

October 3, 2013

Andrew Malcolm posts on the shutdown.

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Yes, you say, but Bush had been a governor, a chief executive leader who had to develop a strategy and build teams and cooperation with opposition politicians in a legislature.

And Obama was, well, an opposition legislator, who never lead anything larger than a college protest and is so void of core beliefs he still requires a teleprompter to feed him the best poll-tested words to be seen saying.

If this president was a leader and had the country's best interests in mind, he would have skipped golf last Saturday and invited legislative leaders in to see what little something they might agree on at that last minute of the expiring fiscal year. To get a deal working.

Instead, Obama called those legislators over two days into the partial government shutdown. And before they even arrived, he had his spokesman, Jay Carney, utter this long sound-bite:

"The President is not going to negotiate about how we can come to an agreement on our budget challenges, how we can come to an agreement about funding necessary priorities to ensure that we grow our economy and ensure that the middle class is protected and expanding, ensure that our kids are getting the best education possible, and then ensure that we reduce our deficit in a responsible way."

So, no negotiations on anything of substance. Just coffee? A pointless meeting to create positive optics so critics can no longer say, "Obama won't even meet with Congress."

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Seth Mandel thinks Harry Reid has lost it.

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The full version of that quote, from 2008, is: “My staff has always said ‘don’t say this,’ but I’m going to say it again, because it’s so descriptive because it’s true. Leader Boehner mentioned the tourists lined up in summer, winter–long lines coming into the Capitol. In the summertime, because the high humidity and how hot it gets here, you could literally smell the tourists coming into the Capitol. And that may be descriptive, but it’s true.”

Reid may have been channeling Biden with that “literally,” but it’s the sort of quote that Democrats like Reid and Biden give because they know they’ll get a pass from the media in the way a Republican never could and they seem to be engaged in a decades-long competition over who can be the first to make conservative bloggers’ heads literally explode. Today, Reid offered yet another example of this tendency. ...

John Hinderaker from Power Line posts on the closing of the World War II memorial. *That’s right: the Obama administration dispatched more security guards to prevent World War II veterans from visiting the wide-open WWII memorial on the Mall than it stationed in Benghazi, notwithstanding the American Ambassador’s pleas for better security. [Paul Bedard](#) has the story:*

“The National Park Service is sending so many officials out to shut down federal parks that it might have to suspend furloughs if the government closure continues.

Two examples:

– At the World War II Memorial on The Mall in Washington, where veterans have been staging protests to keep it open, Washington Examiner’s Charlie Spiering reports that at least seven officials were dispatched Wednesday morning to set up a ring of barricades to block tourists from the memorial. That is two more than the State Department had in Benghazi a year ago on the night of the terrorist attack that killed four, including the U.S. ambassador.”

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“– National Park Officials closed down the educational Claude Moore Colonial Farm near the CIA in McLean, Va., even though the federal government doesn’t fund or staff the park popular with children and schools. Just because the privately-operated park is on Park Service land, making the federal government simply its landlord, the agency decided to close it.”

This is another instance where the Obama administration went out of its way, not to save money, but to inconvenience taxpayers by creating the illusion that the government “shutdown” is causing problems.

More from Power Line.

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And more.

... You can't make this stuff up: World War II veterans come to Washington to see their monument, and the Obama administration tries to block them by putting up barricades. When that blunder starts getting media attention, the administration doubles down by paying union members \$15 to march around, waving signs and protesting—as though that were a sure-fire way to generate sympathy for the nonessential federal employees who are getting the day off. Is it possible that the Democrats could be snatching defeat from the jaws of victory? ...

Spengler says the US plays checkers while Russia plays chess.

Americans see individual pieces of geopolitical real estate in isolation, like hotels on the Monopoly board, while the Russians look at the interaction of all their spheres of interest around the globe.

Syria is of no real strategic interest to Russia, nor to anyone else for that matter. It is a broken wreck of a country, with an irreparably damaged economy, without the energy, water, or food to maintain long-term economic viability. The multiethnic melange left in place by British and French cartographers after the First World War has broken down irreparably into a war of mutual extermination, whose only result can be depopulation or partition on the Yugoslav model.

Syria only has importance in so far as its crisis threatens to spill over into surrounding territories which have more strategic importance. As a Petri dish for jihadist movements, it threatens to become the training ground for a new generation of terrorists, serving the same role that Afghanistan did during the 1990s and 2000s.

As a testing ground for the use of weapons of mass destruction, it provides a diplomatic laboratory to gauge the response of world powers to atrocious actions with comparatively little risk to the participants. It is an incubator of national movements, in which, for example, the newfound freedom of action for the country's 2 million Kurds constitutes a means of destabilizing Turkey and other countries with substantial Kurdish minorities. Most important, as the cockpit of confessional war between Sunnis and Shi'ite, Syria may become the springboard for a larger conflict engulfing Iraq and possibly other states in the region.

I do not know what Putin wants in Syria. I do not believe that at this point Russia's president knows what he wants in Syria, either. A strong chess player engaging an inferior opponent will create complications without an immediate strategic objective, in order to provoke blunders from the other side and take opportunistic advantage. There are many things that Putin wants. But he wants one big thing above all, namely, the restoration of Russia's great power status. Russia's leading diplomatic role in Syria opens several options to further this goal. ...

Reason reviews a book about the Wisconsin union fight written by two reporters from the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel.

It's not clear who first introduced the chant "this is what democracy looks like" to the epic early-2011 showdown in Wisconsin between angry public-sector union workers and newly elected Republican Gov. Scott Walker. The protesters shouting the phrase surely meant to insist that they were the true voice of the people. But despite the sheer size and raucous noise of the crowds that packed the Wisconsin State Capitol for weeks protesting Walker's proposed

legislation to roll back union benefits and prerogatives, the demonstrators ultimately lost every fight that mattered. They lost because the voting public in Wisconsin approved of Walker's plan, albeit narrowly.

The people had already spoken when they elected a Republican governor and legislative majority in 2010. Democracy then re-affirmed Walker's controversial decisions even under the glare of a nationwide spotlight and a hostile press. Nevertheless, the sloganeers were correct, just not in the way they intended.

*As Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel reporters Jason Stein and Patrick Marley note in their book *More Than They Bargained For: Scott Walker, Unions, and the Fight for Wisconsin*, "The citizens of Wisconsin and indeed the country as a whole, sometimes derided as apathetic and out of touch, showed that they were eager to engage on both sides, to defend the rights of workers and to safeguard the state's financial future." The engaged activists "marched, they sent hundreds of thousands of emails and tweets, and they overwhelmingly held themselves to a peaceful, democratic purpose, which asserted itself even in the face of the many exceptions to that general rule. Likewise, the police and authorities also managed to handle the protests without serious injury or loss of life on either side. When it came time to vote, citizens set turnout records."*

Engaged citizenry, vigorous debate, productive legislatures: This is everything that good-government types usually pine for. Yet most national media outlets viewed the Walker/union battle as something distasteful and unfortunate. "How did Wisconsin become the most divisive place in America?" clucked a New York Times headline.

One of the greatest motivators for political participation, it turns out, is bitter division. As Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald (R-Beaver Dam) put it in February 2011, "Democracy isn't pretty all the time."

In their admirably evenhanded account, Stein and Marley leave readers to their own conclusions. ...

IBD

[Forget budgets, debts: What Obama's real goals are](#)

by Andrew Malcolm

Is this the Change we were waiting for?

Really?

Even if you voted the other way in 2008, most of the country felt an energy early in 2009, fresh blood in the White House, a clean slate built on an historic choice who promised so much. Even skeptics were hopeful.

No more. Just look, if you haven't just eaten, at the sad spectacle unfolding in Washington these days on both sides -- starting at the top. As the world's second oldest profession, politics has never been pretty. We ask these chosen men and women to set the collective public priorities and work out the problems we can't in what passes for democracy.

And as voting spectators, via the news and social media, we pass judgment on their efforts, activities, antics, seamy strategies and failures, as if we don't do exactly the same things in our private, less-illuminated lives.

Federal politics don't have to be pretty. But, c'mon, folks, we need some effective results. At least a little bit. *Please!* Our first president would be ashamed to have his name on that place nowadays.

Yes, Americans in their accidental wisdom did vote twice collectively for a divided government in Washington. An extra check on the president and his Democrat party that went absolutely crazy on spending and social engineering during the two years they controlled everything there.

But divided meant cautious, not paralyzed. Obama has presided over precisely the opposite of what he promised. Remember, he was going to end the capital's harsh partisan divide? It's worse now than anyone can remember, which isn't *all* his fault.

But a mighty portion is. One of the ancient rules of politics -- at least outside the knife-wielding world of one-party incest in the president's adopted hometown -- is you are at least neighborly if not friendly with people when you don't need them so that you can work together when you do need them.

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So, no negotiations on anything of substance. Just coffee? A pointless meeting to create positive optics so critics can no longer say, "Obama won't even meet with Congress."

Last year Obama told the Russians he'd have more flexibility after his final election. Apparently, such flexibility does not apply to domestic affairs. A growing number have become convinced that his cynicism, arrogance and intransigence are proof that results in the form of a budget, a debt limit hike or some such item are not Obama's real goals.

His real goals are to exacerbate and inflame divisions, tensions and conflicts across American society. It's a fundamental tenet of community organizing that if everyone is fighting each other, they have less opportunity or energy to resist the organizer's larger goals. And if people feel they're living in chaos, the organizer's alternative of a stronger central organization may well seem more attractive.

Looking back over Obama's first 1,717 days in office, that style and reach become painfully obvious. Which indicates even more painfully that what lies ahead in his remaining 1,205 days will be tumultuous at best.

Contentions

[Why Harry Reid Lost His Temper](#)

by Seth Mandel

"My staff has always said 'don't say this,' but..." is a frightening disclaimer for the communications staffers of any member of Congress to hear. But it can be especially cringe inducing when the person reciting the line has a terrible habit of not only saying things over the warnings of his staff but also saying things he shouldn't even have to be told not to say. Joe Biden falls into this category. And so does the author of the above line, Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

The [full version](#) of that quote, from 2008, is: "My staff has always said 'don't say this,' but I'm going to say it again, because it's so descriptive because it's true. Leader Boehner mentioned the tourists lined up in summer, winter—long lines coming into the Capitol. In the summertime, because the high humidity and how hot it gets here, you could literally smell the tourists coming into the Capitol. And that may be descriptive, but it's true."

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offered yet another example of this tendency. The Washington Free Beacon [provides the transcript](#) of an exchange Reid had today on the government shutdown with CNN's Dana Bash:

DANA BASH: You all talked about children with cancer unable to go to clinical trials. The House is presumably going to pass a bill that funds at least the NIH. Given what you've said, will you at least pass that? And if not, aren't you playing the same political games that Republicans are?

HARRY REID: Listen, Sen. Durbin explained that very well, and he did it here, did it on the floor earlier, as did Sen. Schumer. What right did they have to pick and choose what part of government is going to be funded? It's obvious what's going on here. You talk about reckless and irresponsible. Wow. What this is all about is Obamacare. They are obsessed. I don't know what other word I can use. They're obsessed with this Obamacare. It's working now and it will continue to work and people will love it more than they do now by far. So they have no right to pick and choose.

BASH: But if you can help one child who has cancer, why wouldn't you do it?

REID: Why would we want to do that? I have 1,100 people at Nellis Air Force base that are sitting home. They have a few problems of their own. This is — to have someone of your intelligence to suggest such a thing maybe means you're irresponsible and reckless.

One of Washington's worst-kept secrets is that Reid's attitude toward most people ranges from miserable on his best days to uncommonly vicious on his worst. When he describes members of the public as unwashed masses *to their face*, he isn't being playful. He holds most people in utter contempt, and despite the best efforts of his staff, he usually tells them so. It's refreshingly honest in its own way, but it does not exactly grease the wheels of compromise.

That was evident earlier this week, when Reid's office threatened to release private emails from Republican House Speaker John Boehner that would portray Boehner as a squish and a hypocrite on the issue of congressional subsidies for insurance. Not only would it be a breach of trust—it's one of the few unwritten rules Reid hasn't yet broken—but it could also threaten to weaken Boehner's ability to strike a deal to end the government shutdown. In other words, the move would accomplish nothing except potentially embarrass a politician Reid wanted to take a swing at.

And so, the next day, the emails leaked with, as the *Atlantic* [noted](#), "Reid's fingerprints all over it." So Reid is upset. But the larger question is, what is upsetting Reid so much that he's taking it out publicly on Boehner, reporters, and cancer patients? What has Reid so rattled?

The answer probably has something to do with what precipitated each outburst this week. Republicans have read the polls showing the public does not want the government shut down over ObamaCare, and they want to change the narrative. So every time the Democrats raise the cases of victims of the shutdown, Republicans respond by calling Democrats' bluff and offering up funding bills that would solve the dilemma.

That raises a different question: if Republicans are willing to pass all these spending bills, why won't they just remove the strings and fund the whole government? And the answer is because they are—intentionally or not—demonstrating just how much of the government is not essential. John Steele Gordon [wrote](#) yesterday that the shutdown exposes the waste in the federal

government: if most employees are non-essential, what on earth are taxpayers paying all those salaries and benefits for?

Republicans are willing to take each issue, determine its importance, and lay out the requisite money to fund it. The danger of this approach for Democrats is that any rational cost-benefit analysis of the entire federal government exposes the bureaucratic money pit Washington has become. So when Reid asks why he should want to help a kid suffering from cancer it's not because he is indifferent to human life, it's because only an all-or-nothing approach to budgeting can hide the massive waste of taxpayer money that defines his vision of governance.

Power Line

[The WWII Memorial: More Guards Than At Benghazi](#)

by John Hinderaker

That's right: the Obama administration dispatched more security guards to prevent World War II veterans from visiting the wide-open WWII memorial on the Mall than it stationed in Benghazi, notwithstanding the American Ambassador's pleas for better security. [Paul Bedard](#) has the story:

The National Park Service is sending so many officials out to shut down federal parks that it might have to suspend furloughs if the government closure continues.

Two examples:

– At the World War II Memorial on The Mall in Washington, where veterans have been staging protests to keep it open, Washington Examiner's Charlie Spiering reports that at least seven officials were dispatched Wednesday morning to set up a ring of barricades to block tourists from the memorial. That is two more than the State Department had in Benghazi a year ago on the night of the terrorist attack that killed four, including the U.S. ambassador.

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– National Park Officials closed down the educational Claude Moore Colonial Farm near the CIA in McLean, Va., even though the federal government doesn't fund or staff the park popular with children and schools. Just because the privately-operated park is on Park Service land, making the federal government simply its landlord, the agency decided to close it.

This is another instance where the Obama administration went out of its way, not to save money, but to inconvenience taxpayers by creating the illusion that the government "shutdown" is causing problems. What follows from those who actually run the Moore Colonial Farm is devastating to Barack Obama and his administration:

A Claude Moore Colonial Farm official said that the privately-funded staff is on the job Wednesday, but barred from letting anybody visit the historically accurate buildings or animals.

Anna Eberly, the managing director, sent out an email decrying the decision and rude National Park Service staff handling the closure.

Pointing to Park Service claims that parks have to be closed because the agency can't afford staff during the government closure, Eberly wrote: "What utter crap. We have operated the Farm successfully for 32 years after the NPS cut the Farm from its budget in 1980 and are fully staffed and prepared to open today. But there are barricades at the Pavilions and entrance to the Farm. And if you were to park on the grass and visit on your own, you run the risk of being arrested. Of course, that will cost the NPS staff salaries to police the Farm against intruders while leaving it open will cost them nothing."



She added: "In all the years I have worked with the National Park Service, first as a volunteer for six years in Richmond where I grew up, then as an NPS employee for eight very long years and now enjoyably as managing director for the last 32 years — I have never worked with a more arrogant, arbitrary and vindictive group representing the NPS. I deeply apologize that we have to disappoint you today by being closed but know that we are working while the National Park Service is not — as usual."

Over the last few days, the Obama administration has been exposed as a cynical, heartless political operation that is willing to sacrifice ordinary Americans to its overriding goal of maximizing its own power over our lives. Barack Obama should be ashamed of himself.

Power Line

[Obama to Veterans: Get Out Of My Park!](#)

by John Hinderaker

President Obama's barricading of the World War II memorial on the Mall, to keep out veterans who had long planned visits to the memorial, was one of the dumbest PR moves of all time. This was seen on [Lucianne](#) earlier today:



The image was accompanied by this comment:

WW II VETS: Normandy was also closed when we got there!!!

The conventional wisdom is that Republicans are better at policy, and Democrats are better at politics. Events of the last few days are starting to cast doubt on this assumption.

Finally, if you are wondering whether the liberal press is losing control over the shutdown narrative, consider that this image, published by our friends at [Intellectual Takeout](#), has been seen by more than 3,300,000 people in less than 24 hours:



Power Line

Democrats Pay Union Members to Protest World War II Vets

by John Hinderaker

It appears that the Obama administration is violating the First Rule of Holes. Yesterday the administration looked awful when it “closed” and barricaded the World War II memorial on the Mall. The memorial is, by its nature, open. There is nothing to close. And the administration knows that every day, tour groups consisting of WWII vets, now mostly in their late 80s or early 90s, come to Washington to visit the memorial. So the administration couldn’t resist closing the WWII memorial by putting up barricades, as part of their effort to dramatize how terrible the government “shutdown” is.

Yesterday, as we noted [here](#), the administration suffered a public relations disaster when a group of elderly vets from Mississippi, aided by one or more Republican Congressmen, pushed the barriers aside and visited the memorial. But the administration was still undeterred: a park service employee threatened to arrest any vets who may try to visit the WWII memorial in the future, while the shutdown is in effect.

The best thing the Obama administration could do is quietly remove the barricades around the memorial and forget the whole thing. But no: it happened again today. Fortunately, [PJ Media](#) was on hand to record the action:

The same scene was reenacted again today as two Honor Flights from Missouri and Chicago arrived in prearranged visits. These Honor Flights were met by hundreds of ordinary citizens and about a dozen members of Congress, who once again crashed the barricades to let the veterans into the WW2 Memorial.

After about an hour, about 20 SEIU protesters arrived on the scene chanting “Boehner, get us back to work” and claiming they were federal employees furloughed because of the shutdown.

WWII veterans visiting the memorial that was erected in their honor vs. paid SEIU protesters: great optics for the Obama administration! But it gets worse. The protesters claimed to be furloughed federal employees:

In the video below these protesters were marching towards the press gaggle and I was asking them to show their federal IDs to prove they were in fact federal workers. No one wore their federal ID and none would provide it to prove their claim.

Then, remarkably, a guy carrying a sign passed by wearing a McDonald’s employee shirt, which I noted. I then began asking them how much they had been paid to protest, at which point the guy wearing the McDonald’s shirt came back and admitted he had been paid \$15 to attend the protest.

Here is the video. **(Go to the link if you wish to see the video)** As you watch it, try to imagine what public relations genius in the Obama administration thought that this would play well for the president and Harry Reid:

You can’t make this stuff up: World War II veterans come to Washington to see their monument, and the Obama administration tries to block them by putting up barricades. When that blunder

starts getting media attention, the administration doubles down by paying union members \$15 to march around, waving signs and protesting—as though that were a sure-fire way to generate sympathy for the nonessential federal employees who are getting the day off. Is it possible that the Democrats could be snatching defeat from the jaws of victory?

And does that perhaps have something to do with Obama's backing down on his vow not to talk with Congressional Republicans? Obama has now [invited Congressional leaders](#) to the White House for talks on ending the spending impasse.

Pajamas Media

[US plays Monopoly, Russia plays chess](#)

by Spengler

Americans see individual pieces of geopolitical real estate in isolation, like hotels on the Monopoly board, while the Russians look at the interaction of all their spheres of interest around the globe.

Syria is of no real strategic interest to Russia, nor to anyone else for that matter. It is a broken wreck of a country, with an irreparably damaged economy, without the energy, water, or food to maintain long-term economic viability. The multiethnic melange left in place by British and French cartographers after the First World War has broken down irreparably into a war of mutual extermination, whose only result can be depopulation or partition on the Yugoslav model.

Syria only has importance in so far as its crisis threatens to spill over into surrounding territories which have more strategic importance. As a Petri dish for jihadist movements, it threatens to become the training ground for a new generation of terrorists, serving the same role that Afghanistan did during the 1990s and 2000s.

As a testing ground for the use of weapons of mass destruction, it provides a diplomatic laboratory to gauge the response of world powers to atrocious actions with comparatively little risk to the participants. It is an incubator of national movements, in which, for example, the newfound freedom of action for the country's 2 million Kurds constitutes a means of destabilizing Turkey and other countries with substantial Kurdish minorities. Most important, as the cockpit of confessional war between Sunnis and Shi'ite, Syria may become the springboard for a larger conflict engulfing Iraq and possibly other states in the region.

I do not know what Putin wants in Syria. I do not believe that at this point Russia's president knows what he wants in Syria, either. A strong chess player engaging an inferior opponent will create complications without an immediate strategic objective, in order to provoke blunders from the other side and take opportunistic advantage. There are many things that Putin wants. But he wants one big thing above all, namely, the restoration of Russia's great power status. Russia's leading diplomatic role in Syria opens several options to further this goal.

As the world's largest energy producer, Russia wants to enhance its leverage over Western Europe for which it is the principle energy supplier. It wants to influence the marketing of natural gas produced by Israel and other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. It wants to make other

energy producers in the region dependent on its good graces for the security of their energy exports. It wants to enhance its role as a supplier of military equipment, challenging the American F-35 and F-22 with the new Sukhoi T-50 stealth fighter among other things. It wants a free hand in dealing with terrorism among its Muslim minority in the Caucasus. And it wants to maintain influence in its so-called near abroad in Central Asia.

American commentators reacted with surprise and in some cases dismay to Russia's emergence as the arbiter of the Syria crisis. In fact, Russia's emerging role in the region was already evident when the chief of Saudi intelligence, Prince Bandar, flew to Moscow during the first week of August to meet with Putin. The Russians and Saudis announced that they would collaborate to stabilize the new military government in Egypt, in direct opposition to the Obama administration. In effect Russia offered to sell Egypt any weapons that the United States declined to sell, while Saudi Arabia offered to pay for them.

That was a [diplomatic revolution](#) without clear precedent. It is not only that the Russians have returned to Egypt 40 years after they were expelled in the context of the real world war; they have done so in tactical alliance with Saudi Arabia, historically Russia's nemesis in the region.

Saudi Arabia has an urgent interest in stabilizing Egypt, and in suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudi monarchy nightly views as a risk to its legitimacy. Saudi support for the Egyptian military against the Brotherhood is not surprising; what is most surprising is that the Saudi's felt to involve Russia.

Although there are a number of obvious reasons for the Saudi's and Russians to collaborate, for example controlling the jihadists in the Syrian opposition, we do not yet understand the full implications of their rapprochement. The Saudis leaked news that they had offered to buy \$15 billion worth of Russian weapons in return for Russian help with Assad. Rumors of this kind should not be read at face value. They might be misdirection – but misdirection towards what?

Putin's chessboard encompasses the globe. It includes such things as the security of energy exports from the Persian Gulf; the transmission of oil and gas through Central Asia; the market for Russian arms exports; energy negotiations now underway between Russia and China; the vulnerability of Europe's energy supplies; and the internal stability of countries on or near Russia's borders, including Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

For American analysts, most of this chessboard might as well be on the dark side of the moon. We see only what the Russians permit us to see. For example, Moscow first promised to provide Syria with the S-300 air defense system and then withdrew its offer. Saudi Arabia in early August let it be known that it was prepared to buy \$15 billion of Russian weapons in return for considerations in Syria. A negotiation of some kind is underway, but we have no idea what kind of carrots and sticks might be involved.

What we may surmise is that Russia now has much greater capacity to influence events in the Middle East, including the security of energy resources, that it has at any time since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. For the time being, it is in Russia's interest to keep its interlocutory guessing, and to enhance its future strategic options. Russia in effect has placed the burden of uncertainty on the rest of the world, especially upon major economies dependent on Persian Gulf energy exports.

President Obama evidently considers this arrangement beneficial to his own agenda. The president has no interest whatever in enhancing America's strategic position in the world; his intent may be to diminish it, as [Norman Podhoretz](#) charged in the Wall Street Journal last week, and I argued [five years ago](#). Obama is focused on his domestic agenda.

From that standpoint, handing over responsibility for the Syrian mess is a riskless exercise. American popular revulsion over foreign military intervention is so intense that the voters will welcome any measure that reduces American responsibility for foreign problems. Although the elite of the Democratic Party are liberal internationalists, Obama's voting support has scant interest in Syria.

Public commentary on foreign policy is an exercise in frustration under the circumstances. Because America is a democracy, and substantial commitment of resources requires at least some degree of consensus, diplomacy was exceptionally transparent so long as America dominated the field. Think tanks, academia and the media served as a sounding board for any significant initiatives, so that important decisions were taken at least in part in the view of the public. That is no longer the case on Vladimir Putin's chessboard. Russia will pursue a set of strategic trade-offs, but we in the West will not know what they are until well after the fact, if ever.

Further dimensions of complexity will arise from the eventual response of other prospective players, in particular China, but also including Japan. The self-shrinkage of America's strategic position eliminates the constraint for Russia to choose a particular option. On the contrary, Russia can accumulate positional advantages to employ for particular strategic objectives at its leisure. And Putin will sit silent on his side of the chessboard and let the clock run against his opponent.

Putin may think that he is pre-empting a similar strategy on the part of the West. [Fyodor Lukanov](#) wrote on the AI Monitor website last March:

From Russian leadership's point of view, the Iraq War now looks like the beginning of the accelerated destruction of regional and global stability, undermining the last principles of sustainable world order. Everything that's happened since – including flirting with Islamists during the Arab Spring, US policies in Libya and its current policies in Syria – serve as evidence of strategic insanity that has taken over the last remaining superpower.

Russia's persistence on the Syrian issue is the product of this perception. The issue is not sympathy for Syria's dictator, nor commercial interests, nor naval bases in Tartus. Moscow is certain that if continued crushing of secular authoritarian regimes is allowed because America and the West support "democracy", it will lead to such destabilization that will overwhelm all, including Russia. It's therefore necessary for Russia to resist, especially as the West and the United States themselves experience increasing doubts.

Russians typically assume that Americans think the way they do, gauging every move by the way it affects the overall position on the board. The notion that incompetence rather than conspiracy explains the vast majority of American actions is foreign to Russian thinking. Whatever the Russian leader thinks, though, he will keep to himself.

After 12 years of writing on foreign policy in this space, I have nothing more to say. The Obama administration has handed the strategic initiative to countries whose policy-making proceeds behind a wall of opacity. Robert Frost's words come to mind:

*As for the evil tidings
Belshazzar's overthrow
Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
What he soon enough will know?*

Or – as in Robin Williams' old nightclub impression of then president Jimmy Carter addressing the nation on the eve of World War III: "That's all, good night, you're on your own."

*Spengler is channeled by **David P Goldman**. He is Senior Fellow at the London Center for Policy Research and Associate Fellow at the Middle East Forum. His book [How Civilizations Die \(and why Islam is Dying, Too\)](#) was published by Regnery Press in September 2011.*

Reason

[Big Labor Stumbles in Wisconsin](#)

by Sean Higgins

[More Than They Bargained For: Scott Walker, Unions, and the Fight for Wisconsin](#), by Jason Stein and Patrick Marley, University of Wisconsin Press, 350 pages, \$26.95.

It's not clear who first introduced the chant "this is what democracy looks like" to the epic early-2011 showdown in Wisconsin between angry public-sector union workers and newly elected Republican Gov. Scott Walker. The protesters shouting the phrase surely meant to insist that they were the true voice of the people. But despite the sheer size and raucous noise of the crowds that packed the Wisconsin State Capitol for weeks protesting Walker's proposed legislation to roll back union benefits and prerogatives, the demonstrators ultimately lost every fight that mattered. They lost because the voting public in Wisconsin approved of Walker's plan, albeit narrowly.

The people had already spoken when they elected a Republican governor and legislative majority in 2010. Democracy then re-affirmed Walker's controversial decisions even under the glare of a nationwide spotlight and a hostile press. Nevertheless, the sloganeers were correct, just not in the way they intended.

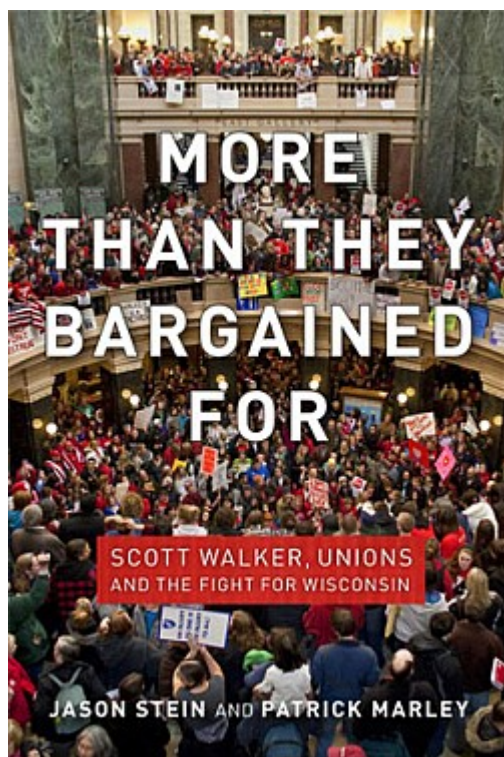
As *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* reporters Jason Stein and Patrick Marley note in their book *More Than They Bargained For: Scott Walker, Unions, and the Fight for Wisconsin*, "The citizens of Wisconsin and indeed the country as a whole, sometimes derided as apathetic and out of touch, showed that they were eager to engage on both sides, to defend the rights of workers and to safeguard the state's financial future." The engaged activists "marched, they sent hundreds of thousands of emails and tweets, and they overwhelmingly held themselves to a peaceful, democratic purpose, which asserted itself even in the face of the many exceptions to that general rule. Likewise, the police and authorities also managed to handle the protests without

serious injury or loss of life on either side. When it came time to vote, citizens set turnout records.”

Engaged citizenry, vigorous debate, productive legislatures: This is everything that good-government types usually pine for. Yet most national media outlets viewed the Walker/union battle as something distasteful and unfortunate. “How did Wisconsin become the most divisive place in America?” clucked a *New York Times* headline.

One of the greatest motivators for political participation, it turns out, is bitter division. As Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald (R-Beaver Dam) put it in February 2011, “Democracy isn’t pretty all the time.”

In their admirably evenhanded account, Stein and Marley leave readers to their own conclusions. But *More Than They Bargained For* suggests that the Wisconsin fight was less a failure of the Badger State’s democratic traditions than an example of how strong those traditions remain.



Wisconsin is the birthplace of public-sector unions. The nation’s largest such organization, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), was founded there in 1932 as the Wisconsin State Employees Association. That history fueled the outraged response to Walker’s attempted rollback of labor’s power. This was their home turf. If it could happen there, it could happen anywhere.

Unionizing people working on the taxpayer’s dime was a divisive issue from the start. “[Franklin Delano] Roosevelt said that such unions couldn’t take the same approach or militancy given that ‘their employer is the whole people, who speak by means of laws enacted by their representatives in Congress,’” Stein and Marley note.

Unlike in the private sector, government-employee union members are also a political constituency of their ostensible bosses. The average private-sector boss, when working out a contract with a union, doesn't have to worry that his employees might vote him out of a job—or give barrels of money to his rivals—if they don't like his contract.

That political power gives public-sector unions an edge their private-sector counterparts lack. It's no coincidence that while private-sector unionization has plummeted from 20.1 percent in 1980 to 6.6 percent in 2012, the public-sector rate rests at 35.9 percent, down just a bit from a 1994 high of 38.7 percent, according to the Labor Department. In 2009 for the first time ever, the number of public-sector union workers exceeded those outside government employ. (As of 2012 the gap is 7.3 million to 7 million and growing.)

As Milwaukee County Executive from 2002 to 2010, young Scott Walker had clashed repeatedly with public-sector unions. Labor costs are one of the main elements in local government budgets. His Democratic predecessor as county executive cut sweetheart deals with unions, such as providing six-figure payouts to some retirees who were also getting \$60,000 a year in annuities, driving up current and future costs. Walker fought, mostly futilely, to prune back those promises.

“Walker's agenda quickly brought him and the county's public employee unions into conflict,” write Stein and Marley. “In negotiations, he struggled to get concessions and agreements that would produce the kinds of savings for taxpayers that he had built into his budgets. Unions countered that Walker was budgeting in bad faith, plugging numbers into his budget plans that he knew unions would successfully oppose at the bargaining table.” Walker grew so frustrated that in 2009 he called for dismantling the entire county government and parceling out its functions.

Despite this history, few suspected the coming firestorm when the boyish-looking Republican was elected governor in 2010. Walker hadn't campaigned on rewriting public-sector union laws—a fact his critics would return to repeatedly, arguing he lacked a mandate. (Stein and Marley are sympathetic to this critique.) But Walker's county-level budgetary battles were never far from his mind.

To avoid a repeat of his setbacks in Milwaukee County, Walker set out to weaken union power from the get-go. In his first budget, the governor boosted the amount that government employees must pay for their health insurance and pension costs. He also proposed rewriting the state labor law to end automatic dues deductions from paychecks, limit collective bargaining to wages and not benefits, and require that the unions subject themselves to annual recertification votes of their members.

In effect, Walker was calling for state employees to abide by right-to-work laws. The workers could still join unions, but the unions would lack the power to compel dues from those who did not want to join. This would place tremendous strain on Big Labor's resources and power. The weakened unions would in turn weaken the state Democrats who depend on them.

It was as hardball as politics gets. Walker even exempted the police and firefighter unions from the legislation, precisely because he knew they had the strongest public sympathy and the best relationship with Republicans. (A key reason why Ohio Gov. John Kasich's similar reforms were successfully rolled back by unions in 2011 was that he didn't make this exception.)

Outwardly, Scott Walker was an unlikely catalyst for such a spectacular battle. The 43-year-old former Eagle Scout was an exceedingly mild-mannered technocrat with no prior reputation as a bomb thrower. But when Walker took office, the state had a projected shortfall of \$3 billion, about 5 percent of the budget, for the next two years. (Wisconsin has biennial budgets.) The new governor did not want to start off with tax hikes, and the state's constitution requires a balanced budget.

The problem fell into Walker's lap because money from President Barack Obama's February 2009 stimulus had propped up the state during the previous year and a half, papering over deficits. But now the federal spigot had run dry.

The unions were not interested in giving anything up. After Walker's election, they pushed the outgoing administration and Democrat-majority legislature to quickly approve new work contracts before Walker and the new GOP majority could be sworn in. The effort failed thanks to a single vote cast by an irascible retiring Senate Democrat.

When the governor and his aides revealed their union-busting plans to state GOP lawmakers in February 2011, Walker rather naively told them they could rush this through the legislature with a minimum of controversy. Older hands at the state capitol knew better. State Sen. Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center) told Walker, "Come on, people kill each other's dogs over this shit."

While Wisconsin is generally seen as moderate, that's more of a mathematical average than a character of centrism. The state is split between heavily liberal Democrats dominating urban areas such as Madison and strong conservatives controlling the rural parts. The practical effect of this is that the state often swings radically from election to election. Hence a liberal senator like Russ Feingold can be replaced by someone equally conservative, Ron Johnson.

This means that either party's gains at the statehouse can be quickly washed away in the next election. Indeed, during the 2011 fight, the unions actually agreed to Walker's financial concessions, offering them in exchange for dropping the collective bargaining changes. But this wasn't the concession that it appeared to be: The unions knew they could get it all back the next time there was a Democratic majority. Part of what Walker was trying to do was to permanently change the state's politics.

Public controversy grew quickly after Walker's plans were formally announced in February. Within days, the state capitol was a circus. A group of 14 Democratic legislators fled to Illinois in a bid to prevent the bill's passage by making a quorum impossible. *Daily Show* correspondent John Oliver even tried to mount a visual gag linking the Wisconsin protests to the Arab Spring by bringing a camel to the capitol. The stunt misfired when the camel got its leg stuck in a fence and panicked.

Yet as rowdy as the Wisconsin protests were during the spring, they never got out of control. Astonishingly, there were only a few arrests. "The masses of people remained overwhelmingly peaceful and generally respectful, and that wasn't accidental or simply spontaneous," Stein and Marley write. "Unions assigned people to self-police their protests and try to intervene before problems developed. When the Senate convened, urgent messages on Twitter called on demonstrators to remain calm and respectful to law enforcement, emphasizing how damaging any act of disrespect or violence could be for their cause."

In other words, protesters policed themselves well because they knew how quickly a negative YouTube moment could go viral. This is a point to which the authors repeatedly return: It only looked from afar like the situation was out of control.

Still, there was little doubt that Walker would eventually win. He had solid GOP majorities in both chambers of the legislature. When it became clear they couldn't get the 14 AWOL Democrats to return to provide a two-thirds quorum, Republicans simply tweaked the bill until they could pass it with a bare majority. Walker signed it, and that was that. The chanting crowds could not reverse the fact that the voters had already given Walker his majority.

The protesters then sought to overturn the package at the ballot box. But despite three separate recall votes during the next year, they failed. Walker actually managed to win his own recall vote by a larger margin than he won election in the first place.

But if Walker was making a power play, the unions were moving to jealously guard their power—power that wasn't exactly little "d" democratic in the first place. They were, after all, arguing for their right to extract money directly from the taxpayer-funded paychecks of workers who had never wanted to join in collective bargaining.

In post-circus Wisconsin, it appears that many government workers have voted with their feet. Labor Department filings since *More Than They Bargained For* was published show that AFSCME Council 40—one of the union's four branches in the state—has gone from 31,730 members in 2011 to just 20,488 now. AFSCME Council 48 went from 9,043 members to just 3,498 during the same time period. (The other two state branches, like most public-sector unions, are not subject to the disclosure requirement, which applies only to unions that represent at least some private-sector workers.)

Some of those workers presumably dropped out because Walker's reforms strictly limited what AFSCME's bargaining could get for them. But if labor solidarity were as strong as the chanting crowds claimed, the declines should not have been that drastic so soon after the reforms passed. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that recall-election exit polls show that Walker got support from 28 percent of union members. A nontrivial minority apparently appreciated getting the choice of whether to join a union.

Stein and Marley's book is a fairly straightforward account, benefiting from their broad knowledge of the state's nuanced politics. The authors bust a few myths, such as the widely held belief that the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Koch brothers—left-wing bogeymen—were involved in writing Walker's legislation. In fact, it was the governor's own idea. His primary inspiration was Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, who rescinded collective bargaining for state employees on his second day in office in 2005.

The book is filled with amusing anecdotes. One Senate Democrat left for Illinois so abruptly that he didn't have time to tell his wife, who had left a crockpot on and had to call a neighbor to get it turned off. Some Republican lawmakers snuck out of the capitol at night by donning hoodies, picking up signs, and pretending to be protesters.

Stein and Marley do lament the decline of bipartisanship that accompanied all this ruckus. "Compromise...had become a 'dirty word,' □" they write. But it is far from clear that a compromise would have done anything more than delay the inevitable policy reckoning of

increasing labor payouts vs. decreasing government revenue. And the extremely high level of civic engagement would not have happened without an emotionally contested battle. There's a reason "politics as usual" is usually boring.

No one can argue that the substantive issues in Wisconsin did not receive a full airing, or that voters were not aware of the policy consequences. This is what democracy looks like.

The protesters may even have done Walker a favor. Had he been able to ram his bill through as originally intended, the governor wouldn't have had a chance to publicly make his case or prove his mettle.

One reason the political class tends to shy away from divisive politics is that one side always stands to lose badly, which is something fans of Walker's actions should bear in mind. His fate could have easily turned out more like that of Ohio's John Kasich, whose reforms were ground into dust by Big Labor.

But sometimes it's better to have clear winners and losers. If Walker's reforms succeed, voters in and out of Wisconsin will have an example of how American policy and politics can change for the better. If not, they'll know who to blame.

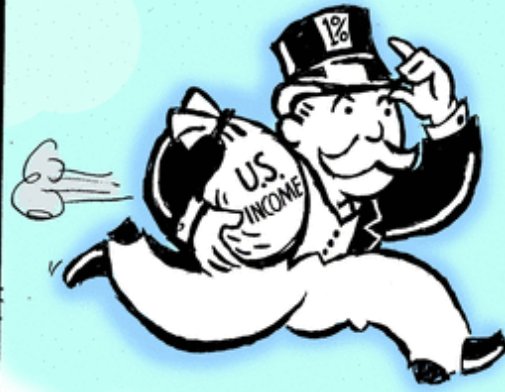




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