Writing about contemporary events is always a challenge, as it involves a number of different difficulties from the usual ones a historian has to deal with. Not only does it rely on a limited amount of primary sources to support interpretation, but the very topic of research is often subjected to unpredictable reassessments. As events move in an unforeseen direction, we often have to go back and reevaluate facts and personalities which had been overlooked or overemphasised by previous interpretations. Finally, the constant release of new sources – both primary and secondary – means that by the time the work is finally published, new revelations may challenge or even shatter the very premises on which it was initially conceived. Since Mario Del Pero’s book on the Obama administration was published, for instance, the literature on the 44th President of the United States has been enriched by important contributions such as the memoirs of Ben Rhodes or the insightful analysis of the Iranian nuclear deal by Trita Parsi. Written by one of Obama’s closest collaborators, Rhodes’ *The World as It Is* is likely to remain the standard reference work for any future assessment of Obama for quite some time, while Parsi’s *Losing an Enemy* is an unparalleled scrutiny of the negotiations with Iran written by a privileged observer with close access to some of the protagonists. Furthermore, we now have the latest arrival: Michelle Obama’s own autobiography *Becoming*.

In spite of all these methodological challenges and pitfalls, Mario Del Pero has managed to produce a balanced, rigorous evaluation of the Obama administration which should stand the test of time reasonably well. The book is not an analysis of the personality or the mindset of the US President, which is briefly elucidated at the beginning to set the stage for what the volume really focuses on: the main choices of his administration.

Del Pero, whose previous work includes a general history of US foreign policy as well as a number of analytical studies of the US during the Cold War, places his analysis of the Obama administration against the backdrop of a broad survey of the US in the early years of the 21st century. In the first part of the book, he focuses at length on a number of closely interrelated themes which will return time and again in the following chapters. The first of these was the devastating impact of the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 on a US society transformed by several
decades of unrestrained neo-liberalism and globalisation. The second, the pervasive, if not overwhelming, importance of the race question; and the growing polarisation of American politics, increasingly radicalised along sharply opposite lines. In this book, Arthur Schlesinger’s vibrant “vital center” is a fading memory of a distant past, and the US society that Del Pero carefully describes is increasingly fragile and, above all, alarmingly fragmented.

After setting the stage Del Pero moves on to focus on the new administration’s initial key domestic initiatives, namely the American Recovery and Investment Act, a host of economic steps conceived to reinvigorate the economy and stabilise an increasingly dangerous financial situation; and the reform of the health system through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The first, writes Del Pero, was largely successful in preventing a further deterioration of a dramatic economic crisis, while the second, innovative as it might have been, was a much more cautious and moderate project than many among Obama’s supporters hoped to see. Yet a remarkably positive impact of the economic recovery act and a self-restrained health reform were not enough to prevent a dramatic backlash against the election of the first black President in US history. The mid-term elections of November 2010 saw the sweeping victory of a radicalised Republican Party. Emboldened by this success, an embittered and acrimonious GOP would remain a constant thorn in the flesh for the next six years of the Obama administration. It severely limited the administration’s capacity to act and even encouraged those radical fringes which went as far as questioning the legitimacy of the President. One of the main consequences of this sharp fragmentation of the domestic scene was to enhance, at least in the early years of the new administration, the President’s natural inclination to gradualism and prudence. Hemmed in by the constant refusal of his opponents to cooperate on any measure, the President Del Pero describes seemed hopelessly wishful that a moderate attitude on his part might persuade at least some of his domestic critics to move towards a more reasonable stance. It never happened.

Obama’s predicament is further explored in the following chapter, dedicated to the early phase of his foreign policy. The new President, Del Pero argues, intended to reshape US foreign policy on a set of new assumptions, namely 1) a move away from an excessive use of military force; 2) a structural realignment of US priorities, which envisaged a reduction of the overexposure in the Middle East, the “reset” of the relationship with Moscow, and a gradual shifting of attention away from Europe and towards East Asia; 3) the development of a new narrative of US foreign policy, which emphasised not only a renewed attention to multilateralism but the projection of a new image of the US largely based on the personal story of Obama himself. This bold and ambitious design had to fight an uphill struggle not only against the domestic opposition of the Republican Party, but also against a systemic shift in international politics. First of all, there was the unexpected series of events which completely transformed the Middle East and forced the US to rethink some of the basic assumptions on which the new President meant to reorient his foreign policy. The ‘Arab Springs’ confronted Obama with a series of challenges which repeatedly made him appear hesitant and uncertain, particularly during the 2013 crisis in the Syrian civil war. Soon afterwards, the dramatic events in Eastern Europe, which culminated with the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian-Ukrainian clashes in the Donbas region, reinforced this impression of a vacillating superpower.
It was only in the final two years of his mandate, Del Pero concludes, that Obama was able to move more freely towards reshaping US foreign policy in the direction he wanted. Perhaps, because he concluded that a more moderate attitude was not going to win him any concessions from his domestic opponents anyway, Obama acted with more determination and was able to achieve some remarkable results. The conclusion of the negotiations with Iran led to the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and stalled the nuclear enrichment activities of the Iranian regime. The reopening of diplomatic relations with Cuba ended a confrontation which had lasted more than half a century. The conclusion of the Paris accords on climate change strengthened the impression of a new US leadership which was finally ready to tackle some of the most urgent global problems of the new century. These three actions, Del Pero suggests, show a remarkably more dynamic, and successful, US foreign policy.

Yet, important as they were, these results may still be reversed by the dramatic swing of the pendulum which led to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Confirming the validity of his initial assessment of the division of US society, Del Pero concludes that it is too early to tell whether the achievements of the Obama administration in its last two years will have a lasting impact. Initially, the enthusiastic supporters of Barack Obama saw in his election the prospect of a long term realignment of US politics along more modern and progressive lines. However, belying this, Del Pero describes a society which at the end of the mandate of the first black President is more divided than ever about its identity and its future. His portrait of Obama’s policies, therefore, is deeply influenced by this gloomy outlook: an administration which moved very cautiously but which also faced an unprecedentedly virulent domestic opposition. Similarly, Obama’s foreign policy might have been too timid and hesitant, but it had to deal with what was probably the most serious realignment in the global balance of power since the end of the Second World War. While the US remains the largest military power in the world, its economic prowess is no longer capable of supporting its hegemonic ambitions, domestic consensus about an active foreign policy is dwindling, and there are a number of rising powers which seem eager and ready to challenge the centrality of the US in the current international order. Maybe Barack Obama may not have been able to fulfill the exaggerated expectations that his election had stimulated, Del Pero reminds us at the end of this very insightful analysis, but given the obstacles he faced his achievements should not be underestimated.