

September 22, 2013

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette with the tragic story of the death of a modern day slave (adjunct professor) toiling in the groves of academe.

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Meanwhile, in the past year, her teaching load had been reduced by the university to one class a semester, which meant she was making well below \$10,000 a year. With huge out-of-pocket bills from UPMC Mercy for her cancer treatment, Margaret Mary was left in abject penury. She could no longer keep her electricity on in her home, which became uninhabitable during the winter. She therefore took to working at an Eat'n Park at night and then trying to catch some sleep during the day at her office at Duquesne. When this was discovered by the university, the police were called in to eject her from her office. Still, despite her cancer and her poverty, she never missed a day of class. ...

Instapundit comments.

Perhaps academics view the business world as cruel and exploitative toward workers because academia is so cruel and exploitative to its own workers. . . .

While slavery exists, The New Republic shows us the luxury for students.

Part of the ritual of returning to college at this time of year used to mean giving up the comforts of home, particularly the cozy private bedroom that is such a staple of American teenage life, and moving into a campus dormitory that was almost architecturally indistinguishable from public housing. Even at elite schools, rooms were the size of jail cells, beds were stacked like cordwood, and amenities consisted of a dresser and a desk. This was considered perfectly normal. Universities, after all, originated as monastic centers.

Plenty of Spartan dormitories still exist, especially at prestigious liberal arts schools that can have their pick of the litter, but they are quickly going the way of the paper textbook. Today's student accommodations are being built to resemble the kind of apartments you would find in a new urban high-rise. It's not unusual for a suite in one of these upscale dorms to include individual bedrooms with private baths and kitchens equipped with a full complement of stainless steel appliances—dishwashers and the obligatory granite countertops included. When admissions officers describe “amenities” to incoming students, their list now includes things like flat-screen televisions and tanning salons. At Drexel University, students are lining up for places in a new, privately built dorm designed by Robert A. M. Stern Architects, a firm known for its Hamptons beach houses and a fabulously expensive apartment building on Central Park West. Besides stunning views of the Philadelphia skyline, full-size beds, and some duplex units, its residents will have access to a private gym with a golf-course simulation room and a 30-seat screening room for practicing presentations—or holding Superbowl parties. ...

Victor Davis Hanson posts on the decline of college.

For the last 70 years, American higher education was assumed to be the pathway to upward mobility and a rich shared-learning experience. Young Americans for four years took a common core of classes, learned to look at the world dispassionately, and gained the concrete knowledge to make informed arguments logically.

The result was a more skilled workforce and a competent democratic citizenry. That ideal may still be true at our flagship universities, with their enormous endowments and stellar world rankings. Yet most everywhere else, something went terribly wrong with that model. Almost all the old campus protocols are now tragically outdated or antithetical to their original mission.

Tenure — virtual lifelong job security for full-time faculty after six years — was supposed to protect free speech on campus. How, then, did campus ideology become more monotonous than diverse, more intolerant of politically unpopular views than open-minded? Universities have so little job flexibility that campuses cannot fire the incompetent tenured or hire full-time competent newcomers.

The university is often a critic of private enterprise for its supposed absence of fairness and equality. The contemporary campus, however, is far more exploitative. It pays part-time faculty

far less for the same work than it pays an aristocratic class of fully tenured professors with the same degrees.

The four-year campus experience is simply vanishing. At the California State University system, the largest university complex in the world, well under 20 percent of students graduate in four years despite massive student aid. Fewer than half graduate in six years. ...

Turning out attention to DC, Daniel Henninger writes on the confused president.
... Early in September, President Obama surprised Washington by announcing he would seek a congressional vote of support for taking action against Bashar Assad in Syria. This came after the red line went. In an account of that decision, The Wall Street Journal reported that after taking a 45-minute walk with his chief of staff, Mr. Obama told his staff, "I have a big idea I want to run by you guys."

After meeting with the president, two significant political figures in Washington expressed public support for his announced plans to act against Assad—House Speaker John Boehner and Majority Leader Eric Cantor.

The president's decision to intervene wasn't popular with the American public or with members of Congress, so the Boehner-Cantor commitment was a big deal. It was a public expression of political support at the moment the president needed all the political support he could get.

A week and a half later, Mr. Obama reversed course. He would not seek congressional approval. Instead it occurred to him that he could negotiate a Syrian chemical-arms reduction agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The merits of that decision aside, ABC's Jonathan Karl reported that neither Mr. Boehner nor Mr. Cantor got a heads up from the White House on the U-turn toward Russia.

Throw a dart at the names of the other 11 post-war U.S. presidents. Would any of them have hung a Speaker of the House out to dry just before heading into negotiations with that speaker on funding the government, extending the debt ceiling or the future of your legacy achievement—ObamaCare? Barack Obama did. No problem. ...

Jennifer Rubin wonders if he is losing it.

As we've written over the last few weeks, the president has real, substantive problems in foreign policy and on Obamacare. But that doesn't mean his problems are only substantive.

In quick succession, the Syria debacle and his frenetically partisan attack on Republicans as the Navy Yard shootings incident was unfolding have gotten the attention and approbation of a large number of usually friendly voices.

On Syria, there has been near uniform dismay among the pundits and foreign policy experts over the president's unsteady and often confusing response to Syria's WMD use.

Just as biting, however, was the criticism of his decision to lash out at Republicans in cartoonish terms at the same time as the killing at the Navy Yard. Politico (which is to Washington superficiality what Emily Post is to table manners) sent up the first flare. Soon CNN chimed in. (“Did Obama strike the wrong tone on Monday?”)

Maureen Dowd gnashed her teeth over the misstep: “[J]arringly, the president went ahead with his political attack, briefly addressing the slaughter before moving on to jab Republicans over the corporate tax rate and resistance to Obamacare. . . . It was out of joint, given that the Senate was put into lockdown and the Washington Nationals delayed a night game against the Atlanta Braves, noting on its Web site, ‘Postponed: Tragedy.’” Chuck Todd (who had his own issues after tweeting the incorrect name of the gunman) intoned on Tuesday that the White House “wish they had yesterday back.” Like Dowd, Andrea Mitchell saw a pattern: “It doesn’t seem as though they have got their footing here, first on Syria, now on this.” ...

The Economist writes on the West's humiliation.

IN JULY 1972 Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt, suddenly decided to turf out thousands of Soviet military advisers. Menaced by Egyptian leftists and undervalued by the Kremlin, he calculated that he had more to gain from siding with America. Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s secretary of state, administered some deft diplomacy to broker a ceasefire between Egypt, Syria and Israel in the Yom Kippur war, and American aid duly flooded into Cairo. So did American influence: the Soviet hold over the Middle East never recovered.

The plan to wrest chemical weapons from Syria, shortly to be embodied in a UN resolution, has echoes of that era—except that the modern Metternich is a serial abuser of human rights and occasional op-ed writer on democracy for the New York Times, called Vladimir Putin. Russia, the country he leads, is too frail to regain its place in the Middle East. But this week, a decade after the invasion of Iraq, it suddenly became clear just how far the influence of the West has ebbed. The pity is how few Americans and Europeans seem to care about that.

In Western capitals the sigh of relief over Syria is audible. Barack Obama, while admitting that his diplomacy fell short on “style points”, claims that he got what he wanted. Syria’s president, Bashar Assad, will sign the convention against chemical weapons and get rid of the agents that he used to kill around 1,500 of his own citizens last month (see article). Even better, Russia shares responsibility for enforcing the plan, which could lead to broader co-operation with America, while Syria’s other ally, Iran, is making noises about negotiating with the Great Satan over its own nuclear programme. ...

... The West is not on an inexorable slide towards irrelevance. Far from it. America’s economy is recovering, and its gas boom has undermined energy-fuelled autocracies. Dictatorships are getting harder to manage: from Beijing to Riyadh, people have been talking about freedom and the rule of law. It should be a good time to uphold Western values. But when the emerging world’s aspiring democrats seek to topple tyrants, they will remember what happened in Syria. And they won’t put their faith in the West.

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

Death of an adjunct

Margaret Mary Vojtko, an adjunct professor of French for 25 years, died underpaid and underappreciated at age 83

By Daniel Kovalik

On Sept. 1, Margaret Mary Vojtko, an adjunct professor who had taught French at Duquesne University for 25 years, passed away at the age of 83. She died as the result of a massive heart attack she suffered two weeks before. As it turned out, I may have been the last person she talked to.

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Of course, what the caseworker didn't understand was that Margaret Mary was an adjunct professor, meaning that, unlike a well-paid tenured professor, Margaret Mary worked on a contract basis from semester to semester, with no job security, no benefits and with a salary of between \$3,000 and just over \$3,500 per three-credit course. Adjuncts now make up well over 50 percent of the faculty at colleges and universities.

While adjuncts at Duquesne overwhelmingly voted to join the United Steelworkers union a year ago, Duquesne has fought unionization, claiming that it should have a religious exemption. Duquesne has claimed that the unionization of adjuncts like Margaret Mary would somehow interfere with its mission to inculcate Catholic values among its students.

This would be news to Georgetown University -- one of only two Catholic universities to make U.S. News & World Report's list of top 25 universities -- which just recognized its adjunct professors' union, citing the Catholic Church's social justice teachings, which favor labor unions.

As amazing as it sounds, Margaret Mary, a 25-year professor, was not making ends meet. Even during the best of times, when she was teaching three classes a semester and two during the summer, she was not even clearing \$25,000 a year, and she received absolutely no health care benefits. Compare this with the salary of Duquesne's president, who makes more than \$700,000 with full benefits.

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Finally, in the spring, she was let go by the university, which told her she was no longer effective as an instructor -- despite many glowing evaluations from students. She came to me to seek legal help to try to save her job. She said that all she wanted was money to pay her medical bills because Duquesne, which never paid her much to begin with, gave her nothing on her way out the door.

Duquesne knew all about Margaret Mary's plight, for I apprised them of it in two letters. I never received a reply, and Margaret Mary was forced to die saddened, penniless and on the verge of being turned over to Orphan's Court.

The funeral Mass for Margaret Mary, a devout Catholic, was held at Epiphany Church, only a few blocks from Duquesne. The priest who said Mass was from the University of Dayton, another Catholic university and my alma mater. Margaret Mary was laid out in a simple, cardboard casket devoid of any handles for pallbearers -- a sad sight, but an honest symbol of what she had been reduced to by her ostensibly Catholic employer.

Her nephew, who had contacted me about her passing, implored me to make sure that she didn't die in vain. He said that while there was nothing that could be done for Margaret Mary, we had to help the other adjuncts at Duquesne and other universities who were being treated just as she was, and who could end up just like she did. I believe that writing this story is the first step in doing just that.

Instapundit

HIGHER EDUCATION BUBBLE UPDATE:

Death Of An Adjunct. Perhaps academics view the business world as cruel and exploitative toward workers because academia is so cruel and exploitative to its own workers. . . .

The New Republic

Granite Countertops, Flat-Screen TVs, Fire Pits: The Surprising Story of How College Dorms Got Luxe

by Inga Saffron

Part of the ritual of returning to college at this time of year used to mean giving up the comforts of home, particularly the cozy private bedroom that is such a staple of American teenage life, and moving into a campus dormitory that was almost architecturally indistinguishable from public housing. Even at elite schools, rooms were the size of jail cells, beds were stacked like cordwood, and amenities consisted of a dresser and a desk. This was considered perfectly normal. Universities, after all, originated as monastic centers.

Plenty of Spartan dormitories still exist, especially at prestigious liberal arts schools that can have their pick of the litter, but they are quickly going the way of the paper textbook. Today's student accommodations are being built to resemble the kind of apartments you would find in a new urban high-rise. It's not unusual for a suite in one of these upscale dorms to include individual bedrooms with private baths and kitchens equipped with a full complement of stainless steel appliances—dishwashers and the obligatory granite countertops included. When admissions officers describe “amenities” to incoming students, their list now includes things like flat-screen televisions and tanning salons. At Drexel University, students are lining up for places in a new, privately built [dorm](#) designed by Robert A. M. Stern Architects, a firm known for its Hamptons beach houses and a [fabulously expensive apartment](#) building on Central Park West. Besides stunning views of the Philadelphia skyline, full-size beds, and some duplex units, its residents will have access to a private gym with a golf-course simulation room and a 30-seat screening room for practicing presentations—or holding Superbowl parties.



A pool for Ohio State University students

How can student housing be going up-market at the exact moment when we are having a [national freak-out](#) over rising college costs and the staggering amounts of student debt? Such financial concerns don't seem to have deterred schools from peppering their campuses with lavish new dorms. Just the opposite. Building student housing has become a big business, and most of the new construction is being done by private developers. Those companies have been responsible for 20 percent of new college housing since 2012, [a recent survey](#) of 40 schools found

The scramble to upgrade college dorms began as a response to changing demographics. Despite everything you hear about the record numbers of applicants for elite schools, in many parts of the country, the pool of college-bound high school students is flat or shrinking. If you subtract those students who can't afford a residential school, the market becomes even tighter. The result is a growing competition for students, especially for the top-scoring, high-achieving kind. Schools figure that if they can offer commodious, well-appointed living quarters, they'll have a better chance of winning over top prospects. "Housing is a great recruiting tool," says Doug Brown, of [Capstone On-Campus Management](#), one of several developers who specialize in the lucrative student housing business. Many of Capstone's recent projects have been for public institutions—Appalachia State University in North Carolina, Queens College in New York City. Brown tells administrators that nice dorms are especially crucial for attracting international students who pay full freight. All that explains the growing "amenities war," adds James Baumann, a spokesman for the [Association of College and University Housing Officers](#).



A kitchen in Utah State University's Morgan Hall

But it's not just rich foreigners who want five-star accommodations. So many American kids have grown up cocooned in their own bedrooms, often with their own bathroom, that the idea of sharing a tiny room with a stranger seems deeply unpleasant. These singletons are even less

keen on trekking down the hallway to the common bathroom (especially now that so many are gender-neutral). College officials estimate that 60 percent of their applicants have never shared a bedroom. So when they commission new student housing, the goal is bigger units, more private bedrooms and a lot more social space. Very few new dorms are being built with common showers, even though it's the more economical way to go. In the typical dorm suite, one bathroom for every two students is now the standard ratio.

Another reason for the luxification of college housing is a bureaucratic shift. Administration officials once managed everything on campus, from the English faculty to the janitors, until they realized they could save money by outsourcing the non-academic stuff. It's much easier to lease a piece of campus land to a developer than to undertake an arduous fund-raising campaign to pay for a new dorm. It's also 20 percent cheaper: Private companies are able to shave \$16,000 off the per-bed cost in their student residences. The most appealing part of the arrangement is that schools get new housing without putting the debt on their books—leaving more money, in theory, for academic programs.



A card table in a student house in Gainesville, Florida

Companies like Capstone and American Campus Communities, which built the Drexel dorm, will also happily manage the student housing, sparing administrators from having to deal with noisy parties and the famously heavy wear-and-tear on furnishings. To convince students to pay more for a room in a private dorm, developers pile on the amenities. Swimming pools. Game rooms. Fire pits. Outdoor grills.



Single bedroom in a student house built by Chestnut Square in Philadelphia

While the rent is usually higher, students may actually get a better deal than they would in regular campus housing. Take the example of Allie Caren, a Syracuse University senior who lives in the deluxe [University Village complex](#) on the school's south campus. After sharing a "dilapidated" room in a '60s-era, cinderblock-walled, university dorm during her sophomore year, she convinced her parents that the overall tab would be roughly the same at the developer-built complex.

She now pays \$10,690 for the school year, about \$2,000 more than what the university charged. But for the price, Caren gets her own bedroom and in-room bath in a four-person suite with a shared kitchen, living room, and washer-drier. Since she cooks all her meals, she was able to give up her meal plan and save nearly \$3,000 a year. She feels she's getting more for her money. "I have a full-size bed, a four-drawer dresser," she enthuses. "When you're going to a private school and paying \$56,000 a year," she adds, "I just feel you should get AC with that."



Gym in a Chestnut Square student apartment in Philadelphia

At those rents—about \$4,000 a month for a four-person suite—you can imagine that the student housing developers don't come out too badly, either. Although schools have perfectly good economic reasons for wanting to get out of the housing business, the trend isn't without consequences for campus life. Students who can afford to live in private enclaves are effectively segregating themselves from the have-nots who are still stuck in the crappy dorms. It also allows them to continue living in the well-feathered cocoon of their teenage years well into their twenties.



A student house in Gainesville, Florida

Eventually, a generation raised in private bedrooms and private dorm rooms will have to venture out into a world where entry-level jobs that can support \$1,000-a-month rents are increasingly rare. How will they react to that first, grotty post-college apartment and sharing space with an annoying roommate? If it doesn't work out, at least there is always that cozy bedroom back home.

The Decline of College

The four-year campus experience is becoming a thing of the past.

by Victor Davis Hanson

For the last 70 years, American higher education was assumed to be the pathway to upward mobility and a rich shared-learning experience. Young Americans for four years took a common core of classes, learned to look at the world dispassionately, and gained the concrete knowledge to make informed arguments logically.

The result was a more skilled workforce and a competent democratic citizenry. That ideal may still be true at our flagship universities, with their enormous endowments and stellar world

rankings. Yet most everywhere else, something went terribly wrong with that model. Almost all the old campus protocols are now tragically outdated or antithetical to their original mission.

Tenure — virtual lifelong job security for full-time faculty after six years — was supposed to protect free speech on campus. How, then, did campus ideology become more monotonous than diverse, more intolerant of politically unpopular views than open-minded? Universities have so little job flexibility that campuses cannot fire the incompetent tenured or hire full-time competent newcomers.

The university is often a critic of private enterprise for its supposed absence of fairness and equality. The contemporary campus, however, is far more exploitative. It pays part-time faculty far less for the same work than it pays an aristocratic class of fully tenured professors with the same degrees.

The four-year campus experience is simply vanishing. At the California State University system, the largest university complex in the world, well under 20 percent of students graduate in four years despite massive student aid. Fewer than half graduate in six years.

Administrators used to come from among the top faculty, who rotated a few years from teaching and scholarship to do the unenviable nuts-and-bolts work of running the university. Now, administrators rarely, if ever, teach. Instead, they became part of a high-paid, careerist professional caste — one that has grown exponentially. In the CSU system, their numbers have exploded in recent years — a 221 percent increase from 1975 to 2008. There are now more administrators in that system than full-time faculty.

College acceptance was supposed to be a reward for hard work and proven excellence in high school, not a guaranteed entitlement of open admission. Yet more than half of incoming first-year students require remediation in math and English during, rather than before attending, college. That may explain why six years and hundreds of millions of dollars later, about the same number never graduate.

The idea of deeply indebted college students in their 20s without degrees or even traditional reading and writing skills is something relatively new in America. Yet aggregate student debt has reached a staggering \$1 trillion. More than half of recent college graduates — who ultimately support the huge college industry — are either unemployed or working in jobs that don't require bachelor's degrees. About a quarter of those under 25 are jobless and still seeking employment.

Apart from our elite private schools, the picture of our postmodern campus that emerges is one of increasing failure — a perception hotly denied on campus but matter-of-factly accepted off campus, where most of the reforms will have to originate.

What might we expect in the future? Even more online courses will entice students away from campuses through taped lectures from top teachers, together with interactive follow-ups from teaching assistants — all at a fraction of current tuition costs. Technical schools that dispense with therapeutic, hyphenated “studies” courses will offer students marketable skills far more cheaply and efficiently. Periodic teaching contracts, predicated on meeting teaching and research obligations, will probably replace lifelong tenure.

Public attitudes will also probably change. The indebted social-science major in his mid-20s with or without a diploma will not enjoy the old cachet accorded a college-educated elite — at least in comparison with the debt-free, fully employed, and higher-paid electrician, plumber, or skilled computer programmer without a college degree.

Real skills will matter more than mere college attendance or a brand. New competency in national tests in math, science, and English will be considered by employers to be a far better barometer of past achievement and future potential than the mere possession of a now-suspect university transcript.

As in any revolution, much good will be lost along with the bad. The traditional university used to offer a holistic four-year experience for motivated and qualified students in a landscape of shared inquiry and tolerance. The Internet and for-profit trade schools can never replace that unique intellectual and social landscape.

Yet because professors of the traditional arts and sciences could or would not effectively defend their disciplines or the classical university system, agenda-driven politicians, partisan ideologues, and careerist technocrats absorbed them.

The college experience morphed into a costly sort of prolonged adolescence, a political arena and a social laboratory — something quite different from a serious place to acquire both practical and humanistic knowledge.

No wonder that it is now financially unsustainable and going the way of the dinosaurs.

WSJ

[The Obama M.O.](#)

Barack Obama's modus operandi is: I think, therefore you do.

by Daniel Henninger

We should admit the obvious: Barack [Obama](#) is the most anti-political president the United States has had in the post-war era. Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter (even), Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush. All practiced politics inside the tensions between Congress and the presidency that were designed into the system by the Founding Fathers. Not Barack Obama. He told us he was different. He is.

Mr. Obama doesn't do Washington's politics. Disappointed acolytes say it is because he is "passive." That underestimates him. For Mr. Obama, the affairs of state are wholly a function of whatever is inside his mind.

Some things remain in his mind, like the economic benefits of public infrastructure spending, which appeared one more time in Monday's post-Navy Yard speech on the lessons of the financial crisis and Congress's obligations to agree with him. Some things enter his mind and then depart, like red lines in the Syrian sand.

From where he sits, it is the job of the political world outside to adjust and conform to the course of the president's mental orbit. Those who won't adjust are dealt with by the president himself. They are attacked publicly until they are too weak politically to oppose what is on his mind.

This is the unique Obama M.O. For historians of the Obama presidency, this September has been a case study in the 44th president's modus operandi.



Early in September, President Obama surprised Washington by announcing he would seek a congressional vote of support for taking action against Bashar Assad in Syria. This came after the red line went. In an account of that decision, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that after taking a 45-minute walk with his chief of staff, Mr. Obama told his staff, "I have a big idea I want to run by you guys."

After meeting with the president, two significant political figures in Washington expressed public support for his announced plans to act against Assad—House Speaker [John Boehner](#) and Majority Leader [Eric Cantor](#).

The president's decision to intervene wasn't popular with the American public or with members of Congress, so the Boehner-Cantor commitment was a big deal. It was a public expression of *political* support at the moment the president needed all the political support he could get.

A week and a half later, Mr. Obama reversed course. He would not seek congressional approval. Instead it occurred to him that he could negotiate a Syrian chemical-arms reduction agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The merits of that decision aside, ABC's Jonathan Karl reported that neither Mr. Boehner nor Mr. Cantor got a heads up from the White House on the U-turn toward Russia.

Throw a dart at the names of the other 11 post-war U.S. presidents. Would any of them have hung a Speaker of the House out to dry just before heading into negotiations with that speaker on funding the government, extending the debt ceiling or the future of your legacy achievement—ObamaCare? Barack Obama did. No problem.

On Monday, Mr. Obama delivered what the White House called "Remarks by the President at the Five-Year Anniversary of the Financial Crisis." After waving in the direction of the Navy Yard shooting and then the 2008 financial crisis, Mr. Obama spent most of the speech's nearly 4,000 words ripping into the congressional Republicans.

You have to read it to get the flavor. This passage should stand as a classic of the Obama politics of anti-politics: "The problem is at the moment, Republicans in Congress don't seem to be focused on how to grow the economy and build the middle class. I say 'at the moment' because I'm still hoping that a light bulb goes off here." (Laughter from the invited props.)

Gridlock? He's sucking the political oxygen out of the city.

There's plenty more. "The last time the same crew threatened this course of action" The same crew? As a bonus, we're getting a post-modern presidential vocabulary.

". . . they're willing to tank the entire economy."

"Are they really willing to hurt people just to score political points?"

The GOP leaders "haven't put forward serious ideas" on entitlement reform. And: "I put forward ideas for tax reform—haven't heard back from them yet." As with much else here, everyone in Washington knows that statement about taxes is false. But in the Obama post-politics apocalypse, what difference does it make?

Twice he announces, "I will not negotiate." But he is negotiating with Vladimir Putin something infinitely more difficult than a debt deal with John Boehner.

Trace elements of normal politics are inevitable in any presidency. But this one over five years has floated beyond the American political tradition. The Obama *modus operandi* is reducible to this: I think, therefore you do. Everyone else who still does real politics—from one side to the other—is left to gape.

Right Turn **[Is Obama losing it?](#)**

by Jennifer Rubin

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On Syria, there has been near uniform [dismay](#) among the [pundits](#) and foreign policy [experts](#) over the president's unsteady and often confusing response to Syria's WMD use.

Just as biting, however, was the criticism of his decision to lash out at Republicans in cartoonish terms at the same time as the killing at the Navy Yard. [Politico](#) (which is to Washington superficiality what Emily Post is to table manners) sent up the first flare. Soon [CNN](#) chimed in. ("Did Obama strike the wrong tone on Monday?")

[Maureen Dowd](#) gnashed her teeth over the misstep: "[J]arringly, the president went ahead with his political attack, briefly addressing the slaughter before moving on to jab Republicans over the corporate tax rate and resistance to Obamacare. . . . It was out of joint, given that the Senate was put into lockdown and the Washington Nationals delayed a night game against the Atlanta Braves, noting on its Web site, 'Postponed: Tragedy.'" [Chuck Todd](#) (who had his own issues after [tweeting the incorrect name of the gunman](#)) intoned on Tuesday that the White House "wish they had yesterday back." Like Dowd, Andrea Mitchell saw a pattern: "It doesn't seem as though they have got their footing here, first on Syria, now on this."

Conservative cynics will say that it wasn't the timing, but the actual contents of the incendiary comments that were the problem. (Conspiracy fans would say the media harped on the timing to "distract us" from how awful the remarks themselves were.) It was as clumsy and crude an attack as we have seen from this president. ("[Are they really willing to hurt people just to score political points?](#)") With disdain running down the sides of the podium, he told us that "it's time for responsible Republicans who share these goals — and there are a number of folks out there who I think are decent folks," which should come as a relief to those who thought he considered all Republicans indecent. He actually seems convinced that he is the only serious, diligent pol inside the Beltway. ("They said that they wanted entitlement reform — but their leaders haven't put forward serious ideas that wouldn't devastate Medicare or Social Security. And I've put forward ideas for sensible reforms to Medicare and Social Security and haven't gotten a lot of feedback yet.")

There are several noteworthy aspects to the president's performance over the last few weeks, and the media coverage of him. First, for a president whose "style" and empty rhetoric got him elected twice, it's a problem when his style goes out of fashion. He's got little else (certainly not a good relationship with Congress) to fall back on. Second, the president once again is setting his base's expectations very high and ginning up their anti-Republican ire. It's a dangerous game when you eventually have to make a deal. Third, unlike prior budget fights when he could argue Republicans were trying to give tax cuts to the rich, it's Obama this time who is seeking to defend unpopular positions (e.g. support for Obamacare).

And finally, his ham-handed attempt to separate the "decent" Republicans from the rest overlooks the real problem with extremists on his own side. As [National Journal](#) points out:

In recent weeks, congressional D's have been uncharacteristically independent, breaking with their leadership and the Obama administration. First they opposed military action in Syria,

warning the president they would deny his request to strike. And then came Larry Summers, who was brought down by a handful of Senate Democrats who let the White House know they would not confirm him as Fed chief.

All this bodes quite poorly for President Obama (and Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi) as the spending and debt fights approach.

Between liberals wanting a fight and red state Democratic senators wanting to save their jobs, the president will face a more fractured Democratic contingent than he's had to work with in the past. Coupled with his low approval ratings and increased public support for GOP's policy positions, the result may be a president too obnoxious to strike a deal with Republicans and too weak to hold his side together. For that reason it may be that after all the hoopla both sides decide to kick the can down the road until after the 2014 election.

The Economist

The weakened West

The deal over Syria's chemical weapons marks a low for those who cherish freedom



IN JULY 1972 Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt, suddenly decided to turf out thousands of Soviet military advisers. Menaced by Egyptian leftists and undervalued by the Kremlin, he calculated that he had more to gain from siding with America. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's secretary of state, administered some deft diplomacy to broker a ceasefire between Egypt, Syria and Israel in the Yom Kippur war, and American aid duly flooded into Cairo. So did American influence: the Soviet hold over the Middle East never recovered.

The plan to wrest chemical weapons from Syria, shortly to be embodied in a UN resolution, has echoes of that era—except that the modern Metternich is a serial abuser of human rights and occasional op-ed writer on democracy for the *New York Times*, called Vladimir Putin. Russia,

the country he leads, is too frail to regain its place in the Middle East. But this week, a decade after the invasion of Iraq, it suddenly became clear just how far the influence of the West has ebbed. The pity is how few Americans and Europeans seem to care about that.

The best of a very bad lot

In Western capitals the sigh of relief over Syria is audible. Barack Obama, while admitting that his diplomacy fell short on “style points”, claims that he got what he wanted. Syria’s president, Bashar Assad, will sign the convention against chemical weapons and get rid of the agents that he used to kill around 1,500 of his own citizens last month (see [article](#)). Even better, Russia shares responsibility for enforcing the plan, which could lead to broader co-operation with America, while Syria’s other ally, Iran, is making noises about negotiating with the Great Satan over its own nuclear programme.

The West’s leaders are off the hook. Mr Obama has managed to avoid the sort of humiliating defeat in Congress that David Cameron suffered in Britain’s Parliament. Now that military action is unlikely, Mr Cameron will not be embarrassed as a no-show. François Hollande no longer faces a domestic fight over his willingness to take France to war on Congress’s command. Some even see it as a victory for democracy: the people of the West did not want to fight, and got their way.

Yet the deal looks good only because the mess Mr Obama had got himself into was so bad. Step back, and the outcome looks rotten.

For a start, the deal itself is flimsy because it will be so hard to enforce. Mr Obama reserves the right to attack a delinquent Syria but the unpopularity of military action among America’s voters makes it clear that only an egregious breach, such as another chemical attack, could stir the country to action. Although Mr Putin would lose face if Syria brazenly defied the agreement, he now knows that Mr Obama needs his support. Given that Russia cares more about diplomatic parity with America than about de-fanging Mr Assad, it is more likely to prolong the crisis than resolve it. Nor is it clear that Russia can force Syria to comply. Mr Assad may co-operate at first, when the will to enforce the deal is strongest. But it is hard to impose disarmament during a civil war. As time drags on, Mr Assad is likely to frustrate the process—both to keep some chemical weapons and to be seen to defy America.

America’s credibility as an ally has been undermined. Whereas Mr Putin has stood firmly by Mr Assad, even while 100,000 people have perished, the West has proved an inconstant friend to the opposition. Two years ago, when only a few thousand Syrians had died, the liberal democracies called for Mr Assad’s ousting, but Mr Obama refused to get mixed up in the fight, even though the regime was reeling. His lone attempt not to look weak was the promise to punish any use of chemical weapons. Since then the formerly largely moderate rebel force has become infested by Sunni extremists, including foreign fighters and al-Qaeda.

As for Syria so for the Middle East. The Arab spring has driven a wedge between the West and its allies. Mr Obama recently sent his envoy to Cairo to ask the generals not to fire on an encampment of protesting Muslim Brothers. But, in an echo of Sadat, the generals preferred to heed Saudi advice, shoot the Brothers and collect billions of dollars of Arab aid. When the cold war ended, the West’s leadership showed imagination and resolve; no historian looking back at the Arab spring will say the same.

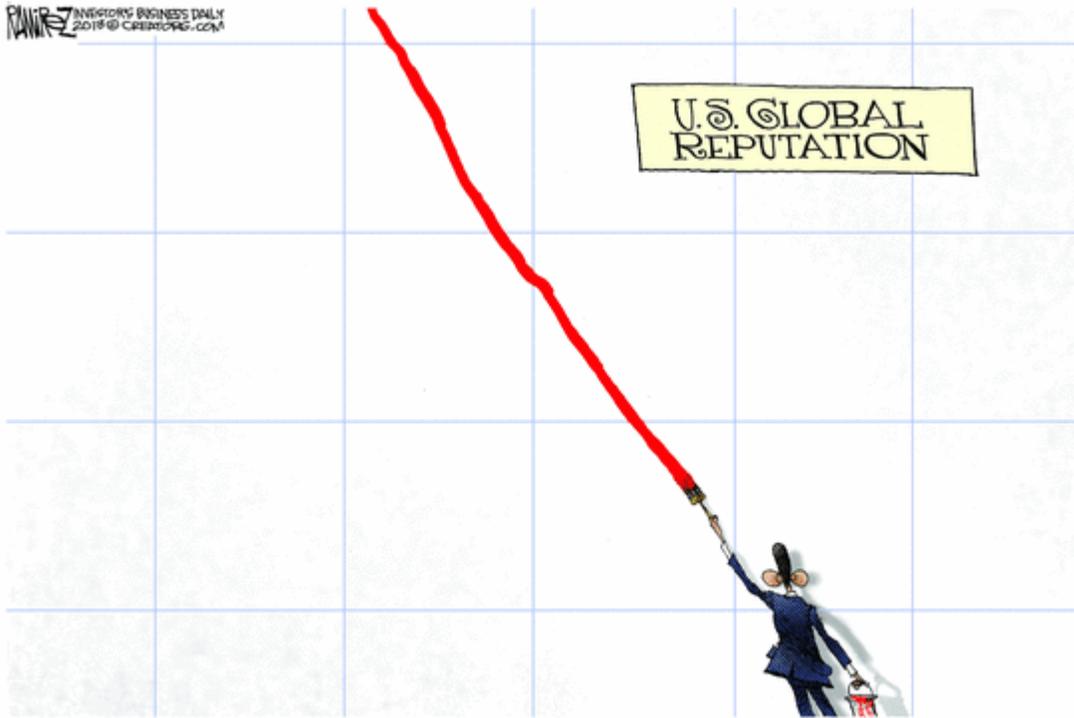
Last, America's credibility as an opponent has also suffered. That's not because all red lines that politicians draw must always be enforced. A leader who freely chooses to walk away from a fight need not suffer any loss of prestige. But a leader who the world sees is unable to fulfil his promises is inevitably weakened. And although nobody doubts that America's armed forces continue to enjoy overwhelming superiority, its unwillingness to use them undermines their ability to give force to its diplomacy.

Freedoms and constraints

The West's great problem is the paralysing legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan, exacerbated by a weak economy in Europe and, in America, vicious partisan politics. Everyone knew that Western citizens were tired of fighting, but until Mr Obama and Mr Cameron asked them, nobody knew just how tired.

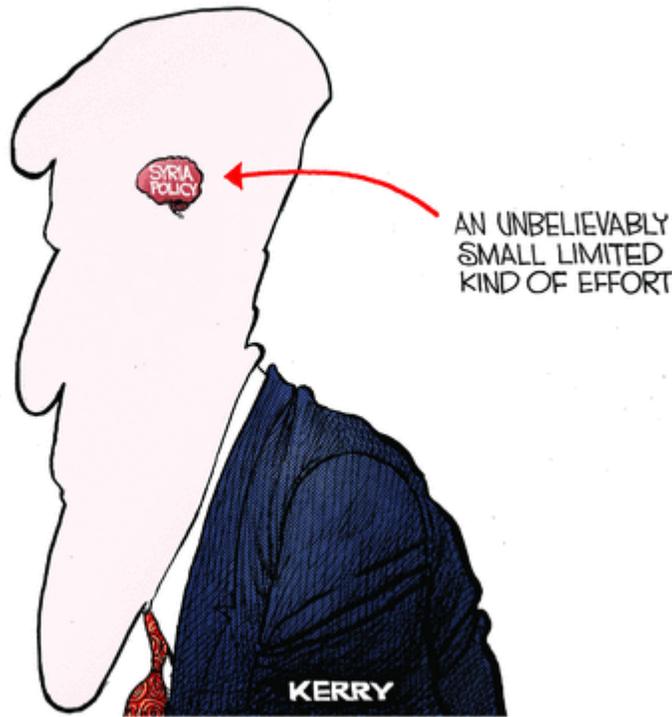
Now every tyrant knows that a red line set by the leader of the free world is really just a threat to ask legislators how they feel about enforcing it. Dictators will be freer to maim and murder their own people, proliferators like North Korea less scared to proceed with spreading WMD, China and Russia ever more content to test their muscles in the vacuum left by the West.

The West is not on an inexorable slide towards irrelevance. Far from it. America's economy is recovering, and its gas boom has undermined energy-fuelled autocracies. Dictatorships are getting harder to manage: from Beijing to Riyadh, people have been talking about freedom and the rule of law. It should be a good time to uphold Western values. But when the emerging world's aspiring democrats seek to topple tyrants, they will remember what happened in Syria. And they won't put their faith in the West.



THE RED LINE.





AN UNBELIEVABLY
SMALL LIMITED
KIND OF EFFORT

KERRY



THE REPUBLICANS SHOULD
STOP PLAYING THESE
JUVENILE POLITICAL GAMES
TO DEFUND OBAMACARE.