

September 3, 2013

Walter Russell Mead points out events in India are the big story this week, not Syria. The government there is pushing food subsidies and land-use bills that could hamper India's growth.

... But because the benefits of globalization are so thinly spread, many in India resist further changes. In China, whatever that country's political problems, massive numbers of ordinary people know that their jobs in manufacturing or in servicing companies that manufacture for export are linked to China's integration into the global trading system. While China is in many respects a dangerously unequal economy, its global opening has at least created opportunities for people in all walks of life. That is much less true in India, so dangerous laws like this one have more support.

India must move towards an industrial revolution; tens of millions, hundreds of millions of Indians must move from the countryside to the city, from agriculture into manufacturing and services. That is never easy, even under ideal circumstances, and India will be attempting to accomplish this transformation as Indian labor faces tough competition from China, other developing countries—and automation. There is no time to lose, but India at the moment seems stuck.

This isn't just an Indian story. Whether or not India moves forward toward a modernizing economy is partly a story about Indian incomes and social conditions; it is also a story about world geopolitics. If India hesitates on the threshold of industrialization while China moves swiftly ahead, the balance of power in Asia will become shakier year by year. If India can keep pace with China, it is likely that Asian geopolitics will settle down over time. With two economic superpowers rising together, and a strong Japan on the scene, the Asian balance of power looks reasonably stable. With one superpower rising and another potential superpower on the sidelines, the picture could change.

In the long run, what India does about its industrial and land use policy matters much more to the world than anything that happens in Syria. It matters more to the happiness and economic security of billions of human beings, and it matters more to the prospects for world peace.

Even in the middle of yet another crisis in the unhappy Middle East, Americans need to keep their eyes on the countries in which humanity's fate in the 21st century will be hammered out. Land policy in India is a bigger deal than sectarian politics in Syria; we need to keep our eyes on the big picture.

For another story of government overreach, we turn to WSJ's Weekend Interview. *'So this is what starting over looks like. I have a seven-by-seven space with two little desks in it.'*

Craig Zucker is remarkably good-humored, considering what he's been through over the past year—and the tribulations that lie ahead. He's referring to his office, rented month-to-month in a dilapidated building in a dusty corner of Brooklyn. There is construction all around, graffiti on the brick walls, and unfinished doors and windows.

It's a long way from the Soho digs the 34-year-old used to occupy. Mr. Zucker is the former CEO of Maxfield & Oberton, the small company behind Buckyballs, an office toy that became an

Internet sensation in 2009 and went on to sell millions of units before it was banned by the feds last year.

A self-described "serial entrepreneur," Mr. Zucker looks the part with tussled black hair, a scraggly beard and hipster jeans. Yet his casual-Friday outfit does little to subdue his air of ambition and hustle.

Nowadays Mr. Zucker spends most of his waking hours fighting off a vindictive U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission that has set out to punish him for having challenged its regulatory overreach. The outcome of the battle has ramifications far beyond a magnetic toy designed for bored office workers. It implicates bedrock American notions of consumer choice, personal responsibility and limited liability. ...

Victor Davis Hanson did a lot of research and compares the poser v. the president.
... On the perils of going it alone without allies

"Where the stakes are the highest, in the war on terror, we cannot possibly succeed without extraordinary international cooperation. Effective international police actions require the highest degree of intelligence sharing, planning and collaborative enforcement." (2004)

So far no European or Arab nation has offered military support for our planned effort against Syria.

On the need to obtain UN approval before attacking another country

"You know, if the U.S. goes in and attacks another country without a U.N. mandate and without clear evidence that can be presented, then there are questions in terms of whether international law supports it, do we have the coalition to make it work, and, you know, those are considerations that we have to take into account." (2013)

After misleading the UN in obtaining no-fly-zones for Libya (and then bombing troops on the ground), Obama is not even approaching the UN for a resolution to bomb this time around.

On the idea that armed intervention is ever a good option

"I don't want to just end the war, but I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place." (2008)

The mindset in Iraq was to stop a genocidal dictator like Saddam Hussein who had gassed his own people — apparently [the present mission](#) is to stop the genocidal dictator Bashar Assad, who has gassed his own people. ...

... Candidate Obama has always been an adroit demagogue. He knew how to score political points against George Bush, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain, without any intention of abiding by his own sweeping declarations. The consistency in Obama's foreign policy is his own carefully calibrated self-interest. Bombing or not bombing, shutting down or keeping open Guantanamo Bay, going or not going to the UN or the U.S. Congress — these choices are all predicated not on principle, but only on what a canny and unprincipled Obama feels best suits

his own political interests and self-image at any given moment. In a self-created jam, he flipped and now goes to Congress in hopes of pinning responsibility on them, whether we go or not, whether successful or unsuccessful if we do. ...

The New Republic has an ode to The Onion claiming it the best op-ed page in the country.

I largely dislike reading op-ed columnists. All too often, columnists hem and haw and posture and drop references to their famous friends and fancy trips. They make points that are obvious. They are overly pious. They hew to the party line. They love moderation. They love pointing out how they love moderation even more than they love moderation. They give credit where it is not due for politeness's sake. They gin up fake controversies out of deadline desperation. They feign shock they don't really feel. Even when I agree with them, I am bored by about paragraph three.

It's not necessarily the idea of op-eds I hate; it's the execution. The best op-eds in the country are written by the staff of The Onion, though they're often published as news articles. The satirical paper, which turned 25 on Thursday, still does plenty of hilarious articles on the mundane ("Nation's Single Men Announce Plan To Change Bedsheets by 2019"), but its writing on current events has becoming increasingly biting. What they share in common with the best opinion writing is an ability to elegantly locate and dismantle a problem with an economy of words. In recent months, as BuzzFeed pointed out, the site has published a spate of crusading articles calling out the Obama administration's inaction on Syria. ("Obama Deeply Concerned After Syrians Gassed to Death on White House Lawn"). ...

American Interest

[Why Syria Isn't the Big Story This Week](#)

by Walter Russell Mead



The world's eyes are riveted on Syria this week, as the United States, France and perhaps a few others organize plans to punish a bloodstained government for its use of chemical weapons against its own people. It's a story that has everything: the prospect of violence, the political agony of an embattled White House, David Cameron's loss of grip, and perplexing questions about right and wrong. For liberal internationalists, few international laws are more important than those that ban the use of WMD against civilians; on the other hand, when the political patrons of a war criminal block action at the UN Security Council, liberal internationalists must choose between their highest values and their most cherished institution.

That's why the Syria story is dominating the news this week, and like the rest of the world, VM has been [following it closely](#). But another story that is getting less attention is much more important for the future of the world: the [economic crisis in India](#) represents a much more fateful moment in world politics than anything happening in Syria.

What's so important about India's economic problems? It's more what they tell us about the state of the country than the severity of the problems themselves. The stock market jitters, the currency crash, the GDP slowdown and the government deficit aren't enough in themselves to sink India. All economies go through rough patches every now and then, but the question isn't about a downturn. The question is whether the Indian political system has what it takes to get the economy back on track.

Two horrible things happened in India this week: an inept government reeling from serial corruption scandals and mounting evidence of economic failure pushed two bad bills towards enactment. There's a wasteful "food security law" that will do much more to nourish India's rich world of government corruption than to help the poor on a sustainable basis, and a poorly designed "land reform" law that could be even more crippling.

We've noted the [food bill](#) before; the land law is new and its consequences could be devastating enough to India's growth prospects to change the course of world history. In India, under a law dating from the British Raj, the government has wide powers of eminent domain. Essentially, the government is the nation's real estate agent, organizing transactions between buyers (often Indian or foreign companies who want to build factories, or Indian government organizations wanting to build roads or other infrastructure) and the farmers and others who own the land. For many Indians, this approach makes sense for two reasons. First, there are so many small plots in India that without the convenience of government organization (and its powers of eminent domain to force unwilling holdouts to sell), it would difficult if not impossible for private organizations to get the land for big projects. The second reason is that given the low level of education among many rural people in India and their lack of economic sophistication, there is a fear that unscrupulous investors will swindle the poor unless the government is there to protect them.

This isn't just paternalism. Rural life in India isn't always beautiful, and corrupt local officials, landlords and others can and often do squeeze the poor unmercifully. It's not at all clear that a "free market" in land would lead to anything but the forced dispossession of hundreds of thousands and even millions of poor farmers and their families.

But there's a catch. The paternalistic state, theoretically devoted to the welfare of poor farmers, is staffed by very human and often very venal officials. Business interests wanting to develop land can bribe politicians and officials to get the government to force land sales; a system established to protect the poor is easily perverted into the instrument of their destruction.

As a result, the business of land sales for economic development in India often degenerates into an unholy mess. NGOs, farmer organizations, corrupt officials, desperate farmers, families with conflicting claims and many other parties get caught up in struggles that can go on for years. Sometimes violent rebel groups get involved in land controversies, and even in their absence these battles can turn violent as farmers fight desperately to hold onto the only security they know. What makes these struggles even more bitter at times is the knowledge on the farmers' part that the bureaucrats aren't giving them the full and fair price for the land. Like their counterparts in China, Indian officials and politicians see the gap between the price paid by investors and the price paid to farmers as a revenue source that both supports local government and in some cases lines the pockets of local officials.

India certainly needs land reform, but as [an editorial in the Hindustan Times](#) notes, this bill makes things worse. The government's land bill

envisages payment of twice the market rate for land in urban areas and four times the market rate for land in rural areas — enough to make any project, public or private, economically unviable. Then, it calls for the consent of 80% of landowners before any acquisition can proceed.

The *Times* goes on to spell out the consequences: the law mandates a windfall bonanza for landowners, requires social impact studies that will drag out the process of land acquisition for “years if not decades” and will make the acquisition of large plots of land for development uneconomic all across India.

The problems don't stop there. The *Times* concisely describes why the final passage of this law would be a disaster of the first magnitude:

This provision could well spell the end of India's dreams of emerging as a manufacturing superpower. The only way to quickly lift what the western media pejoratively refers to as India's teeming millions into the lower middle classes and then progressively higher, is to create industrial jobs.

The farm sector accounts for 16% of GDP but supports 60% of the population. This is clearly unsustainable. We need rapid industrialisation. And for this, we need land — not land that has been acquired from their owners for a pittance and given to industry cheap, but land that has been acquired at a fair value and given to industry at a price that keeps projects viable.

We couldn't have put that better ourselves. India can only hope to provide a better way of life for its hundreds of millions of poor rural people by rapidly developing as an industrial power. To do that, private investors have to be able to buy land, and the government has to be able to acquire land for roads, electricity plants and transmission lines and all the other necessities of an industrial society.

Land blockages and infrastructure problems have so far blocked India from benefiting fully from the globalization of industrial production and landed the country in a Catch-22 style development trap. Because there is no massive industrialization, most of the jobs and other benefits of Indian globalization go to the well educated—the techies in the cyberparks and the fluent English language speakers in the call centers. These are the types of international businesses that can

flourish in a country filled with talented people but lacking the basic infrastructure that can support a modern manufacturing economy.

But because the benefits of globalization are so thinly spread, many in India resist further changes. In China, whatever that country's political problems, massive numbers of ordinary people know that their jobs in manufacturing or in servicing companies that manufacture for export are linked to China's integration into the global trading system. While China is in many respects a dangerously unequal economy, its global opening has at least created opportunities for people in all walks of life. That is much less true in India, so dangerous laws like this one have more support.

India must move towards an industrial revolution; tens of millions, hundreds of millions of Indians must move from the countryside to the city, from agriculture into manufacturing and services. That is never easy, even under ideal circumstances, and India will be attempting to accomplish this transformation as Indian labor faces tough competition from China, other developing countries—and automation. There is no time to lose, but India at the moment seems stuck.

This isn't just an Indian story. Whether or not India moves forward toward a modernizing economy is partly a story about Indian incomes and social conditions; it is also a story about world geopolitics. If India hesitates on the threshold of industrialization while China moves swiftly ahead, the balance of power in Asia will become shakier year by year. If India can keep pace with China, it is likely that Asian geopolitics will settle down over time. With two economic superpowers rising together, and a strong Japan on the scene, the Asian balance of power looks reasonably stable. With one superpower rising and another potential superpower on the sidelines, the picture could change.

In the long run, what India does about its industrial and land use policy matters much more to the world than anything that happens in Syria. It matters more to the happiness and economic security of billions of human beings, and it matters more to the prospects for world peace.

Even in the middle of yet another crisis in the unhappy Middle East, Americans need to keep their eyes on the countries in which humanity's fate in the 21st century will be hammered out. Land policy in India is a bigger deal than sectarian politics in Syria; we need to keep our eyes on the big picture.

WSJ

[Craig Zucker: What Happens When a Man Takes on the Feds](#)

Buckyballs was the hottest office game on the market. Then regulators banned it. Now the government wants to ruin the CEO who fought back.

by Sohrab Ahmari

New York "So this is what starting over looks like. I have a seven-by-seven space with two little desks in it."

Craig Zucker is remarkably good-humored, considering what he's been through over the past year—and the tribulations that lie ahead. He's referring to his office, rented month-to-month in a

dilapidated building in a dusty corner of Brooklyn. There is construction all around, graffiti on the brick walls, and unfinished doors and windows.

It's a long way from the Soho digs the 34-year-old used to occupy. Mr. Zucker is the former CEO of Maxfield & Oberton, the small company behind Buckyballs, an office toy that became an Internet sensation in 2009 and went on to sell millions of units before it was banned by the feds last year.



A self-described "serial entrepreneur," Mr. Zucker looks the part with tussled black hair, a scraggly beard and hipster jeans. Yet his casual-Friday outfit does little to subdue his air of ambition and hustle.

Nowadays Mr. Zucker spends most of his waking hours fighting off a vindictive U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission that has set out to punish him for having challenged its regulatory overreach. The outcome of the battle has ramifications far beyond a magnetic toy designed for bored office workers. It implicates bedrock American notions of consumer choice, personal responsibility and limited liability.

It all began while the Ohio native was wrapping up his previous venture, Tap'd NY, "a bottled water company that was purifying New York City tap water and selling it to New Yorkers as the local, honest bottled-water alternative." You read that right: Mr. Zucker persuaded New Yorkers to pay for rebranded tap water.

Jake Bronstein, Mr. Zucker's marketing director at Tap'd NY, was at the time the proprietor of a blog called Zoomdoggle. "He would produce eight posts a day," Mr. Zucker recalls, "one for each hour of the workday: games, jokes, adult fun. What Jake wanted to do was to find a product that would fit perfectly with that audience."

The answer came in the form of neodymium magnets. These small, powerful rare-earth magnets can be stacked like Legos, stretched and used to make infinite shapes. Maxfield & Oberton, the company Messrs. Zucker and Bronstein eventually formed, packaged the magnets and called them "Buckyballs," after the American architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller.

"In March of 2009, we ordered 100 sets of magnets from China. We literally put our last \$1,000 each in the business," Mr. Zucker says. At first the company filled a few hundred orders a day on its own website. But then Buckyballs made their way into the blogosphere. "Then very, very quickly other websites were calling to buy the product and resell it. We realized we had a really great brand."

In August 2009, Maxfield & Oberton demonstrated Buckyballs at the New York Gift Show; 600 stores signed up to sell the product. By 2010, the company had built a distribution network of 1,500 stores, including major retailers like Urban Outfitters and Brookstone. People magazine in 2011 named Buckyballs one of the five hottest trends of the year, and in 2012 it made the cover of Brookstone's catalog.

Maxfield & Oberton now had 10 employees, 150 sales representatives and a distribution network of 5,000 stores. Sales had reached \$10 million a year. "Then," says Mr. Zucker, "we crashed."

On July 10, 2012, the Consumer Product Safety Commission instructed Maxfield & Oberton to file a "corrective-action plan" within two weeks or face an administrative suit related to Buckyballs' alleged safety defects. Around the same time—and before Maxfield & Oberton had a chance to tell its side of the story—the commission sent letters to some of Maxfield & Oberton's retail partners, including Brookstone, warning of the "severity of the risk of injury and death possibly posed by" Buckyballs and requesting them to "voluntarily stop selling" the product.

It was an underhanded move, as Maxfield & Oberton and its lawyers saw it. "Very, very quickly those 5,000 retailers became zero," says Mr. Zucker. The preliminary letters, and others sent after the complaint, made it clear that selling Buckyballs was still considered lawful pending adjudication. "But if you're a store like Brookstone or Urban Outfitters . . . you're bullied into it. You don't want problems."

As for the corrective-action plan, it was submitted at 4 p.m. on the July 24 deadline. Yet the very next morning the commission filed an administrative lawsuit against Maxfield & Oberton, suggesting the company's plan was never seriously considered.

The commission alleged that Buckyballs pose substantial hazards, which no remedy short of a full recall could address. Buckyballs, the commission said, "pose a risk of magnet ingestion by children below the age of 14, who may . . . place single or numerous magnets in their mouth."

Although no deaths have been associated with Buckyballs, the commission alleged that "numerous incidents involving ingestion by children under the age of 14 have occurred," including a 3-year-old who swallowed Buckyballs attached to her home refrigerator and a 4-year-old who ingested Buckyballs used to decorate his mother's wedding cake. These were troubling cases. But considering the thousands of other potentially dangerous products purchased everyday, it's hard to blame them on an inherent defect in Buckyballs.

"When used as intended there's never been an incident involving someone over the age of 14," Mr. Zucker says. "Like any other product in your house, if it's used in an unintended way by an unintended consumer, it of course has the ability to create an injury. Take household cleaners, knives, power tools, detergent pods. Or take balloons, which are actually intended for children and create deaths every few years. So we didn't see how the product, when used as intended—following the warnings, following the safety program—could be defective."

Buckyballs' initial conception and subsequent marketing, Mr. Zucker says, shows they were never intended for children. "We were in the lexicon of popular culture," he says. "And if you look back at this press, it was very clearly targeted at the adult community. It was in People

magazine, in Real Simple magazine—it was never in Parenting magazine saying they're great for children."

Mr. Zucker and his colleagues were particularly appalled by the commission's claims, given that the warnings and safety programs they used were developed in collaboration with commission staff.

Initially the product was labeled "13+," since the relevant statute at the time defined "children's products" as intended for children 12 and under. But when a voluntary industry practice defining "toys" as intended for children 14 and under became the legal standard, Maxfield & Oberton conducted a voluntary recall: In spring 2010, any consumer who had purchased Buckyballs labeled "13+" was offered a refund. Of over 175,000 units sold, fewer than 50 were returned by consumers.

Stores also received packaging with aggressive new warnings. "Keep away from all children!" the label said. "Do not put in nose or mouth. Swallowed magnets can stick to intestines causing serious injury or death. Seek immediate medical attention if magnets are swallowed or inhaled."

"Maxfield & Oberton had a comprehensive safety program that included not just warnings but a way to restrict sales to stores that were exclusively or primarily selling children's products," Mr. Zucker says. "Toys 'R' Us didn't qualify. They wanted Buckyballs for their brick-and-mortar stores, but we wouldn't even take a call from them."

To enter into a sales agreement, retailers were required to complete a safety questionnaire and commit to a Buckyballs Responsible Seller Agreement. "When Maxfield & Oberton did that initial recall, 600 stores didn't pass the test, and the company paid to bring the product back."

Nonetheless, the commission pressed ahead with its war on Buckyballs. Most infuriating was the commission's argument that a total recall was justified because Buckyballs have "low utility to consumers" and "are not necessary to consumers."

"Two and a half million adults spent \$30 on a product," Mr. Zucker says. "This wasn't a \$5 impulse buy. This was a product that American adults thought had value and wanted it. It's not the government's place to say what has value and what doesn't in a free society."

Maxfield & Oberton resolved to take to the public square. On July 27, just two days after the commission filed suit, the company launched a publicity campaign to rally customers and spotlight the commission's nanny-state excesses. The campaign's tagline? "Save Our Balls."

Online ads pointed out how, under the commission's reasoning, everything from coconuts ("tasty fruit or deadly sky ballistic?") to stairways ("are they really worth the risk?") to hot dogs ("delicious but deadly") could be banned. Commission staff were challenged to debate Mr. Zucker, and consumers were invited to call Commissioner Inez Tenenbaum's "psychic hotline" to find out how it was that "the vote to sue our company was presented to the Commissioners on July 23rd, a day before our Corrective Action Plan was to be submitted."

"It was a very successful campaign," says Mr. Zucker, "just not successful enough to keep us in business." On Dec. 27, 2012, the company filed a certificate of cancellation with the State of Delaware, where Maxfield & Oberton was incorporated, and the company was dissolved.

"The inventory was sold and the business ended," says Mr. Zucker. He thought it was an "honest and graceful exit" to a broken entrepreneurial dream.

But in February the Buckyballs saga took a chilling turn: The commission filed a motion requesting that Mr. Zucker be held personally liable for the costs of the recall, which it estimated at \$57 million, if the product was ultimately determined to be defective.

This was an astounding departure from the principle of limited liability at the heart of U.S. corporate law. Normally corporate officers aren't liable for the obligations of a company, and courts are loath to pierce the shield of limited liability unless it can be shown that the corporate entity was a mere facade—that corporate formalities weren't adhered to, the officers commingled personal and corporate funds, and so on.

No such allegations were made against Mr. Zucker. Instead, the commission seeks to extend the holding of *United States v. Park*, a 1975 Supreme Court case in which the CEO of a food retailer was held criminally liable under the Food and Drug Act for rodent infestation at company warehouses. The CEO, the court ruled, was the "responsible corporate officer" by virtue of being in a position of authority when the health violations occurred.

But in a subsequent case, *Meyer v. Holley* (2003), the justices clarified that ordinary rules of liability apply unless there is clear congressional intent in the pertinent statute to hold individual officers liable. The statute in *Park* did include an individual-liability provision. But the relevant law in the Buckyballs case, Section 15 of the Consumer Product Safety Act, regulates the conduct of manufacturers, distributors, retailers and importers *as corporate persons*, suggesting Congress didn't intend to hold officers liable for recalls when there is a proper corporate entity in place. There is also no question of a criminal violation in Mr. Zucker's case.

Says Mr. Zucker: "The commission's saying that because as CEO I did my duty—didn't violate any law, was completely lawful—I am now the manufacturer individually responsible." Shockingly, the administrative-law judge hearing the case bought the commission's argument, meaning Mr. Zucker will have to defend himself in the Maxfield & Oberton recall case to its conclusion at the administrative level before he can challenge the individual-liability holding on appeal.

Given the fact that Buckyballs have now long been off the market, the attempt to go after Mr. Zucker personally raises the question of retaliation for his public campaign against the commission. Mr. Zucker won't speculate about the commission's motives. "It's very selective and very aggressive," he says. "If you want to ask if this is some sort of reprisal, well, they don't need Craig Zucker anymore."

Mr. Zucker says his treatment at the hands of the commission should alarm fellow entrepreneurs: "This is the beginning. It starts with this case. If you play out what happens to me, then the next thing you'll have is personal-injury lawyers saying 'you conducted the actions of the company, you were the company,' "

And if the commission's reasoning on Buckyballs were to stand, "you won't have a free market anymore—you end up with a place where adults aren't choosing which products they can own."

Mr. Ahmari is an assistant books editor at the Journal.

Works and Days

Obama Indicts Obama

by Victor Davis Hanson



One of the problems that Barack Obama has in mounting an attack against the Assad regime is that the gambit violates every argument Barack Obama used against the Bush administration to establish his own anti-war candidacy.

The hypocrisy is so stunning that it infuriates his critics and stuns his supporters.

Deriding the Iraq war was Obama's signature selling point. He used it to great effect against both Hillary Clinton (who voted for the war) in the Democratic primaries and John McCain in the general election. For the last five years, disparagement of "Iraq" and "Bush" has seemed to intrude into almost every sentence the president utters.

And now? His sudden pro-war stance makes a number of hypocritical assumptions. First, the U.S. president can attack a sovereign nation without authorization from Congress (unlike the Iraq war when George W. Bush obtained authorization from both houses of Congress). [Even if Obama gets a no vote](#), he said that he reserves the right to strike.

Second, Obama assumes that the U.S. must go it alone and attack unilaterally (unlike the coalition of the willing of some 40 nations that joined us in Iraq).

Third, it is unnecessary even to approach the UN (unlike Iraq when the Bush administration desperately sought UN support).

Fourth, the U.S. president must make a judgment call on the likelihood of WMD use, which is grounds ipso facto to go to war (unlike Iraq when the vast majority of the 23 congressionally authorized writs had nothing to do with WMD [e.g., genocide of the Marsh Arabs and Kurds, bounties to suicide bombers, harboring of international terrorists, violations of UN agreements, attempts to kill a former U.S. president, etc.]).

So review for a moment the Old Obama case against the New Obama.

On the perils of going it alone without allies

“Where the stakes are the highest, in the war on terror, we cannot possibly succeed without extraordinary international cooperation. Effective international police actions require the highest degree of intelligence sharing, planning and collaborative enforcement.” ([2004](#))

So far no European or Arab nation has offered military support for our planned effort against Syria.

On the need to obtain UN approval before attacking another country

“You know, if the U.S. goes in and attacks another country without a U.N. mandate and without clear evidence that can be presented, then there are questions in terms of whether international law supports it, do we have the coalition to make it work, and, you know, those are considerations that we have to take into account.” ([2013](#))

After misleading the UN in obtaining no-fly-zones for Libya (and then bombing troops on the ground), Obama is not even approaching the UN for a resolution to bomb this time around.

On the idea that armed intervention is ever a good option

“I don’t want to just end the war, but I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place.” ([2008](#))

The mindset in Iraq was to stop a genocidal dictator like Saddam Hussein who had gassed his own people — apparently [the present mission](#) is to stop the genocidal dictator Bashar Assad, who has gassed his own people.

On the folly of starting a wrong war to ensure a president’s sinking credibility

“It’s time to reject the counsel that says the American people would rather have someone who is strong and wrong than someone who is weak and right.” ([2008](#))

“That’s what I’m opposed to. A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics.” ([2002](#))

Most believe that we are going to war mostly to restore Obama’s credibility after he issued an ill-advised red line to Syria that he thought would never be crossed — a war, in other words, predicated on “politics.”

On the dangers of not defining a mission or a methodology

“I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda.” (2002)

“When we send our young men and women into harm’s way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they’re going, to care for their families while they’re gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.” (2004)

So far we have not articulated the purpose of attacking Syria, the methods of intervention, or the desired outcome of the war — at a time of deep administration cuts to defense, soon to be made worse by sequestration.

On not intervening in the civil wars and internal affairs of Arab nations

“The U.S. military has performed valiantly and brilliantly in Iraq. Our troops have done all that we have asked them to do and more. But no amount of American soldiers can solve the political differences at the heart of somebody else’s civil war, nor settle the grievances in the hearts of the combatants.” (2007).

Syria is currently in “somebody else’s” civil war in which the Assad dictatorship, Hezbollah militias, and Iranian volunteers are battling al-Qaeda affiliates, the Free Syrian Army, and various unknown coalitions of Assad opponents.

On the need for obtaining congressional authorization

“The president does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation. In instances of self-defense, the President would be within his constitutional authority to act before advising Congress or seeking its consent. History has shown us time and again, however, that military action is most successful when it is authorized and supported by the Legislative branch. It is always preferable to have the informed consent of Congress prior to any military action. As for the specific question about bombing suspected nuclear sites, I recently introduced S.J.Res.23, which states in part that “any offensive military action taken by the United States against Iran must be explicitly authorized by Congress.” In response to a question “In what circumstances would the president have constitutional authority to bomb Iran without seeking a use-of-force authorization from Congress? ... The notion that as a consequence of that [2002 Congressional] authorization, the president can continue down a failed path without any constraints from Congress whatsoever is wrong and is not warranted by our Constitution.” (2007)

The president did not ask Congress for authorization for the Libya attack. He just flip-flopped and plans to ask permission from Congress to bomb Syria, but indicated that he might bomb anyway should they say no. Neither Libya nor Syria posed an “imminent threat.”

Dr. Barack and Mr. Hyde

So why is there such a disconnect between what Obama once declared and what he subsequently professed? There are four explanations, none of them mutually exclusive:

A. Candidate Obama had no experience in foreign policy and has always winged it, now and then recklessly sounding off when he thought he could score cheap points against George Bush. As president, he still has no idea of how foreign policy is conducted, and thus continues to make things up as he goes along, often boxing himself into a corner with serial contradictions. Trying to discern any consistency or pattern in such an undisciplined mind is a futile exercise: what Obama says or does at any given moment usually is antithetical to what he said or did on a prior occasion. *He is simply [lost and out of his league](#).*

B. Candidate Obama has always been an adroit demagogue. He knew how to score political points against George Bush, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain, without any intention of abiding by his own sweeping declarations. The consistency in Obama's foreign policy is his own carefully calibrated self-interest. Bombing or not bombing, shutting down or keeping open Guantanamo Bay, going or not going to the UN or the U.S. Congress — these choices are all predicated not on principle, but only on what a canny and unprincipled Obama feels best suits his own political interests and self-image at any given moment. In a self-created jam, he flipped and now goes to Congress [in hopes of pinning responsibility on them](#), whether we go or not, whether successful or unsuccessful if we do. *He is a quite clever demagogue.*

C. Obama is a well-meaning and sincere naïf, but a naïf nonetheless. He really believed the world prior to 2009 worked on the premises of the Harvard Law School lounge, Chicago organizing, and Rev. Wright's Church — or least should have worked on such assumptions. Then when Obama took office, saw intelligence reports, and assumed the responsibilities of our highest office, he was shocked at the dangerous nature of the world! There was no more opportunity for demagoguery or buck-passing, and he had to become serious. In short, it is easy to criticize without power, hard with it to make tough decisions and bad/worse choices. *He is slowly learning.*

D. Obama is the first president who genuinely feels U.S. exceptionalism and power were not ethically earned and should be in an ethical sense ended. As a candidate, he consistently undermined current U.S. foreign policy at a time of two critical wars; as president, he has systematically forfeited U.S. authority and prestige. There is no inconsistency: whatever makes the traditional idea of the U.S. as a superpower weaker, Obama promotes; whatever enhances our profile, he opposes. *He is often quite angry at what could be called traditional America — seen often as [a downright mean country](#) here and abroad.*

New Republic

[The Onion Is The Country's Best Op-Ed Page. Seriously.](#)

by Noreen Malone

I largely dislike reading op-ed columnists. All too often, columnists hem and haw and posture and drop references to their famous friends and fancy trips. They make points that are obvious. They are overly pious. They hew to the party line. They love moderation. They love pointing out how they love moderation even more than they love moderation. They give credit where it is not due for politeness's sake. They gin up fake controversies out of deadline desperation. They feign shock they don't really feel. Even when I agree with them, I am bored by about paragraph three.

It's not necessarily the idea of op-eds I hate; it's the execution. The best op-eds in the country are written by the staff of *The Onion*, though they're often published as news articles. The satirical paper, which turned 25 on Thursday, still does plenty of hilarious articles on the mundane (["Nation's Single Men Announce Plan To Change Bedsheets by 2019"](#)), but its writing on current events has become increasingly biting. What they share in common with the best opinion writing is an ability to elegantly locate and dismantle a problem with an economy of words. In recent months, [as BuzzFeed pointed out](#), the site has published a spate of crusading articles calling out the Obama administration's inaction on Syria. ("Obama Deeply Concerned After Syrians Gassed to Death on White House Lawn"). After the Newtown shooting, "[Fuck Everything, Nation Reports](#)" was what I wanted to read, not insta-commentary on gun policy. "[Congress Fiercely Divided over Completely Blank Bill That Says and Does Nothing](#)" is just BARELY absurdist. "[U.S. Continues Quagmire-Building Effort in Afghanistan](#)" was a more pithy summary than the world's best position paper. Racism ([Report: Now Sadly the Best Time in American History to Be Black](#)) and sexism ("[Teenage Girl Blossoms Into Beautiful Object](#)") are slammed deftly, sharply, and blessedly un-earnestly.

In other words, *The Onion* has figured out a way to do a high-wire trick: they've made moral outrage funny (without slipping into moralizing, as "The Daily Show" sometimes does). It's not always laugh-out-loud; the site's most trenchant commentary is often rather mordant and can rub some people the wrong way. "[Men Are the Best](#)," went one angrily sarcastic column "authored" by the women who'd been locked in a Cleveland basement for a decade. But *The Onion* structurally bypasses the worst failing of many an op-ed columnist: taking themselves too seriously. *The Onion* won't cop to even having an opinion. On Syria, the site's editor in chief Will Tracy told BuzzFeed's Rosie Gray, "I wouldn't say we've staked out an editorial line so much as we've chosen to acknowledge two equally valid points of view at once. Specifically, we want to support the rebels because of our own strong financial ties to the jihadist movement, but we also want to support Bashar al-Assad because he's been a close and dear friend of the paper for nearly two decades."

The Onion can be wicked on the subject of specific people. John Kerry is a particular disappointment ("[Man Who Couldn't Beat George W. Bush Attempting To Resolve Israel-Palestine Crisis](#)"). But it is rarely cruel, surprisingly. "What you have to be really careful about is what the target of the joke is," Tracy [told NPR](#). "And if the target of the joke is wrong, if you're targeting the victim or someone who doesn't deserve our ire, then it doesn't feel right and it also doesn't feel funny."

The Onion isn't Democratic or Republican. It's clearly got a left-leaning outlook, but the editorial position is more properly characterized as against bullshit. This can include everything from the highhanded way Barack Obama deals with the press ("[Dear The Onion, reads a letter to the editor "from" him, "Just a polite reminder that you have to print whatever I send you"](#)) or the appalling things campaigns make politicians do ("[Romney Murdered JonBenet Ramsey, New Obama Campaign Ad Alleges](#)") or CNN's unseemly pageview-trolling ("[Let Me Explain Why Miley Cyrus' VMA Performance Was Our Top Story This Morning](#).") Bullshit also includes the way people go through the motions of "dialogue" (as in this faux opinion column titled "[America Needs To Have a Superficial Conversation on Race](#)") or fake-apologize ("[The Onion isn't sure exactly what it did wrong but it'll apologize if that's what you need to hear to move on](#)"). Bullshit is even the way people deal with veterans, and what war does to people. ("[Town Nervously Welcomes Veteran Back Home](#).")

But there are limitations to the against-bullshit. It is sometimes difficult to be FOR anything if you hold that position, and that is one way in which a traditional op-ed page can do something valuable *The Onion* cannot. This was evident this week, when, after having beat the drum for Obama to do something in Syria and it finally looking as if he might, *The Onion* published a piece entitled "[Experts Point to Long, Glorious History of Successful U.S. Bombing Campaigns](#)," reminding Obama of a series of deadly imbroglis from Vietnam all the way up to Libya. You could look at that piece and conclude that *The Onion* had changed its opinion of the best course of action. Or: you could realize what it is that *The Onion* seeks to do, which is to unmistakably, unrestrainedly point out the truth. The best kind of opinion column doesn't rely very heavily on opinion—and that's not an *Onion* headline.

Noreen Malone is a staff writer for the New Republic.



DON'T WORRY SYRIA



DEMOCRACY IS ON ITS WAY

Disney's PROBLEM CHILDREN

©2015
MRC.org/CMI
Dist. by King Features



BRITNEY SPEARS



MILEY CYRUS



MICKEY MOUSE

The CURRENT American Employment Cycle

Gary Varvel
THE NORMAL IS GONE
©2013 GARYVARVEL.COM



garyvarvel.com

