

September 15, 2013

Alluding to Bismarck saying "there is a Providence that protects idiots, drunkards, children and the United States of America", [Craig Pirrong](#) posts on Syria.

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*Some dissolve into incoherence, as second raters take over key positions. Some are overwhelmed by events, frequently of their own making, combined with exhaustion (Bush comes to mind especially). All are bedeviled by the end-game problem. Many-especially Republican administrations-are particularly hampered by a hostile press. Modestly successful first term administrations should take a lesson from James K. Polk and rest on their laurels, but he is the exception that proves the rule.*

*But I am hard pressed to find a historical precedent for the public humiliation of a president so early in his second term, due to his own strategic foreign policy blunders, as we are witnessing with Obama at present. ...*

*... There are those who take glee in Obama's distress. I am not one of them. Through his blunders he has humiliated his office, and humiliated the country. His personal distress is irrelevant: the damage to the nation far too relevant indeed. He has emboldened our enemies-and yes, Russia is an enemy and views the US as its enemy-and dismayed our friends. Radical and dangerous forces-notably the Iranians-will be tempted to take advantage, and allies disconcerted by Obama's fecklessness and confusion (Israel, Saudi Arabia) may feel impelled to act on their own in self-defense, despairing of the ability and willingness of the US to act decisively. Such a situation is fraught with danger, especially with a wounded president. That the wounds are self-inflicted makes it all the more discouraging.*

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**Daniel Henninger** calls it the "Laurel and Hardy Presidency."

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Let's turn to the left/liberal media. What does Time's Joe Klein think?

***It has been one of the more stunning and inexplicable displays of presidential incompetence that I've ever witnessed.*** *The failure cuts straight to the heart of a perpetual criticism of the Obama White House: that the President thinks he can do foreign policy all by his lonesome. This has been the most closely held American foreign-policy-making process since Nixon and Kissinger, only there's no Kissinger. There is no éminence grise—think of someone like Brent Scowcroft—who can say to Obama with real power and credibility, Mr. President, you're doing the wrong thing here. Let's consider the consequences if you call the use of chemical weapons a "red line." Or, Mr. President, how can you talk about this being "the world's red line" if the world isn't willing to take action? ...*

*... The public presentation of his policies has been left to the likes of Secretary of State John Kerry, whose statements had to be refuted twice by the President in the Syria speech. Kerry had said there might be a need for "boots on the ground" in Syria. (Obama: No boots.) Kerry had said the military strikes would be "unbelievably small." (Obama: We don't do pinpricks.) Worst of all, Kerry bumbled into prematurely mentioning a not-very-convincing Russian "plan" to get rid of the Syrian chemical weapons. This had been under private discussion for months, apparently, the sort of dither that bad guys—Saddam, the Iranians, Assad—always use as a delaying tactic. Kerry, in bellicose mode, seemed to be making fun of the idea—and the Russians called him on it. Kerry's staff tried to walk back this megagaffe, calling it a "rhetorical exercise." As it stands, no one will be surprised if the offer is a ruse, but the Administration is now trapped into seeing it through and gambling that it will be easier to get a congressional vote if it fails.*

*Which gets close to the Obama Administration's problem: there have been too many "rhetorical exercises," too many loose pronouncements of American intent without having game-planned the consequences. This persistent problem—remember the President's needless and dangerous assertion that his policy wasn't the "containment" of the Iranian nuclear program—has metastasized into a flurry of malarkey about Syria. It's been two years since he said, "Assad must step aside." He announced the "red line" and "the world's red line." And now, "We can stop children from being gassed." The Chinese believe that the strongest person in the room says the least.*

**Jennifer Rubin** lists 10 reasons why it is now worse.

1. *His Russia gambit lost whatever conservative support he had built up for a strike on Syria.*

2. *We are now at [Vladimir Putin's mercy](#), which he is already exploiting skillfully. The Russian despot took to the pages of the [New York Times](#) to deplore American exceptionalism and to denounce potential U.S. action. (He used the same “the rebels are all jihadists” claptrap that American isolationists use.) He accused the rebels of using the chemical weapons, an ominous sign for a chemical weapons exchange. Even worse was [the pathetic U.S. response](#): “That’s all irrelevant. He put this proposal forward and he’s now invested in it. That’s good. That’s the best possible reaction. He’s fully invested in Syria’s CW disarmament and that’s potentially better than a military strike — which would deter and degrade but wouldn’t get rid of all the chemical weapons. He now owns this. He has fully asserted ownership of it and he needs to deliver.” This is delusional and frightening, to be blunt. Obama’s international humiliation will continue.*

3. *The media figured out quickly the Russia gambit is ridiculous and therefore is unlikely to treat the morass to follow as anything other than Obama’s fault. ...*

**Roger Simon** posts on Putin's NY Times column.

*... Down with American exceptionalism, but up with the Lord. What a righteous man. And good for the New York Times, known for its atheistic tendencies, to give him space to express these views and make the world safer for humanity.*

*But it shouldn’t end here. The Times should open up more space to President Putin. Perhaps he should be featured in the sports and travel sections. He is known to be a great hunter and fisherman. As recently as this year he apparently caught the [biggest pike on record](#). Who knows? He may [out swim Mao](#) yet, or even Diana Nyad.*

*So he is just the man for the New York Times — an international liar who has just made a complete fool of the president of the United States and shamed our country in the process while putting into question the entire future of the Middle East.*

*For his next column, perhaps he can finally tell us what happened in Benghazi. Sadly, there’s a better chance he’ll do it than our own administration.*

**Max Boot** says Putin is spiking the football.

*More than 100,000 dead in Syria—a figure growing by 5,000 or so deaths every month. Millions more displaced. Chemical weapons used. Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah on the offensive. The United States humiliated and powerless on the sidelines. The situation in Syria is about as grim as you can imagine—and Vladimir Putin is loving every minute of it. That impression comes across very strongly in his New York Times op-ed today in which he takes a typically brazen victory lap after having wrestled global leadership, at least temporarily, away from a confused and hesitant American president.*

*As usual with Putin, he overdoes it—the man who parades around bare-chested to show off his peccs does not know the meaning of “subtlety.” Putin begins by claiming that only the UN*

*Security Council can authorize the use of military force. Funny, I don't remember the UN resolutions justifying Putin's attack on Georgia in 2008 or his homicidal campaign in Chechnya which has killed tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands. ...*

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## **Streetwise Professor**

### **Obama Puts Bismarck to the Test**

by Craig Pirrong

Second terms seldom end well. Some implode in scandal (Lewinsky; Iran-Contra; Watergate). Some dissolve into incoherence, as second raters take over key positions. Some are overwhelmed by events, frequently of their own making, combined with exhaustion (Bush comes to mind especially). All are bedeviled by the end-game problem. Many-especially Republican administrations-are particularly hampered by a hostile press. Modestly successful first term administrations should take a lesson from James K. Polk and rest on their laurels, but he is the exception that proves the rule.

But I am hard pressed to find a historical precedent for the public humiliation of a president so early in his second term, due to his own strategic foreign policy blunders, as we are witnessing with Obama at present. Even a decidedly friendly press recognizes that the Syria situation has degenerated into an epic debacle. Some objective observers, who want desperately to succeed, have been brutal in their criticism: Walter Russell Mead comes to mind. He calls the Syrian episode a "clusterfarce." Very clever. You know exactly what he means to say but is too polite to say.

The twists and turns of the last weeks are mind boggling, and too tiresome to recount. But I think, at root, they are readily explained. Obama had no stomach for intervention in Syria, but felt compelled to do something due to his previous ad libs ("redline", "Assad must go") and political pressure in the face of atrocity, even though his most fundamental instincts and beliefs (other than an instinct for political survival and a belief in his destiny) counseled him to stay out. Faced with a varied political opposition, and not convinced in the prudence of intervention, Obama seized upon the Putin/Assad offer to put Syrian CW under "international control" despite the obvious fact that this was a practical impossibility, in order to avoid taking a military action he fundamentally detested. His desperation is palpable, and no amount of posturing will show otherwise.

Some of the political opposition was well-intentioned. Some of it was opportunistic and loathsome-particularly that part of which regurgitated the propaganda put forth by Putin and the Iranians. Regardless, Obama made no serious effort to present the case for intervention either to Congress or to the American people. He didn't use the opportunistic right as a foil, like he usually does in domestic brawls (where he runs against Limbaugh, for instance). Again, his heart wasn't in it.

It is distressing beyond words to watch Obama seize on the Putin Fig Leaf mere weeks after Putin humiliated him over Snowden. After Snowden, he had to know that Putin is no friend, but he played along anyways. (It would actually be worse if post-Snowden Obama does not grasp that Putin is an adversary bent on besting the US, and indeed, humiliating it.)

It is even more depressing to witness Putin strut around, and rub Obama's nose in it-and the nation's collective nose in it-with an obnoxious oped in the NYT. I take that back. It was not obnoxious. It was mendacious. The Russian exceptionalist ridiculing American exceptionalism, and posing as a prince of peace, even though everything Russia has done since the Syrian revolution began has served to prolong and intensify the brutal war. Obama has performed the miracle of making Putin look like the reasonable peacemaker.

The Putin Plan will only result in delay, rather than resolution of the humanitarian and political crisis in Syria. Already Assad is laying down conditions: he will accede only if the US stops supporting the opposition and pledges to forego any use of force in the future. In other words: we surrender first, he'll give up his CW. But you know in reality he'll pocket the surrender, and then go on exactly as he pleases.

I am in Geneva right now, and a few hours ago and a few miles away Kerry and Lavrov went through the motions of negotiating a path forward based on the Russian proposal. Perhaps they should go to a railway car in Compiègne instead.

It's obvious that I am no fan of Obama, but it must be noted that even many of his reliable supporters recognize this has been an epic debacle. Only the sycophants attempt to portray his conduct as cagey and statesmanlike.

There are those who take glee in Obama's distress. I am not one of them. Through his blunders he has humiliated his office, and humiliated the country. His personal distress is irrelevant: the damage to the nation far too relevant indeed. He has emboldened our enemies-and yes, Russia is an enemy and views the US as its enemy-and dismayed our friends. Radical and dangerous forces-notably the Iranians-will be tempted to take advantage, and allies disconcerted by Obama's fecklessness and confusion (Israel, Saudi Arabia) may feel impelled to act on their own in self-defense, despairing of the ability and willingness of the US to act decisively. Such a situation is fraught with danger, especially with a wounded president. That the wounds are self-inflicted makes it all the more discouraging.

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I have often said I hope Bismarck was right about the special providence that America shares with fools and drunkards. Putin certainly doesn't believe in it, but never have we needed more for this to be true. Obama has definitely proven himself to be no Bismarck, but he had better hope Bismarck was right.

WSJ

## The Laurel and Hardy Presidency

by Daniel Henninger

After writing in the London Telegraph that Monday was "the worst day for U.S. and wider Western diplomacy since records began," former British ambassador Charles Crawford asked simply: "How has this happened?"

On the answer, opinions might differ. Or maybe not. A consensus assessment of the past week's events could easily form around Oliver Hardy's famous lament to the compulsive bumbler Stan Laurel: "*Here's another nice mess you've gotten us into!*"

In the interplay between Barack Obama and [John Kerry](#), it's not obvious which one is Laurel and which one is Hardy. But diplomatic slapstick is not funny. No one wants to live in a Laurel and Hardy presidency. In a Laurel and Hardy presidency, red lines vanish, shots across the bow are word balloons, and a display of U.S. power with the whole world watching is going to be "unbelievably small."

The past week was a perfect storm of American malfunction. Colliding at the center of a serious foreign-policy crisis was Barack Obama's manifest skills deficit, conservative animosity toward Mr. Obama, Republican distrust of his leadership, and the reflexive opportunism of politicians from Washington to Moscow.



*Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy reporting for duty.*

It is Barack Obama's impulse to make himself and whatever is in his head the center of attention. By now, we are used to it. But this week he turned himself, the presidency and the United States into a spectacle. We were alternately shocked and agog at these events. Now the sobering-up has to begin.

The world has effectively lost its nominal leader, the U.S. president. Is this going to be the new normal? If so—and it will be so if serious people don't step up—we are looking at a weakened U.S. president who has a very, very long three years left on his term.

The belief by some that we can ride this out till a Reagan-like rescue comes in the 2016 election is wrong. Jimmy Carter's Iranian hostage crisis began on Nov. 4, 1979. One quick year later, the American people turned to Ronald Reagan. There will be no such chance next year or the year after that—not till November 2016.

The libertarian lurch on foreign policy among some Republicans is a dead end. Libertarians understand markets. But left alone, the global market in aggression won't clear. Like a malign, untreated tumor, it will grow. You can't program it to kill only non-Americans. The world's worst impulses run by their own logic. What's going to stop them now?

A congressional vote against that Syria resolution was never going to include a sequester for the Middle East. Iran's 16,600 uranium-enrichment centrifuges are spinning. Iran's overflights of Iraq to resupply Damascus with heavy arms and Quds forces will continue until Assad wins. Turkey and Saudi Arabia, U.S. allies, will start condominium talks with Iran, a U.S. enemy. Israel will do what it must, if it can.

On Wednesday the Russian press reported that the Putin government has sold state-of-the-art S-300 anti-aircraft missiles and batteries to Iran, a system with the capability to create a no-fly zone along the Syrian-Lebanon border. It should be running like clockwork by 2016. Europe will consider a reset with the new status quo.

There also isn't going to be a continuing resolution that defines limits for China the next 40 months. Articles now appear routinely describing how the U.S. "pivot" toward Asia is no longer believed by Asians. What if, after watching this week's Syrian spectacle, China next year lands a colony of fishermen on the Diaoyu Islands, known as the Senkakus to their Japanese claimants?

China on Tuesday warned India about setting up new military posts along their disputed 4,000-kilometer border. Is North Korea's Kim Jong Un on hold till 2016? There isn't going to be a House vote to repeal al Qaeda, which can still threaten U.S. personnel or assets around the world.

The White House, Congress and Beltway pundits are exhaling after the president of Russia took America off the hook of that frightful intervention vote by offering, in the middle of a war, to transfer Syria's chemical weapons inventory to the U.N.—a fairy tale if ever there was one. Ask any chemical-weapons disposal specialist.

Syria looks lost. The question now is whether anyone who participated in the fiasco, from left to right, will adjust to avoid a repeat when the next crisis comes.

The president himself needs somehow to look beyond his own instinct on foreign policy. It's just not enough. The administration badly needs a formal strategic vision. Notwithstanding her piece of Benghazi, National Security Advisor [Susan Rice](#), who gave a surprisingly tough speech Monday on the failure of the U.N. process and America's role now, may be the insider to start

shaping a post-Syria strategy. Somebody has to do it. Conservative critics can carp for three years, which will dig the hole deeper, or contribute to a way forward.

Allowing this week to become the status quo is unthinkable. A 40-month run of Laurel and Hardy's America will endanger everyone.

## Time

### Obama and Syria: Stumbling Toward Damascus

*The President's uneven Syria response has damaged his office and weakened the nation. It's time for one more pivot*

by Joe Klein

On the eve of the 12th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Barack Obama made the strongest possible case for the use of force against Bashar Assad's Syrian regime. But it wasn't a very strong case. Indeed, it was built on a false premise: "We can stop children from being gassed to death," he said, after he summoned grisly images of kids writhing and foaming at the mouth and then dying on hospital floors. Does he really think we can do that with a limited military strike—or the rather tenuous course of diplomacy now being pursued? We might not be able to do it even if we sent in 250,000 troops and got rid of Assad. The gas could be transferred to terrorists, most likely Hizballah, before we would find all or even most of it. And that is the essence of the policy problem Obama has been wrestling with on Syria: when you explore the possibilities for intervention, any vaguely plausible action quickly reaches a dead end.

The President knows this, which makes his words and gestures during the weeks leading up to his Syria speech all the more perplexing. He willingly jumped into a bear trap of his own creation. In the process, he has damaged his presidency and weakened the nation's standing in the world. It has been one of the more stunning and inexplicable displays of presidential incompetence that I've ever witnessed. The failure cuts straight to the heart of a perpetual criticism of the Obama White House: that the President thinks he can do foreign policy all by his lonesome. This has been the most closely held American foreign-policy-making process since Nixon and Kissinger, only there's no Kissinger. There is no éminence grise—think of someone like Brent Scowcroft—who can say to Obama with real power and credibility, Mr. President, you're doing the wrong thing here. Let's consider the consequences if you call the use of chemical weapons a "red line." Or, Mr. President, how can you talk about this being "the world's red line" if the world isn't willing to take action? Perhaps those questions, and many others, fell through the cracks as his first-term national-security staff departed and a new team came in. But Obama has shown a desire to have national-security advisers who were "honest brokers"—people who relayed information to him—rather than global strategists. In this case, his new staff apparently raised the important questions about going to Congress for a vote: Do you really want to do this for a limited strike? What if they say no? But the President ignored them, which probably means that the staff isn't strong enough.

The public presentation of his policies has been left to the likes of Secretary of State John Kerry, whose statements had to be refuted twice by the President in the Syria speech. Kerry had said there might be a need for "boots on the ground" in Syria. (Obama: No boots.) Kerry had said the



military strikes would be “unbelievably small.” (Obama: We don’t do pinpricks.) Worst of all, Kerry bumbled into prematurely mentioning a not-very-convincing Russian “plan” to get rid of the Syrian chemical weapons. This had been under private discussion for months, apparently, the sort of dither that bad guys—Saddam, the Iranians, Assad—always use as a delaying tactic. Kerry, in bellicose mode, seemed to be making fun of the idea—and the Russians called him on it. Kerry’s staff tried to walk back this megagaffe, calling it a “rhetorical exercise.” As it stands, no one will be surprised if the offer is a ruse, but the Administration is now trapped into seeing it through and gambling that it will be easier to get a congressional vote if it fails.

Which gets close to the Obama Administration’s problem: there have been too many “rhetorical exercises,” too many loose pronouncements of American intent without having game-planned the consequences. This persistent problem—remember the President’s needless and dangerous assertion that his policy wasn’t the “containment” of the Iranian nuclear program—has metastasized into a flurry of malarkey about Syria. It’s been two years since he said, “Assad must step aside.” He announced the “red line” and “the world’s red line.” And now, “We can stop children from being gassed.” The Chinese believe that the strongest person in the room says the least. The President is the strongest person, militarily, in the world. He does not have to broadcast his intentions. He should convey them privately, wait for a response, then take action, or not. He should do what the Israelis did when they took out the Syrian nuclear reactor: they did it, without advance bluster, and didn’t even claim credit for it afterward. The wolf doesn’t have to cry wolf, nor should the American eagle. We must stand for restrained moral power, power that is absolutely lethal and purposeful when it is unleashed, but never unleashed wantonly, without a precise plan or purpose.

Creating a precise plan in the Middle East is utterly impossible, which is something the American people have clearly come to realize. The region is at a hinge of history: those straight-line borders, drawn by the Europeans nearly 100 years ago, seem to have passed their sell-by date. The next decades may see the formation of new countries, like Kurdistan, along ethnic and sectarian lines, and the process will undoubtedly be bloody. Some version of Syria will probably emerge—there’s always been a Syria—but perhaps not within the current borders. The West will have to stand aside as this is worked out. We have slashed our way into these places, under the neocolonial assumption that they are somehow in need of our wisdom and power, and left too much chaos and too many dead bodies in our wake to have any moral credibility left in the region except, perhaps, in Israel. And you have to wonder if, after the past few weeks, the Israelis would trust us to provide the security for the peace that Kerry is trying to negotiate with the Palestinians.

Once again, the President understands all this. The subtext of his presidency has been that it is no longer possible for the U.S. to go it alone—even if he continues to do so himself—unless we face a direct and immediate threat to our national security, and that we must build multilateral coalitions to enforce the world’s red lines. And so, the question must be asked: Why has he persisted in pursuing a limited military option in Syria? These things almost never work. Often, they make the situation worse. Ryan Crocker, the retired American diplomat with the most experience in the region, has speculated that Assad’s diabolical response to an American military strike might be to launch “another chemical attack just as a stick in our eye.” And then, our next move? Could the President let another gas attack stand?

The President isn’t crass or stupid enough to say it, but I would guess that he is persisting in his public threats of military action because American credibility—and, more precisely, his credibility—really is at stake. But playing the “American credibility” card is a foolish and

extremely dangerous game. In my lifetime, more lives, including American lives, have been lost in the pursuit of American credibility than by any legitimate military factor. It was what led Lyndon Johnson to double down in Vietnam. It was what helped propel George W. Bush into pulling the trigger in Iraq, even after it was clear that most of the world and, quietly, the American military thought it would be a disastrous exercise. It was what led Obama deeper into Afghanistan. Make no mistake, Obama has already lost credibility in the world, given his performance of the past few weeks. But American credibility is easily resurrected, given our overwhelming strength, by prudent action the next time a crisis erupts, a clear strategic vision and a rock-steady hand on the wheel. It was resurrected by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The sad thing is that Obama had been rebuilding our international stature after George W. Bush's unilateral thrashing about. He has now damaged his ability to get his way with the Chinese, the Iranians and even the Israelis.

That may never come back—and there were real opportunities to make some progress, especially with Iran, where the ascension of a nonprovocative President, Hassan Rouhani, and a reform-minded Foreign Minister in Mohammed Javad Zarif had opened the possibility of real progress in the nuclear talks and maybe even in other areas, like Afghanistan. The question now is whether Obama's inability to make his military threat in Syria real—and the American people's clear distaste for more military action—will empower the hard-liners in the Revolutionary Guards Corps to give no quarter in the negotiations. The Chinese, who have been covetous of the South China Sea oil fields, may not be as restrained as they have been in the past. The Japanese may feel the need to revive their military, or even go nuclear, now that the promise of American protection seems less reliable. The consequences of Obama's amateur display ripple out across the world.

There are domestic consequences as well. This was supposed to be the month when the nation's serious fiscal and budgetary problems were hashed out, or not, with the Republicans. There was a chance that a coalition could be built to back a compromise to solve the debt-ceiling problem and the quiet horrors caused by sequestration and to finally achieve a long-term budget compromise. But any deal would have required intense, single-minded negotiation, including political protection, or sweeteners, for those Republicans who crossed the line. Precious time has been wasted. And, after Syria, it will be difficult for any member of Congress to believe that this President will stick to his guns or provide protection.

There are those who say Obama has destroyed his presidency. It may be true, but I doubt it. All sorts of things could happen to turn the tide back in his favor. The snap polls after the Syria speech indicate that he still has the ability to sell an argument, however briefly. He has been lucky in his opponents: the Republicans will doubtless continue to take positions that most Americans find foolish or extreme. Obamacare may prove a success. He may make crisp decisions in the next overseas crisis; one would hope he's learned something from this one. But he has done himself, and the nation, great and unnecessary harm. The road back to credibility and respect will be extremely difficult. □

## Right Turn

### 10 reasons why it's now worse

by Jennifer Rubin

President Obama had gotten himself into quite a bind going into his Tuesday night speech on Syria. But he made things much worse because of an incoherent speech, which even [former officials](#) are blasting. Here are at least 10 reasons why things are now worse:

1. His Russia gambit lost whatever conservative support he had built up for a strike on Syria.
2. We are now at [Vladimir Putin's mercy](#), which he is already exploiting skillfully. The Russian despot took to the pages of the [New York Times](#) to deplore American exceptionalism and to denounce potential U.S. action. (He used the same "the rebels are all jihadists" claptrap that American isolationists use.) He accused the rebels of using the chemical weapons, an ominous sign for a chemical weapons exchange. Even worse was [the pathetic U.S. response](#): "That's all irrelevant. He put this proposal forward and he's now invested in it. That's good. That's the best possible reaction. He's fully invested in Syria's CW disarmament and that's potentially better than a military strike — which would deter and degrade but wouldn't get rid of all the chemical weapons. He now owns this. He has fully asserted ownership of it and he needs to deliver." This is delusional and frightening, to be blunt. Obama's international humiliation will continue.
3. The media figured out quickly the Russia gambit is ridiculous and therefore is unlikely to treat the morass to follow as anything other than Obama's fault.
4. There is no pro-Russia or pro-United Nations constituency to speak of in this country; putting our national security interests in these peoples' hands isn't likely to endear him to the public, Congress or foreign policy professionals.
5. He has marched up the hill (to a unilateral strike) and marched down (asking for a congressional vote), promised to march up (*definitely going to win this one*) and now put the march on pause. Aside from the humiliation involved in the flip-flop frenzy, it will be virtually impossible to re-engage Congress; once again he is back in this fix by himself.
6. Congress can now easily say "no" to the muddled resolution or, more likely, do nothing. Obama's attempt to turn the tables on the Republicans as David Axelrod gleefully tweeted ("the dog that caught the bus") backfired, losing him whatever partisan advantage he hoped to gain.
7. He has embarrassed and likely demoralized his own staff by constant reversals. The danger of defensive leaking (*Not me!*) has increased.
8. He has lost any residual ability to move public opinion, even in an area (foreign policy) in which the president is usually afforded the benefit of the doubt. It's hard to see how he gets this back on either domestic or foreign policy issues over the next three years.
9. He made such a good case about the heinous nature of the Assad regime and the imperative to deter chemical weapons use that the pressure on him to act is now greater than before the speech. His words will be played and replayed unless he acts.

10. Obama has let the foreign policy advantage he temporarily had over Republicans slip away. All Dems had to do up until now was holler "Iraq!" Now, Republicans can justifiably say (and they did via a steady flow of "no" votes on Wednesday) that this is worse. In fact, he might be the worst moment in presidential history when it comes to national security.

Liberals have insisted that a "no" vote wouldn't have ruined his presidency. Perhaps. But having made himself the subject of ridicule and been forced to withdraw his request altogether, he is a much-diminished figure and is likely to remain so, unless, of course, Republicans do something dumb like try to shut down the government.

**Roger L. Simon**

**[Welcome the New York Times' Great New Columnist — Vladimir Putin](#)**



Forget that creaky feminist Maureen Dowd. Forget that pompous know-it-all Paul Krugman. And that pseudo-conservative neo-yuppie David Brooks. They're all yesterday's news and oh-so-repetitive. The *New York Times* has finally found a columnist worth reading.

He's so good they might even be able to revive the late-lamented [Times Select](#) program and make a little money from him, bring that stock back and sell some papers, even the dead-tree kind.

Welcome, [Vladimir Putin!](#)

Okay, he's occasionally guilty of a little disinformation KGB-style and his English can sound a little stiff and translated, but he probably has the best set of ghost writers extant. How about [Yevgeny Yevtushenko](#)? Have any of Barack Obama's speech-writing hacks ever written anything nearly as good as ["Babi Yar?"](#) No bloody way!

So kudos to the *New York Times* for their new columnist. He at least can back up his opinions with actions unlike the rest of the blowhards on their op-ed page. Let's hope his first column of September 11, 2013, is only the beginning of a long, literary relationship.

And the *Times*' opening their pages to this man is all the more praiseworthy since so many had a false impression of President Putin as a neo-Stalinist bent on bringing back totalitarianism to Russia. Wrong-o! This is a Man of God, a man who walks humbly among the nations. Consider the pious conclusion of his first column:

My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is "what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional." It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.

So there you have it: Down with American exceptionalism, but up with the Lord. What a righteous man. And good for the *New York Times*, known for its atheistic tendencies, to give him space to express these views and make the world safer for humanity.

But it shouldn't end here. The *Times* should open up more space to President Putin. Perhaps he should be featured in the sports and travel sections. He is known to be a great hunter and fisherman. As recently as this year he apparently caught the [biggest pike on record](#). Who knows? He may [out swim Mao](#) yet, or even Diana Nyad.

So he is just the man for the *New York Times* — an international liar who has just made a complete fool of the president of the United States and shamed our country in the process while putting into question the entire future of the Middle East.

For his next column, perhaps he can finally tell us what happened in Benghazi. Sadly, there's a better chance he'll do it than our own administration.

## Contentions

### [Putin Spikes the Football](#)

by Max Boot

More than 100,000 dead in Syria—a figure growing by 5,000 or so deaths every month. Millions more displaced. Chemical weapons used. Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah on the offensive. The United States humiliated and powerless on the sidelines. The situation in Syria is about as grim as you can imagine—and Vladimir Putin is loving every minute of it. That impression comes across very strongly in his [New York Times op-ed](#) today in which he takes a typically brazen victory lap after having wrestled global leadership, at least temporarily, away from a confused and hesitant American president.

As usual with Putin, he overdoes it—the man who parades around bare-chested to show off his pecs does not know the meaning of “subtlety.” Putin begins by claiming that only the UN Security Council can authorize the use of military force. Funny, I don’t remember the UN resolutions justifying Putin’s attack on Georgia in 2008 or his homicidal [campaign in Chechnya](#) which has killed tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands.

He warns specifically that a U.S. strike on Syria “could undermine multilateral efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and further destabilize the Middle East and North Africa.” No doubt Russian arms deliveries to Syria and Iran—including Russian help with Iran’s nuclear program and the [rumored sale](#) of a sophisticated air-defense system to Tehran—have been big factors in enhancing Middle Eastern stability.

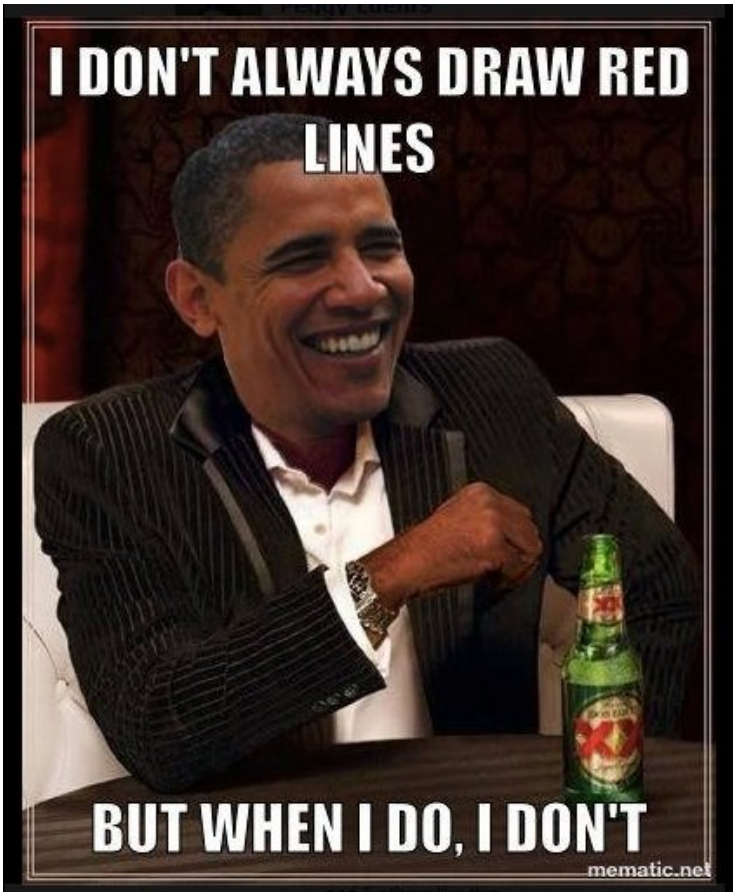
Putin, moreover, claims: “We are not protecting the Syrian government, but international law. We need to use the United Nations Security Council and believe that preserving law and order in today’s complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos.” Uh, right: That’s why the Russian government is not willing to go along with a UN Security Council resolution threatening Assad with force for failing to disarm—it’s not because Russia is Assad’s ally, it’s because of Putin’s boundless respect for international law! There is, of course, no mention of Assad’s many violations of international law in his war against his own people.

Putin slides from the ridiculous to the comic when he next claims: “No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists.” Actually, I think it’s safe to say that Putin and his minions are the only people who claim to believe that sarin was used by the rebels, not the government—and even the Russians can’t possibly believe that: it’s another convenient lie.

As if to rub salt into the wound, Putin ends with a pious denunciation of Americans who might claim that our country is exceptional: “It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”

Sure, there are countries such as Russia where the unelected leaders [oppress](#) their own people and jail anyone who speaks out against them; then there are countries such as the United States where liberal democratic norms prevail, human rights are respected, and the rule of law is followed. But in Putin’s upside-down moral universe there is no difference between the two—in his relativist telling, they are simply differently democratic.

There is nothing especially surprising about the cynical worldview of this old KGB apparatchik. The only thing dismaying is that President Obama, through his failure of leadership, has allowed this malevolent troublemaker to usurp America’s leadership role in the Middle East and indeed the world. And Putin isn’t about to let us forget it.



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# TIMES CHANGE



# IDIOTS DON'T

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**At first I was like... abolish war**



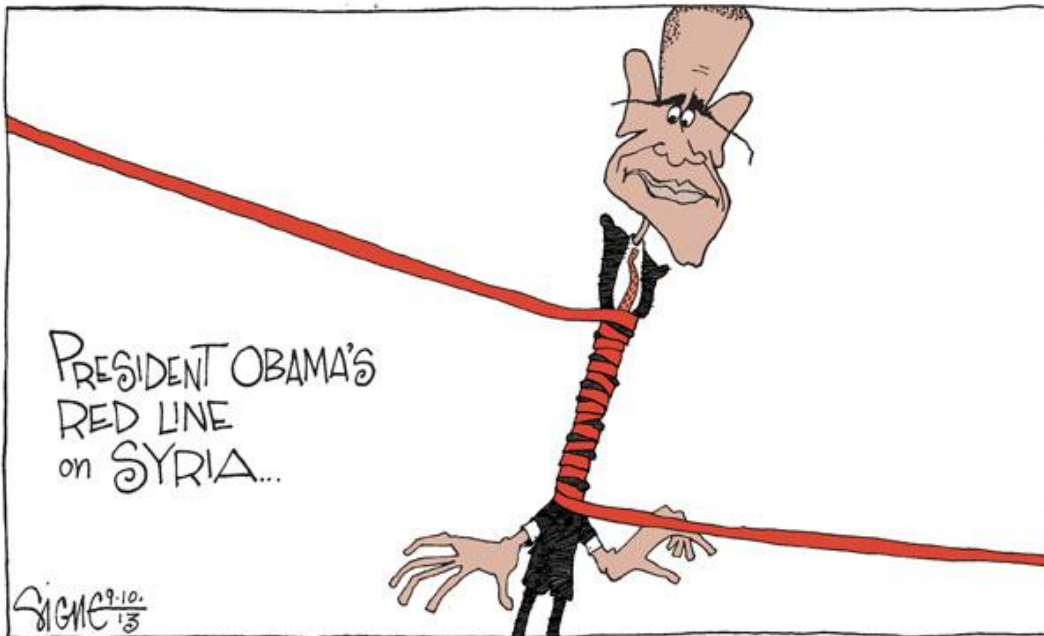
**But then I was all... bomb Syria**



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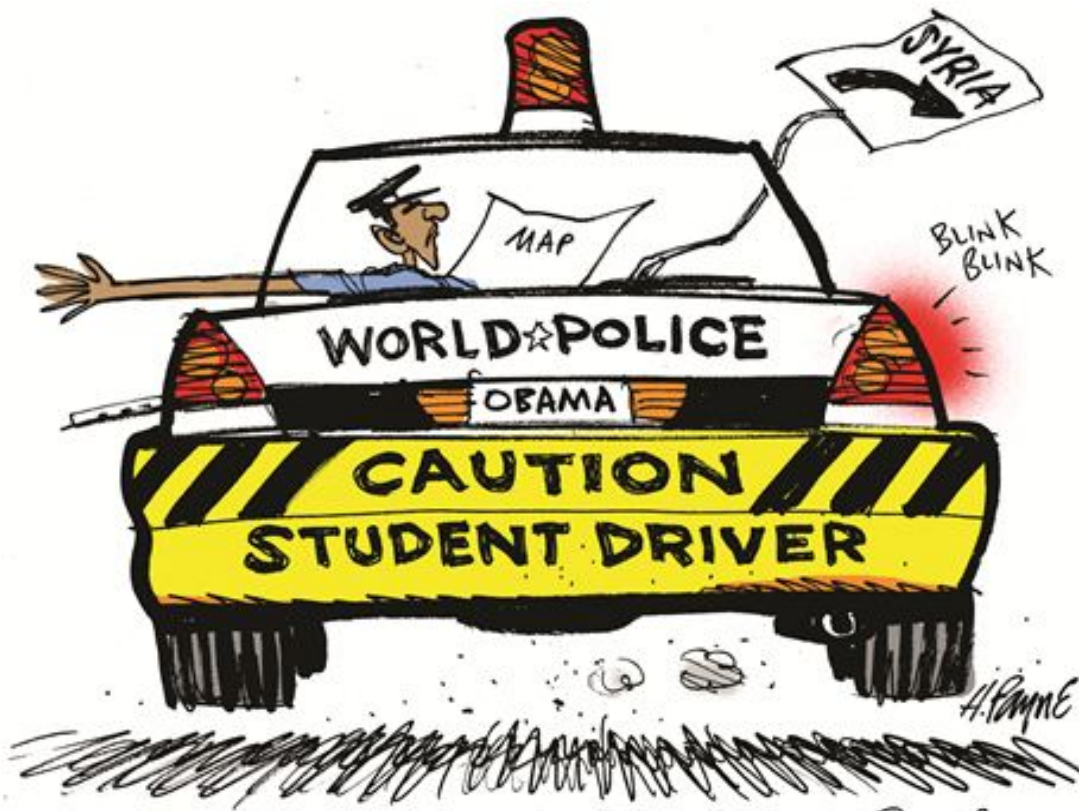
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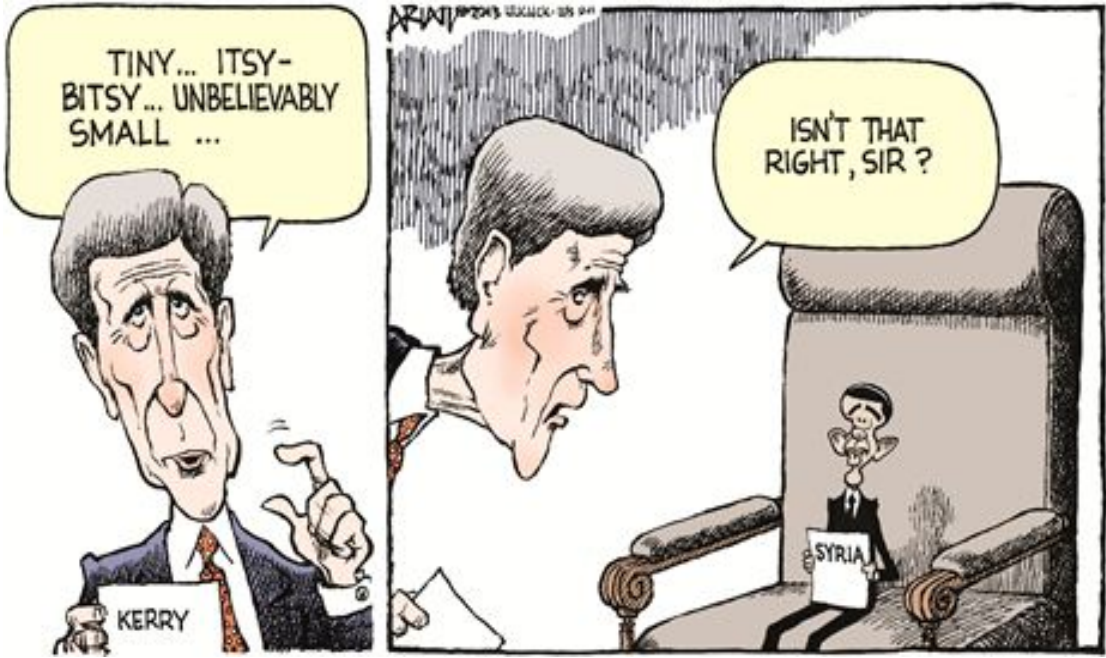


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DANCING WITH THE CZARS





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