

Obama: the rhetoric of justice (guest blog)

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At approximately 11:35 p.m. on May 1, speaking from the East Room of the White House, President [Obama announced](#) “to the American people and the world” that “justice has been done,” that he had personally “authorized an operation to get Osama Bin Laden and bring him to justice.”

POLIS Silverstone Scholar **Marco Scalvini** gives his analysis of Obama’s discourse.



Obama on Osama

Obama used the word ‘justice’ several times in his announcement. Yet the question arises: Can the victor decide what is ‘justice’?

Countries who’ve assumed a global leadership position should not be allowed succumb to emotional justifications for their violent reprisals—and then call it ‘justice’. The capture and prosecution of Osama Bin Laden would have been a rare opportunity to reconsider recent history and the so-called “war on terror.” Instead, President Obama opted to repurpose a false dichotomy that divides again the world into good and evil.

“We quickly learned that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by al-Qaeda – an organization headed by Osama Bin Laden, which had openly declared war on the United States and was committed to killing innocents in our country and around the globe,” Obama declared in his speech. “And so we went to war against al-Qaeda to protect our citizens, our friends, and our allies.”

The aim of the rhetoric here is two-fold: first, an attempt to reshape the concept of justice into one that condones a victor’s violent retribution by attaching it to the legitimizing myth of victimhood and, second, an effort to subordinate political order in favor of U.S. military power. Countries that have yet to remove the dangerous influence of religion from their political sphere are expected to understand that American secular justice is rational and peace-making, and that it must at times—regrettably, of course—resort to violence to bring criminals to justice.

German political theorist [Carl Schmitt](#) may have been right when he said the friend-enemy dichotomy was essential to the creation of the political in the modern state. “Theologians,” Schmitt wrote, “tend to define the enemy as something that must be destroyed.”

The Obama doctrine, however, differs from this more ethical, theological formulation. Here the enemy is no longer seen as entering into war for immoral or unethical reasons, or because he is a barbarian, an infidel or a pirate. Instead, the enemy is seen as unfair in light of “the story of our history,” and the American “commitment to stand up for our values abroad, and our sacrifices to make the world a safer place,” as Obama remarked in his speech. For this reason, Obama claims that the enemy’s demise “should be welcomed by all who believe in peace and human dignity.”

Obama’s policy of extra-judicial justice conflicts with the Nobel committee’s motivation for honoring him with the Nobel Peace Prize. According to the [committee](#), Obama deserved the prize because “his diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes at are shared by the majority of the world’s population.” Are these motivations still true?

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