defenses](#) proposed by President George W. Bush for Poland and the Czech Republic, mainly with a set of maritime-based defenses geared toward the short- and medium-range missile threat from Iran.

Meanwhile, in March, Obama promised clarity [on Afghanistan](#). "So let me be clear: Al-Qaeda and its allies . . . are in Pakistan and Afghanistan," he said. "We have a clear and focused goal to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future."

But it turns out the plan was anything but clear, and the president spent months reevaluating his Afghanistan policy before giving a [new speech in November](#), one full of Obama-esque nuance: The United States would add 30,000 troops in Afghanistan, but set a July 2011 timeline for drawing down; it would escalate forces in order to end the war.

To convey such dualities and shades of gray, nothing better than to declare the situation "clear." Obama used the word 11 times in the speech. To rebut the charge that his lengthy deliberations had slowed down military efforts, he said, "Let me be clear: There has never been an option before me that called for troop deployments before 2010, so there has been no delay or denial of resources necessary for the conduct of the war during this review period."

And to gird the country for an escalation that even he seemed ambivalent about, the president declared: "Now, let me be clear: None of this will be easy. The struggle against violent extremism will not be finished quickly, and it extends well beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan."

In other words: Governing is messy and the world is cloudy. Is that clear?

Alec MacGillis and Paul Farhi are staff writers of The Washington Post. Related Outlook coverage: Recent looks at President Obama's rhetoric include Michael D. Shear's ["Responsibility: It's Barack Obama's go-to word. But will it get old?"](#) and Alec MacGillis's ["Pragmatism: Sounds great, but what does he really mean?"](#)

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