

September 12, 2013

Here's some of our favorites on Tuesday's speech. Peter Wehner is first.

*Max Boot does an excellent job explaining why the new Russian proposal on removing chemical weapons from Syria is almost certainly a mirage. Not surprisingly, however, President Obama is eager to embrace it. After all, doing so will avoid Congress rejecting his request to use military strikes against Syria—and the de facto collapse of his presidency.*

*But this will come at quite a high cost. Russia is now establishing itself as the preeminent power in the region, having displaced the United States. American prestige and credibility lie in ruins. President Obama has succeeded in undermining the moderate rebels he promised to assist. He has strengthened the murderous anti-American regime he declared he wanted gone. A despot who used chemical weapons and committed, in the words of Secretary of State John Kerry, a “moral obscenity” will now escape any punishment (which after all was the stated purpose of Obama’s threats to strike Syria). And Iran and Hezbollah, having (along with Russia) come to the aid of Assad, will emerge from this whole thing in a much stronger position.*

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Peggy Noonan is next.

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*We’ve never had a presidential speech like that! ...*

Jennifer Rubin weighs in.

*... The president is paralyzed because the first part of his argument, one which conservatives wholeheartedly agree with, does not match his call for inaction or, in the best case scenario, a Russian brokered deal.*

*Gone is the demand that Assad “must go.” Gone is any penalty for using chemical weapons. Gone is the demonstration of resolve meant to signal seriousness about chemical weapons. Gone is the notion that we care about the plight of Syrians or that 100,000 dead stir something beyond empty rhetoric. Gone is any deterrent effect to Iran. By throwing the ball to Congress and then to Russia, Obama has effectively taken the use of force off the table, letting the Russians and Assad set the ground rules. From a moral and geopolitical standpoint, this is a debacle that will extend throughout the Middle East and beyond.*

*A decade of war is not ending; it’s our willingness to move events in our direction and protect American interests and values that has. It will be a minor miracle if Iran doesn’t get a nuclear weapon in the next 3 years. Conservative hawks and liberal interventionists aren’t the only ones who should be concerned about Russian dominance in the Middle East. I hate to break it to those trying to wriggle out of doing anything about Assad, but even Obama admits we have vital national interests in the region. The president just isn’t willing to act to protect them.*

Craig Pirrong from a few days ago.

*Do we have the dumbest foreign policy team in history?*

*First, SecState Kerry advertises that any strikes on Syria will be “unbelievably small.”*

*This is going to deter who from doing what, exactly? This is what I’ve been on about ever since the to-ing and fro-ing about how little we could get away with doing in Syria started. It will have no deterrent effect, and if it sends a signal, it will be one of utter fecklessness. They are rolling in the aisles in Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran.*

*Then Kerry suggests that Syria could avoid a US strike by putting its chemical weapons under international control.*

*That’s bad enough-how could we ever know he put them all under international control? But it’s worse. When Lavrov and Assad jumped at this, Kerry said that his proposal was merely “rhetorical.”*

*Again. Not from The Onion.*

*I am tired after a long day, and tired of watching this display of incompetence. I will just point out these things, and presume that the self-evident idiocy means that further comment is unnecessary.*

Now some folks from the certified left/liberal media. Maureen Dowd is first.

*Vladimir Putin, who keeps Edward Snowden on a leash and lets members of a riotous girl band rot in jail, has thrown President Obama a lifeline.*

*The Russian president had coldly brushed back Obama on Snowden and Syria, and only last week called John Kerry a liar.*

*Now, when it is clear Obama can't convince Congress, the American public, his own wife, the world, Liz Cheney or even Donald "Shock and Awe" Rumsfeld to bomb Syria — just a teensy-weensy bit — Pooty-Poot (as W. called him) rides, shirtless, to the rescue, offering him a face-saving way out? If it were a movie, we'd know it was a trick. We can't trust the soulless Putin — his Botox has given the former K.G.B. officer even more of a poker face — or the heartless Bashar al-Assad. By Tuesday, Putin the Peacemaker was already setting conditions.*

*Just as Obama and Kerry — with assists from Hillary and some senators — were huffing and puffing that it was their military threat that led to the breakthrough, Putin moved to neuter them, saying they'd have to drop their military threat before any deal could proceed. The administration's saber-rattling felt more like knees rattling. Oh, for the good old days when Obama was leading from behind. Now these guys are leading by slip-of-the-tongue.*

*Amateur hour started when Obama dithered on Syria and failed to explain the stakes there. It escalated last August with a slip by the methodical wordsmith about "a red line for us" — which the president and Kerry later tried to blur as the world's red line, except the world was averting its eyes.*

*Obama's flip-flopping, ambivalent leadership led him to the exact place he never wanted to be: unilateral instead of unified. ...*

Now The New Republic.

*This, apparently, is how diplomacy happens these days: Someone makes an off-hand remark at a press conference and triggers an international chain reaction that turns an already chaotic and complex situation completely on its head, and gives everyone a sense that, perhaps, this is the light at the end of the indecision tunnel...*

*... What happened was Kerry went off message and, as has been his wont as Secretary of State, off the reservation, and violated the cardinal rule of official press conferences: He answered a hypothetical question in a hypothetical way. He blurted out a pie-in-the-sky, hyperbolic idea—getting rid of "every single bit" of the chemical weapons scattered across Syria "in the next week"—but everyone seized on it as a realistic proposal. It's not. ...*

*... There are two clear winners in this slow-motion train wreck, and they are not Obama or Kerry. They are Assad and Putin. Both wanted, for their own reasons, to avert a military strike, and a military strike was averted. Putin insisted on a diplomatic solution while doing everything to make a diplomatic solution impossible, and now he gets his phony, unenforceable diplomatic solution. Assad wanted to go on killing his opposition, and he will continue to do so.*

Obama, on the other hand, found himself constantly check-mated, either by his own hand, or, this time, by Kerry's. First, he drew a red line on chemical weapons, seemingly by accident. Then, he all but ignored chemical weapons use by Assad until the evidence forced itself on the world. Then he agonized on whether to act, while Dempsey and the Pentagon rolled him, leaking their military plans to anyone who would listen, "probably," said one insider, "because they didn't want to act." Then, he talked about how limited the strikes would be, all while Assad moved his men and his guns into residential areas and the Russians moved their ships in. Then, out of nowhere, he decided to take it to Congress. "The president says that he's going to launch strikes and then, suddenly, he's going to Congress. It's probably one of the more incredible things I've ever seen," McCain told me. "We were all dumbfounded," said another Senate staffer.

Then came the persuasion of Congress, a legislative body that can't even pass a farm bill, or a gun-control measure favored by a crushing majority of the American people. The president didn't call Congress back, so instead, congressmen and senators got spend nearly two weeks marinating not in the intelligence, but in the vehement opposition of their constituents. Those that were in town—like the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—were rushed through the process of putting together a resolution before they even heard the classified briefing. Others, relative moderates like Republicans Saxby Chambliss and Kelly Ayotte who would normally support such a measure, complained that the briefings were vague and short on specifics.

Obama, meanwhile, took off for Sweden, and, as the town halls roiled with anger, put off his address to the country for the following week. While abroad, he managed to further humiliate himself in the eyes of Putin, who already sees him as weak. Obama, having just called off his bilateral summit with Putin because Russia granted asylum to Edward Snowden, went ahead and met with Putin anyway. It was a pointless meeting—"We both stuck to our guns," Putin said afterwards—but in Russia, the message was unmistakable: Putin is stronger, and Putin won. ...

Andy Borowitz, another lib, can't stop with his spoofs.

(The Borowitz Report)—Secretary of State John Kerry said today that he was "shocked and flabbergasted" that the Russians heeded his suggestion about Syria's chemical weapons, telling reporters, "After four decades in public life, this is the first time someone has taken me seriously."

"Whether as a senator, a Presidential candidate, or Secretary of State, I've devoted countless hours to thunderous and droning speeches that people have consistently tuned out," he said. "So naturally, to be listened to all of a sudden came as something of a shock."

But after the novelty of not being ignored wore off, Mr. Kerry said, the Russians' assertion that he had said something worth paying attention to "seemed like a trick."

"You mean to tell me that after decades of spewing mind-numbing rhetoric I all of a sudden blurted out an idea worth acting on?" he said. "It doesn't pass the smell test."

*At the White House, spokesman Jay Carney welcomed the Russians' engagement in the Syria crisis, but warned that "further actions based on John Kerry's remarks will not be tolerated."*

*"We ask the Russians to be constructive participants in this process," he said. "And taking John Kerry seriously is a clear violation of international norms."*

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## Contentions

### [Obama's Syria Debacle Inflicts Historic Damage on America](#)

by Peter Wehner

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But this will come at quite a high cost. Russia is now establishing itself as the preeminent power in the region, having displaced the United States. American prestige and credibility lie in ruins. President Obama has succeeded in undermining the moderate rebels he promised to assist. He has strengthened the murderous anti-American regime he declared he wanted gone. A despot who used chemical weapons and committed, in the words of Secretary of State John Kerry, a "moral obscenity" will now escape any punishment (which after all was the stated purpose of Obama's threats to strike Syria). And Iran and Hezbollah, having (along with Russia) come to the aid of Assad, will emerge from this whole thing in a much stronger position.

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## Peggy Noonan's Blog

### [Making Sense of Syria](#)

This is what I think we're seeing:

The president has backed away from a military strike in Syria. But he can't acknowledge this or act as if it is true. He is acting and talking as if he's coolly, analytically, even warily contemplating the Russian proposal and the Syrian response. The proposal, he must know, is

absurd. Bashar Assad isn't going to give up all his hidden weapons in wartime, in the middle of a conflict so bitter and severe that his forces this morning reportedly bombed parts of Damascus, the city in which he lives. In such conditions his weapons could not be fully accounted for, packed up, transported or relinquished, even if he wanted to. But it will take time—weeks, months—for the absurdity to become obvious. And it is time the president wants. Because with time, with a series of statements, negotiations, ultimatums, promises and proposals, the Syria crisis can pass. It can dissipate into the air, like gas.

The president will keep the possibility of force on the table, but really he's lunging for a lifeline he was lucky to be thrown.

Why is he backing off? Because he knows he doesn't have the American people and isn't going to get them. The polls, embarrassingly, show the more people hear the less they support it. The president's problem with his own base was probably startling to him, and sobering. He knows he was going to lose Congress, not only the House but very possibly—likely, I'd say—the Senate. The momentum was all against him. And he never solved—it was not solvable—his own Goldilocks problem: A strike too small is an embarrassment, a strike too big could topple the Assad regime and leave Obama responsible for a complete and cutthroat civil war involving terrorists, foreign operatives, nihilists, jihadists, underemployed young men, and some really nice, smart people. Obama didn't want to own that, or the fires that could engulf the region once Syria went up.

His plan was never good. The choices were never good. In any case he was going to lose either in terms of domestic prestige, the foreign result or both. Likely both.

He got himself into it and now Vladimir Putin, who opposes U.S. policy in Syria and repeatedly opposed a strike, is getting him out. This would be coldly satisfying for Putin and no doubt personally galling for Obama—another reason he can't look as if he's lunging.

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But Putin has no reason to want a Syrian conflagration. He is perhaps amused to have a stray comment by John Kerry be the basis for a resolution of the crisis. The hidden rebuke: It means that when Putin met with Obama at the G-20 last week Obama, due to his lack of competence, got nothing. But a stray comment by the Secretary of State? Sure, why not rub Obama's face in it.

All this, if it is roughly correct, is going to make the president's speech tonight quite remarkable. It will be a White House address in which a president argues for an endeavor he is abandoning. It will be a president appealing for public support for an action he intends not to take.

We've never had a presidential speech like that!

So what will he say? Some guesses.

He will not really be trying to “convince the public.” He will be trying to move the needle a little, which will comfort those who want to say he retains a matchless ability to move the masses. It will make him feel better. And it will send the world the message: *Hey, this isn't a complete disaster. The U.S. president still has some juice, and that juice can still allow him to surprise you, so watch it.*

He will attempt to be morally compelling and rhetorically memorable. He will probably, like Susan Rice yesterday, attempt to paint a graphic portrait of what chemical weapons do—the children in their shrouds, the suffering parents, what such deaths look like and are. This is not meaningless: the world must be reminded what weapons of mass destruction are, and what the indifference of the world foretells.

He will claim the moral high ground. He will temporarily reserve the use of force...

## Right Turn

### [Obama's Syria speech: An illogical argument from a paralyzed president](#)

by Jennifer Rubin

After a week or so of political whiplash, the country heard directly from President Obama as he tried to explain his policy. The speech was exceptionally revealing in the logical disconnect that plagues his policy: *Chemical weapons use is beyond the pale and different than any weapon. We cannot let it go on. We have a national interest in acting. But I would ask Congress to hold off on voting for me to do anything. We'll consider a deal to have Assad turn over his weapons. But remain in power.*



Several other disturbing inconsistencies were noteworthy. First, he talked about aiding rebel forces. However, virtually no aid has arrived. Second, he claimed that everything changed on Aug. 21, when massive use of chemical weapons was reported. However, his secretary of state in testimony confessed they had been used many times before Aug. 21. Why was it not essential for us to act months ago? And third, Obama said the action would be limited and swore off “boots on the ground,” yet assured us this would be no “pinprick.” This makes our response even more muddled and provides Assad with all the assurance he needs that even if the U.S. were to use force (highly unlikely now) he would survive unscathed.

The president is paralyzed because the first part of his argument, one which conservatives wholeheartedly agree with, does not match his call for inaction or, in the best case scenario, a Russian brokered deal.

Gone is the demand that Assad “must go.” Gone is any penalty for using chemical weapons. Gone is the demonstration of resolve meant to signal seriousness about chemical weapons. Gone is the notion that we care about the plight of Syrians or that 100,000 dead stir something beyond empty rhetoric. Gone is any deterrent effect to Iran. By throwing the ball to Congress and then to Russia, Obama has effectively taken the use of force off the table, letting the Russians and Assad set the ground rules. From a moral and geopolitical standpoint, this is a debacle that will extend throughout the Middle East and beyond.

A decade of war is not ending; it’s our willingness to move events in our direction and protect American interests and values that has. It will be a minor miracle if Iran doesn’t get a nuclear weapon in the next 3 years. Conservative hawks and liberal interventionists aren’t the only ones who should be concerned about Russian dominance in the Middle East. I hate to break it to those trying to wriggle out of doing anything about Assad, but even Obama admits we have vital national interests in the region. The president just isn’t willing to act to protect them.

## **Streetwise Professor**

### **We’re So Screwed**

by Craig Pirrong

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**NY Times**

## **Who Do You Trust?**

by Maureen Dowd

WASHINGTON — Vladimir Putin, who keeps Edward Snowden on a leash and lets members of a riotous girl band rot in jail, has thrown President Obama a lifeline.

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Now, when it is clear Obama can't convince Congress, the American public, his own wife, the world, Liz Cheney or even Donald "Shock and Awe" Rumsfeld to bomb Syria — just a teensy-weensy bit — Pooty-Poot (as W. called him) rides, shirtless, to the rescue, offering him a face-saving way out? If it were a movie, we'd know it was a trick. We can't trust the soulless Putin — his Botox has given the former K.G.B. officer even more of a poker face — or the heartless Bashar al-Assad. By Tuesday, Putin the Peacemaker was already setting conditions.

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Amateur hour started when Obama dithered on Syria and failed to explain the stakes there. It escalated last August with a slip by the methodical wordsmith about "a red line for us" — which the president and Kerry later tried to blur as the world's red line, except the world was averting its eyes.

Obama's flip-flopping, ambivalent leadership led him to the exact place he never wanted to be: unilateral instead of unified. Once again, as with gun control and other issues, he had not done the groundwork necessary to line up support. The bumbling approach climaxed with two off-the-cuff remarks by Kerry, hitting a rough patch in the role of a lifetime, during a London press conference Monday; he offered to forgo an attack if Assad turned over "every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community" and promised, if they did strike, that it would be an "unbelievably small" effort.

A State Department spokeswoman walked back Kerry's first slip, but once the White House realized it was the only emergency exit sign around, Kerry walked back the walking back, claiming at a Congressional hearing Tuesday that he did not "misspeak."

The president countered Kerry's second slip with NBC's Savannah Guthrie Monday night, declaring that "The U.S. does not do pinpricks," which Kerry parroted at the hearing Tuesday, declaring that "We don't do pinpricks." For good measure, Obama, in his address to the nation Tuesday night, made sure the world knew: "The United States military doesn't do pinpricks."

Where the mindlessly certain W. adopted a fig leaf of diplomacy to use force in Iraq, the mindfully uncertain Obama is adopting a fig leaf of force to use diplomacy in Syria.

Even as Democrats tiptoed away from the red line, eager to kick the can of Sarin down the road, their own harsh rhetoric haunted them. Kerry compared Assad to Hitler last week, and Harry Reid evoked "Nazi death camps" on the Senate floor Monday.

Again, an echo of the misbegotten Iraq. Making his hyperbolic case for war, W. was huffy with Germans on a visit in 2002, irritated that they did not seem to grasp the horror of "a dictator who gassed his own people," as he put it to a Berlin reporter.

Obama cried over the children of Newtown. He is stricken, as he said in his address Tuesday, by "images of children writhing in pain and going still on a cold hospital floor" from "poison gas." He thought — or thought he thought — that avenging the gassing was the right thing to do. But W., once more haunting his successor's presidency, drained credibility, coffers and compassion.

While most Americans shudder at the news that 400 children have been killed by a monster, they recoil at the Middle East now; they've had it with Shiites vs. Sunnis, with Alawites and all the ancient hatreds. Kerry can bluster that "we're not waiting for long" for Assad to cough up the weapons, but it will be hard for him to back it up, given that a new NBC/Wall Street Journal poll indicates that Joe Sixpack is now a peacenik; in 2005, 60 percent of Republicans agreed with W. that America should foster democracy in the world; now only 19 percent of Republicans believe it.

W., Dick Cheney and Rumsfeld launched a social engineering scheme to change the mind-set in the Middle East about democracy and the mind-set at home about the post-Vietnam reluctance to be muscular about imposing our values through war. They did manage to drastically change the mind-set in the Middle East and at home, but in the opposite way than they intended.

In a crouch after 9/11, the country was happy to punish an Arab villain, even the wrong one. That mass delusion, plus the economic vertigo, has sent Americans into a permanent crouch. And that's too bad.

## **The New Republic**

### **[The Syria Solution: Obama Got Played by Putin and Assad](#)**

by Julia Ioffe

This, apparently, is how diplomacy happens these days: Someone makes an off-hand remark at a press conference and triggers an international chain reaction that turns an already chaotic and complex situation completely on its head, and gives everyone a sense that, perhaps, this is the light at the end of the indecision tunnel.

Speaking in London next to British Foreign Secretary William Hague on Monday, Secretary of State John Kerry [said](#) that perhaps the military strike around which the administration has been painfully circling for weeks could be avoided if Bashar al-Assad can "turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay, and allow a full and total accounting for that."

The fact that Kerry immediately followed with, "But he isn't about to do it, and it can't be done, obviously," didn't seem to bother anyone. (Probably because they were focusing on his other slip-up: [calling](#) the promised strikes "unbelievably small.")

The Russians immediately jumped on the impromptu proposal, [calling Kerry](#) to check if he was serious before going live with their proposal to lean on Syria. An hour later, they [trotted out](#) Syria's foreign minister, Walid al-Mouallem, who said he too was down with the proposal, which was a strange way to get the Syrians to finally admit they even *had* chemical weapons to begin with. Before long, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, the English, and the French were all on board, too.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, the White House was just as surprised as anyone. Asked if this was a White House plan that Kerry had served up in London, Deputy National Security Advisor Tony Blinken was unequivocal. "No, no, no," he [said](#). "We literally just heard about this as you did some hours ago."

So that's good. At least everyone's on the same page.

While the Russians are already cutting deals and drumming up promises from the Syrians—with whom, as they've insisted for years, they have no leverage—and as the world lines up on the off-ramp, the White House was still marshalling its case for a military strike, trotting out National Security Advisor Susan Rice, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and poor Tony Blinken, who was left making the case for two mutually exclusive things: "We'll talk to the Russians," he kept repeating even as he hammered on the intelligence and the need to degrade, deter, et cetera, et cetera.

Last night, President Barack Obama, who, just over a week ago, had said he was ready to act, [tells](#) the nation's cable watchers that he's now discussing this bogus plan with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and that he's "going to take this very seriously" while also not letting up on the drumbeat of military strikes while. On Tuesday, Syria [said](#) it had accepted Russia's proposal and France [said](#) it would seek the UN Security Council's backing for the proposal.

This, in other words, is no light at the end of the tunnel. This, to borrow a phrase from a Congressional staffer at his wits' end, "is an unmitigated clusterfuck."

What happened was Kerry went off message and, as has been his wont as Secretary of State, off the reservation, and violated the cardinal rule of official press conferences: He answered a hypothetical question in a hypothetical way. He blurted out a pie-in-the-sky, hyperbolic idea—getting rid of "every single bit" of the chemical weapons [scattered](#) across Syria "in the next week"—but everyone seized on it as a realistic proposal. It's not.

First, how do you deal with a regime that only admits it has chemical weapons under the threat of impending military intervention? Or that uses chemical weapons while a team of U.N. inspectors is there *to investigate the prior use of chemical weapons*, in the same city?

Second, that handful of chemical weapons storage and mixing facilities are just the ones we know about, and, now that the U.S. has been loudly beating the war drum for weeks, Assad has

been [moving](#) his troops and weapons around. If we thought getting to "beyond a reasonable doubt" with the intelligence on the August 21 chemical attack was hard, imagine us getting to "every single bit."

Third, negotiating with the Russians and the Syrians about what "every single bit" and what disposing them mean will certainly take more than "the next week." Both Moscow and Damascus have all the time in the world, and the Kremlin, which has never met a legal norm it couldn't waltz around, will quibble and hair-split and insist that this is all done legally—whatever that means in Moscow.

Fourth, the mechanics of disposing these chemical weapons are far from straightforward. [Quoth](#) the *Times*: "flying [the chemical weapons] out of the country is not as simple as picking up nuclear components—as the United States did in Libya in late 2003—and moving them to a well-guarded site in Tennessee."

Fifth, and most important, is the fact that Assad giving up his chemical weapons was only part of the stated objective. If you listened to the White House pitch closely, the point of the military strike was not just to stop Assad from using chemical weapons further on his citizens, and it was not just to warn other rogue leaders with their fingers on various triggers. Part of the goal was to force a political solution that would remove Assad from power. That is, even though the Obama administration has been insisting that it is not interested in "regime change," that disastrous cornerstone of the Bush era, it was, in fact, pursuing regime change, at least until Monday.

On August 21, just hours after the sarin attack in Ghouta, a Damascus suburb, had occurred, Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest spoke of the failure of international pressure to achieve a key administration goal: "We've seen evidence and indications that the Assad regime is feeling that pressure, but you're right that we have not—that it has not resulted in the outcome that we would like to see, which is Assad being completely removed from power," Earnest said. "That's not just the preference of the United States of America, that's the will of the Syrian people and that's why it's important." This was what Senator John McCain managed to pry from General Martin Dempsey during the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing last week, that the [goal](#) of a military strike was "to change the military equation on the battlefield," and what he worked into the committee's resolution to authorize the use of force in Syria. This, the administration has insisted, was what made the military option so important: creating the opening for a diplomatic solution.

Well, on Monday, the administration argued, correctly, that the threat of a strike has done just that. "I don't think we would have gotten to this point unless we had maintained a credible possibility for a military strike," Obama [said](#) in an interview with ABC, adding, "and I don't think now is the time for us to let up on that." But Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has already [scrapped](#) the vote on the authorization of the use of force. And, given how bleak the vote count was looking pre-Kerry gaffe, and given how audible the sigh of relief from the Hill was, it's clear to everyone that the jig is up. Now that there's a semblance of a diplomatic option, the military option has evaporated. "The momentum is moving against us," said one Senate staffer. "We're on track to lose this thing. Our folks are dropping like flies."

There are two clear winners in this slow-motion train wreck, and they are not Obama or Kerry. They are Assad and Putin. Both wanted, for their own reasons, to avert a military strike, and a military strike was averted. Putin insisted on a diplomatic solution while doing everything to make a diplomatic solution impossible, and now he gets his phony, unenforceable diplomatic solution. Assad wanted to go on killing his opposition, and he will continue to do so.

Obama, on the other hand, found himself constantly check-mated, either by his own hand, or, this time, by Kerry's. First, he drew a red line on chemical weapons, seemingly by accident. Then, he all but ignored chemical weapons use by Assad until the evidence forced itself on the world. Then he agonized on whether to act, while Dempsey and the Pentagon rolled him, leaking their military plans to anyone who would listen, "probably," said one insider, "because they didn't want to act." Then, he talked about how limited the strikes would be, all while Assad moved his men and his guns into residential areas and the Russians moved their ships in. Then, out of nowhere, he decided to take it to Congress. "The president says that he's going to launch strikes and then, suddenly, he's going to Congress. It's probably one of the more incredible things I've ever seen," McCain told me. "We were all dumbfounded," said another Senate staffer.

Then came the persuasion of Congress, a legislative body that can't even pass a farm bill, or a gun-control measure favored by a crushing majority of the American people. The president didn't call Congress back, so instead, congressmen and senators got spend nearly two weeks marinating not in the intelligence, but in the vehement opposition of their constituents. Those that were in town—like the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—were rushed through the process of putting together a resolution before they even heard the classified briefing. Others, relative moderates like Republicans Saxby Chambliss and Kelly Ayotte who would normally support such a measure, complained that the briefings were vague and short on specifics.

Obama, meanwhile, took off for Sweden, and, as the town halls roiled with anger, put off his address to the country for the following week. While abroad, he managed to further humiliate himself in the eyes of Putin, who already sees him as weak. Obama, having just called off his bilateral summit with Putin because Russia granted asylum to Edward Snowden, went ahead and met with Putin anyway. It was a pointless meeting—"We both stuck to our guns," Putin [said](#) afterwards—but in Russia, the message was unmistakable: Putin is stronger, and Putin won.

Meanwhile, back home, the nays fell into place and the yeahs became fewer and fewer, and the talk in Washington was about what Obama will do if Congress says no? Or if the Senate says yes but the House says no? And just when it couldn't get any more discombobulated, Kerry opened the door to a nonsense Russian diplomatic solution, just three days after Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., said publicly it would be naive to count on Russia diplomatically.

As it stands now, [Russia](#) and [France](#) have taken the lead on working out a plan to get Assad to hand over his chemical weapons, a lead Obama seems all too happy to relinquish. Hammering out the details will take a some time, and, while they're at it, Assad will still have his chemical weapons but will no longer be under the threat of a U.S. military strike. (Who knows if he'll use them, but he certainly hasn't [let up](#) on the conventional shelling.) Putin has succeeded in throwing sand in the gears of the American political process and separating the U.S. from its allies, and the current American handwringing over Syria seems likely to grind on for weeks.



And a pro-Assad paper ran with the following [headline](#) this morning: "Moscow and Damascus Pull the Rug Out From Under the Feet of Obama."

Meanwhile, the president is supposed to address the nation tonight. He was supposed to make the case for military action, but his advisors spent Monday night frantically reworking the speech. What will he say? What can he say?

### **Borowitz Report** **[Kerry Shocked to Be Taken Seriously](#)**



WASHINGTON ([The Borowitz Report](#))—Secretary of State John Kerry said today that he was “shocked and flabbergasted” that the Russians heeded his suggestion about Syria’s chemical weapons, telling reporters, “After four decades in public life, this is the first time someone has taken me seriously.”

“Whether as a senator, a Presidential candidate, or Secretary of State, I’ve devoted countless hours to thunderous and droning speeches that people have consistently tuned out,” he said. “So naturally, to be listened to all of a sudden came as something of a shock.”

But after the novelty of not being ignored wore off, Mr. Kerry said, the Russians’ assertion that he had said something worth paying attention to “seemed like a trick.”

“You mean to tell me that after decades of spewing mind-numbing rhetoric I all of a sudden blurted out an idea worth acting on?” he said. “It doesn’t pass the smell test.”

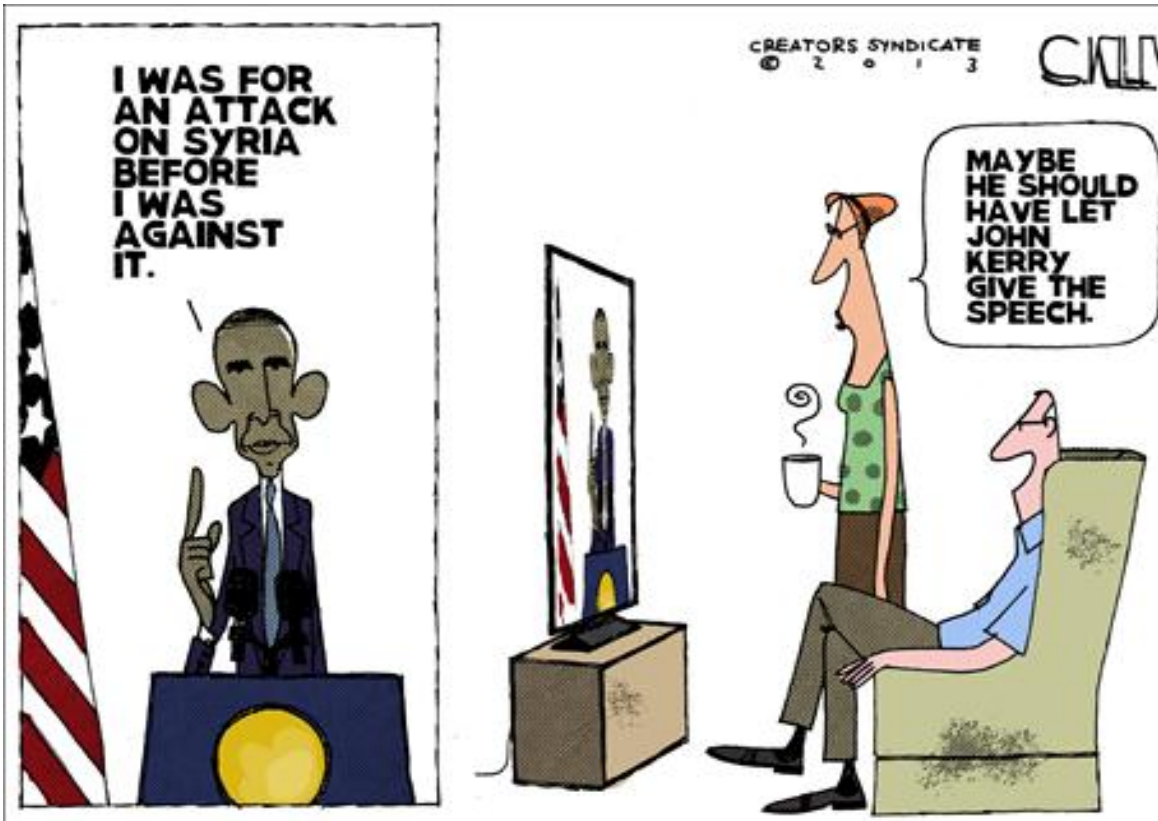
At the White House, spokesman Jay Carney welcomed the Russians’ engagement in the Syria crisis, but warned that “further actions based on John Kerry’s remarks will not be tolerated.”

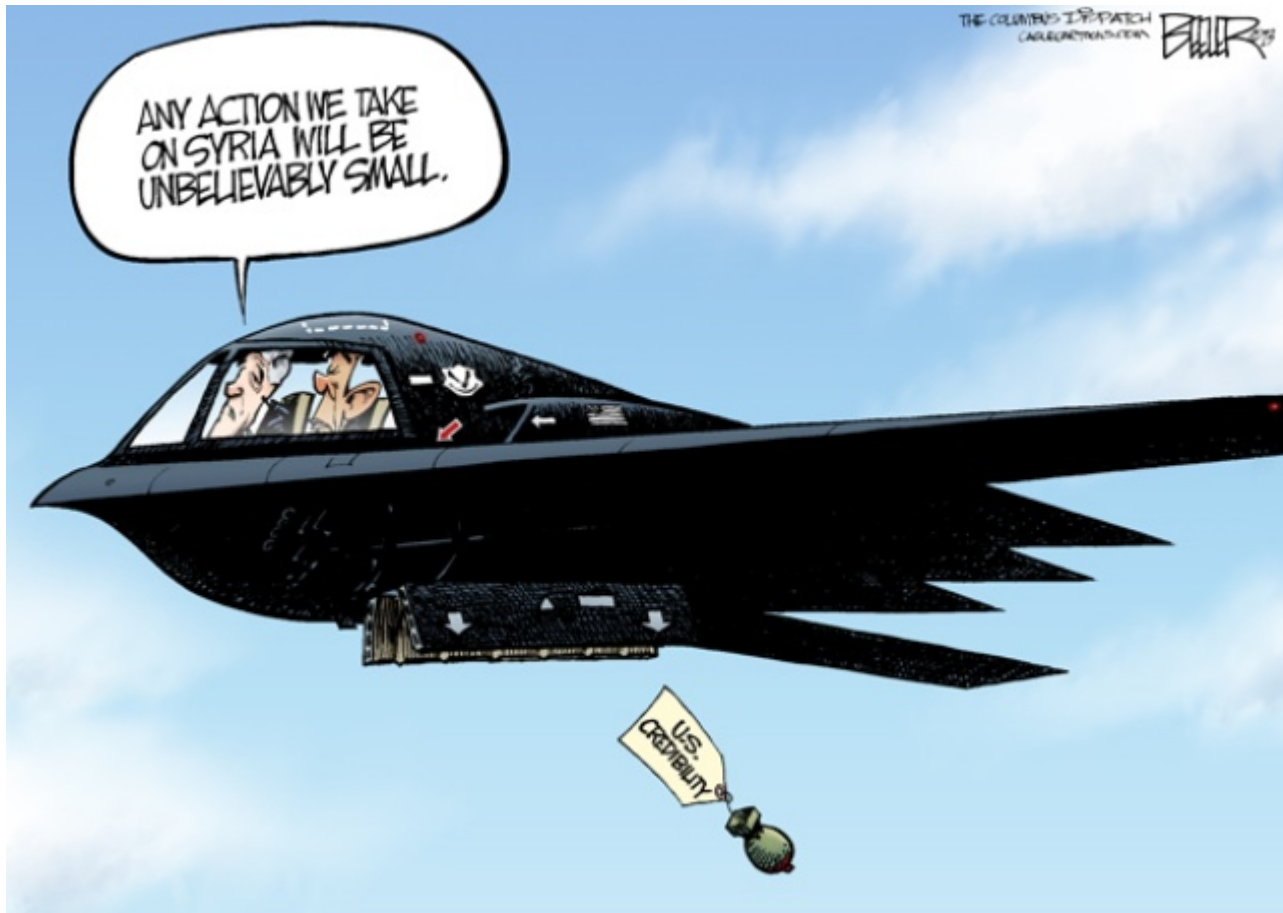
“We ask the Russians to be constructive participants in this process,” he said. “And taking John Kerry seriously is a clear violation of international norms.”













THE DEAL?