

April 3, 2014

Thomas Sowell says weak vacillating foreign policies lead to wars.

Many people are lamenting the bad consequences of Barack Obama's foreign policy, and some are questioning his competence.

There is much to lament, and much to fear. Multiple setbacks to American interests have been brought on by Obama's policies in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Crimea and — above all — in what seems almost certain to become a nuclear Iran in the very near future.

The president's public warning to Syria of dire consequences if the Assad regime there crossed a "red line" he had drawn seemed to epitomize an amateurish bluff that was exposed as a bluff when Syria crossed that red line without suffering any consequences. Drawing red lines in disappearing ink makes an international mockery of not only this president's credibility, but also the credibility of future American presidents' commitments.

When some future President of the United States issues a solemn warning internationally, and means it, there may be less likelihood that the warning will be taken seriously. That invites the kind of miscalculation that has led to wars. ...

Mr. Sowell has Part II in his look at foreign policies.

Japan recently turned over to the United States enough weapons-grade nuclear material to make dozens of nuclear bombs. This was one of President Barack Obama's few foreign policy "successes," as part of his nuclear disarmament initiative. But his foreign policy successes may be more dangerous than his "failures." Back in 2005, Senator Barack Obama urged the Ukrainians to drastically reduce their conventional weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles and tons of ammunition. Ukraine had already rid itself of nuclear missiles, left over from the days when it had been part of the Soviet Union.

Would Vladimir Putin have sent Russian troops so boldly into Ukraine if the Ukrainians still had nuclear missiles? The nuclear disarming of Japan and Ukraine shows how easy it is to disarm peaceful nations — making them more vulnerable to those who are not peaceful.

Ukraine's recent appeal to the United States for military supplies, with which to defend itself as more Russian troops mass on its borders, was denied by President Obama. He is sending food supplies instead. He might as well send them white flags, to facilitate surrender.

According to **Bret Stephens**, dissing the president is in vogue.

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Kremlin, which, as in Soviet days, no longer bothers distinguishing diplomatic communiqués from crass propaganda.

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This would have been a diss were it whispered in the corridor of a foreign chancellery. The ambassador published it as an op-ed in the New York Times. All this in just the past four months. And all so reminiscent of the contempt the world showed for Jimmy Carter in the waning days of his failed presidency. The trouble for us is that the current presidency has more than 1,000 days to go.

I was wrong about diss. It's a fine word. It means diss-respect. And connotes diss-may. And diss-honor. And diss-aster. (Kinda like "clueless, hapless, feckless, and hopeless.")

Roger Simon calls it the "silence of the liberals."

Am I the only one or have you noticed your liberal friends and family have been strangely silent lately?

I tweeted as much Friday and, given the number of retweets in a matter of minutes, I gather I am not alone.

So why are these normally voluble people suddenly doing a disappearing act? (I'm not talking about the politicians and pundits. They're being paid to move their mouths.) It's pretty obvious.

They are bewildered and embarrassed. Some are even ashamed of themselves, not that they will readily admit it. The man who was their hero has now been unmasked in every direction as the worst president since the Civil War and possibly earlier. Not only is he a cheesy liar, everything he has done, domestic and foreign, has failed, sometimes to extraordinary degrees. The domestic part is bad enough, but at least that might be reparable. The foreign is another matter. The world is spinning out of control. Who knows where that will end?

Hence, the silence. ...

Worse still, Craig Pirrong wonders why the new Ukrainian constitution was drafted by Kerry and Lavrov in Paris. Craig wants to know if Munich was unavailable.

Following up on Putin's phone call to Obama, Kerry is making a detour to Paris to negotiate with Lavrov over the fate of Ukraine.

Lavrov has laid out Russia's terms, and intimates that Obama and Kerry have accepted the principles underlying these terms.

First, Russia demands that Ukraine adopt a new constitution that establishes a federal structure that gives each region considerable autonomy. Translate this to mean that these regions would be able to pull a Crimea. Or, more accurately, that Russia would be able to pull a Crimea, slicing off pieces of Ukraine and splicing them onto Russia.

Crucially, Lavrov said: "I can say that 'federation' is no longer a taboo word in our negotiations." Meaning that if he is telling the truth (always a big if) Obama has conceded that Ukraine's constitutional order is up for negotiation, on Moscow's terms.

Second, Russia demands that Ukraine's new constitution incorporate guarantees that Ukraine will not join Nato or any other alliance. ...

Leaving foreign policy and heading for the president's domestic mess, Andy Malcolm thinks Sebelius is gonna get thrown under the bus.

... Then, Obama thanked two -- and only two -- people by name -- ex-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who said we'd have to pass the bill to learn what was in it. And he thanked Dick Durbin, the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate. Strangely, Obama did not thank the Senate's top Democrat, Harry Reid, who runs that place for the moment.

Even more striking, however, Obama did not even mention Sebelius, the face of this long, painful implementation struggle. Not one word, though she was sitting right in front of him. ...

... Sure, she made some gaffes, as all public officials do. With TV cameras rolling at a Florida photo op, Sebelius cheerily asked one ObamaCare navigator what she was doing. The worker's reply: She couldn't anything because the healthcare.gov website had crashed again.

Asked if she was going to resign in those anguishing days early last October, Sebelius told reporters the people she worked for were quite satisfied with her job performance. Later, she apologetically explained that she knew she really works for the American people.

If Washington was the Kremlin, Pyongyang or Chicago, such a glaring public omission of praise for a senior aide by the supreme leader would be a sure sign she was on the way out the door of the office or airplane. We'll soon see.

Meanwhile, Obama unintentionally added a moment of humor to his self-celebration of how easily ObamaCare allegedly reached 7.1 million enrollment: "We didn't make a hard sell."

Nate Silver yesterday and now Al Jazeera! What's happened to Pickerhead? Shikha Dalmia moved her byline as she exposes the fraud in the healthcare numbers.

... First off, the exchanges: The 7 million enrollment figure that the administration is bandying about is misleading. The actual number of uninsured covered by the marketplace will be much smaller. For starters, if the current trend continues, 20 percent of the 7 million will drop out without paying. Out of the remaining 5.6 million, only about half were likely previously uninsured. Why? Because reliable early surveys found that a whopping 65 to 90 percent of those flocking to the exchange already had insurance. Even assuming that uninsured people were waiting until the end to sign up, it is hard to see how that figure would exceed 50 percent, given that 6 out of 10 uninsured people surveyed by the Kaiser Family Foundation recently didn't know about the March 31 deadline and after being told about it, half of them still planned to remain uninsured.

Second, Medicaid. The administration claims that the ACA's expansion of Medicaid has allowed 4 million to 4.5 million uninsured people to gain coverage. But a substantial portion of that stems from regular Medicaid growth (unrelated to "Obamacare"). In January, Real Clear Politics' Sean Trende estimated the number to be closer to 400,000, although he expected that number to improve. And last month, Avalere, a health advisory company, put the new enrollees due to Obamacare at 2.4 million to 3.5 million. (Some states are reporting higher rates of uninsured Medicaid enrollment, but it is unclear how representative or reliable they are or how many of these uninsured might have been covered even under the old eligibility criteria.)

Things are not likely to get better next year. The new 'Obamacare' sign-ups are so skewed toward the old and the sick that some experts expect premiums to double. ...

Econ prof from Cornell, Robert Frank, has interesting thoughts about the sale of Detroit's art.

... Fortunately, costs are easier to estimate, and those for displaying a painting derive largely from its market value. Consider "The Wedding Dance," a 16th-century work by the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Detroit museum visitors have enjoyed this painting since 1930. How much would it cost to preserve that privilege for future generations?

A tidy sum, as it turns out. According to Christie's, this canvas alone could fetch up to \$200 million. Once interest rates return to normal levels — say, 6 percent — the forgone interest on that amount would be approximately \$12 million a year.

If we assume that the museum would be open 2,000 hours a year, and ignore the cost of gallery space and other indirect expenses, the cost of keeping the painting on display would be more than \$6,000 an hour. Assuming that an average of five people would view it per hour, all year long, it would still cost more than \$1,200 an hour to provide the experience for each visitor.

Notwithstanding the crudeness of these approximations, we can say that even a very wealthy taxpayer would be reluctant to pay anything close to \$1,200 an hour for the privilege of viewing this painting. And that suggests that most taxpayers think the same money could deliver much greater value if spent in other ways. Of course, the painting might still justify its cost if other indirect benefits were large enough.

Yet the point remains that prices affect the options we face. ...

Jewish World Review
[How Foreign Is Our Policy?](#)

by Thomas Sowell

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There is much to lament, and much to fear. Multiple setbacks to American interests have been brought on by Obama's policies in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Crimea and — above all — in what seems almost certain to become a nuclear Iran in the very near future.

The president's public warning to Syria of dire consequences if the Assad regime there crossed a "red line" he had drawn seemed to epitomize an amateurish bluff that was exposed as a bluff when Syria crossed that red line without suffering any consequences. Drawing red lines in disappearing ink makes an international mockery of not only this president's credibility, but also the credibility of future American presidents' commitments.

When some future President of the United States issues a solemn warning internationally, and means it, there may be less likelihood that the warning will be taken seriously. That invites the kind of miscalculation that has led to wars.

Many who are disappointed with what seem to be multiple fiascoes in President Obama's foreign policy question his competence and blame his inexperience. Such critics may be right, but it is by no means certain that they are.

Like those who are disappointed with Barack Obama's domestic policies, critics of his foreign policy may be ignoring the fact that you cannot know whether someone is failing or succeeding without knowing what he is trying to do.

Whether ObamaCare, for example, is a success or a failure, depends on whether you think the president's goal is to improve the medical treatment of Americans or to leave as his permanent legacy a system of income redistribution, through ObamaCare, and tight government control of the medical profession.

Much, if not most, of the disappointment with Barack Obama comes from expectations based on his words, rather than on an examination of what he has done over his lifetime before reaching the White House.

His words were glowing. He is a master of rhetoric, image and postures. He was so convincing that many failed to connect the dots of his past life that pointed in the opposite direction from his words. "Community organizers," for example, are not uniters but dividers — and former community organizer Obama has polarized this country, despite his rhetoric about uniting us.

Many were so mesmerized by both the man himself and the euphoria surrounding the idea of "the first black president" that they failed to notice that there were any dots, much less any need to connect them.

One dot alone — the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose church the Obamas attended for 20 years — would have been enough to sink any other presidential bid by anyone who was not in line to become "the first black president."

The painful irony is that Jeremiah Wright was just one in a series of Obama's mentors hostile to America, resentful of successful Americans, and convinced that America had too much power internationally, and needed to be brought down a peg.

Jewish World Review

[How Foreign Is Our Policy?: Part II](#)

by Thomas Sowell

Japan recently turned over to the United States enough weapons-grade nuclear material to make dozens of nuclear bombs. This was one of President Barack Obama's few foreign policy "successes," as part of his nuclear disarmament initiative. But his foreign policy successes may be more dangerous than his "failures." Back in 2005, Senator Barack Obama urged the Ukrainians to drastically reduce their conventional weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles and tons of ammunition. Ukraine had already rid itself of nuclear missiles, left over from the days when it had been part of the Soviet Union.

Would Vladimir Putin have sent Russian troops so boldly into Ukraine if the Ukrainians still had nuclear missiles? The nuclear disarming of Japan and Ukraine shows how easy it is to disarm peaceful nations — making them more vulnerable to those who are not peaceful.

Ukraine's recent appeal to the United States for military supplies, with which to defend itself as more Russian troops mass on its borders, was denied by President Obama. He is sending food supplies instead. He might as well send them white flags, to facilitate surrender.

Critics who say that President Obama is naive and inexperienced in foreign policy, and blame that for the many setbacks to American interests during this administration may be right. But it is by no means certain that they are.

Another and more disturbing possibility is that Barack Obama, in his citizen-of-the-world conception of himself, thinks that the United States already has too much power and needs to be deflated. Rush Limbaugh, Dinesh D'Souza and some other critics have seen Obama's repeated sacrifices of American national interests as deliberate.

Monstrous as that possibility might seem, it is consistent not only with many otherwise hard to explain foreign policy setbacks, but also consistent with Obama's having been raised, literally from childhood, with anti-American mentors, beginning with his mother. He continued to seek out such people as an adult.

The ranting Reverend Jeremiah Wright was just one of these anti-American mentors.

President Obama's undermining of stable and unthreatening governments in Egypt and Libya, opening both to Islamic extremists, while doing nothing that was likely to keep Iran from going nuclear, seems more consistent with the views of Rush Limbaugh, Dinesh D'Souza, et al., than with the views of most other critics.

What is also more consistent with the Limbaugh and D'Souza thesis are such personal quirks as Obama's gross rudeness to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the White House and his otherwise inexplicable public debasement of himself and the United States by bowing low to other foreign leaders.

There was nothing to be gained politically by such actions. Nor by such things as his whispered statement to Russian president Dmitry Medvedev that he should tell "Vladimir" that he — Obama — could follow a more "flexible" foreign policy after his last election was behind him.

What could be more "flexible" than denying Ukraine the military supplies needed to deter further Russian aggression? Or leaving Japan without material needed to create a nuclear deterrent quickly, while an aggressive China is expanding its military forces and its territorial demands in the region?

WSJ

The Dissing of the President

The world is treating Obama like another failed American leader.

by Bret Stephens

I've never liked the word diss—not as a verb, much less as a noun. But watching the [Obama](#) administration get the diss treatment the world over, week-in, week-out, I'm beginning to see its uses.

Diss: On Sunday, Bloomberg reported that Hasan Rouhani named Hamid Aboutalebi to serve as the ambassador to the United Nations. Mr. Rouhani is the Iranian president the West keeps insisting is a "moderate," mounting evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Mr. Aboutalebi was one of the students who seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979.

Here's the kicker: The State Department—the very institution whose diplomats were held hostage and brutalized for 444 days—will have to approve his visa to come to New York. Considering how desperate [John Kerry](#) is not to spoil the nuclear mood music with Tehran, the department probably will.

Diss: On Friday, [Vladimir Putin](#) called President Obama to discuss a resolution to the crisis in Ukraine. The Russian president "drew Barack Obama's attention to continued rampage of extremists who are committing acts of intimidation towards peaceful residents," according to the Kremlin, which, as in Soviet days, no longer bothers distinguishing diplomatic communiqués from crass propaganda.

Mr. Kerry was immediately dispatched to Paris to meet with Sergei Lavrov, his Russian counterpart. Mr. Lavrov—who knows a one-for-me, one-for-you, one-for-me deal when he sees it—is hinting that Russia will graciously not invade Ukraine provided Washington and Moscow shove "constitutional reforms" favorable to the Kremlin down Kiev's throat. And regarding the invasion that brought the crisis about: "Mr. Kerry on Sunday didn't mention Crimea during his remarks," reports The Wall Street Journal, "giving the impression that the U.S. has largely given up reversing the region's absorption into Russia."

Diss: "If your image is feebleness, it doesn't pay in the world," Moshe Ya'alon, Israel's defense minister, said last month at Tel Aviv University. "At some stage, the United States entered into negotiations with them [the Iranians], and unhappily, when it comes to negotiating at a Persian bazaar, the Iranians were better."

The administration later demanded an apology from Mr. Ya'alon, which he dutifully delivered. But this isn't the first time he's dissed the administration. In January, he called Mr. Kerry "obsessive and messianic," adding that "the only thing that can save us is if Kerry wins the Nobel Prize and leaves us alone."

Diss: "It seems to me that some kind of joker wrote the U.S. president's order :-)". That was what Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin tweeted after learning last month that the Obama administration had sanctioned him for his role in the invasion of Ukraine.

Gotta love the ":-)".

Diss: In March, Iranian Gen. Masoud Jazayeri offered his view of Mr. Obama's threat to use military force against Iran if negotiations fail. "The low-IQ U.S. President and his country's Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) speak of the effectiveness of 'the U.S. options on the table' on Iran while this phrase is mocked at and has become a joke among the Iranian nation, especially the children."

Diss: In late December, Mr. Obama warned Congress that he would veto legislation to impose new sanctions on Iran if the Islamic Republic violated its nuclear commitments. It was essential, White House Press Secretary [Jay Carney](#) said, to do nothing that "will undermine our efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution."

A few weeks later, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif laid a wreath at the tomb of Imad Mughniyeh, mastermind of the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, the 1985 hijacking of TWA 847 and countless other acts of international terrorism. Apparently Mr. Zarif didn't much fear undermining efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution.

Diss: In December, Turkish Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), under fire for a corruption scandal, unleashed a media campaign to impugn U.S. Ambassador Francis Ricciardone as a member of a dark conspiracy to destabilize the government in Ankara. This is the same Mr. Erdogan whose regime Mr. Ricciardone praised for "great development in democratic structure." It's also the same Mr. Erdogan about whom Mr. Obama once said he had formed "bonds of trust."

Diss: "Rather than challenging the Syrian and Iranian governments, some of our Western partners have refused to take much-needed action against them," warned Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the U.K. late last year. "The foreign policy choices being made in some Western capitals risk the

stability of the region and, potentially, the security of the whole Arab world. This means the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has no choice but to become more assertive in international affairs."

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Roger L. Simon **[The Silence of the Liberals](#)**

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I tweeted as much Friday and, given the number of retweets in a matter of minutes, I gather I am not alone.

So why are these normally voluble people suddenly doing a disappearing act? (I'm not talking about the politicians and pundits. They're being paid to move their mouths.) It's pretty obvious.

They are bewildered and embarrassed. Some are even ashamed of themselves, not that they will readily admit it. The man who was their hero has now been unmasked in every direction as the worst president since the Civil War and possibly earlier. Not only is he a cheesy liar, everything he has done, domestic and foreign, has failed, sometimes to extraordinary degrees. The domestic part is bad enough, but at least that might be reparable. The foreign is another matter. The world is spinning out of control. Who knows where that will end?

Hence, the silence.

Easter and Passover celebrations will be a little easier for those on the right this year. We won't have to listen to as much stultifying palaver about global warming, income inequality, etc. Some, of course, but not enough, I suspect, to ruin our dinners.

Unfortunately, however, we have nothing to gloat about. Our liberal friends have left us with a pile of dung the size of the Horsehead Nebula. Digging out will be a titanic undertaking, especially in the aforementioned area of foreign affairs. Ironically, Republicans have been jumping up and down about the inept Affordable Care Act, but the real problems left by the Obama administration will be global. You don't easily roll back an Iranian nuclear weapon or regain respect for America as the global leader when it is being dissed in nearly every corner of the planet. (See [Bret Stephens'](#) ^[1] excellent column on the subject.) Just as nature abhors a vacuum, global leadership abdicated rapidly finds a replacement – usually a worse one. (Rand Paul and followers take note.)

Speaking of which, it might be interesting to direct the conversation to foreign policy at those coming family dinners. I also suspect that our liberal friends and relations deep down are worried about what has happened to the state of the world. Most of them were happy to see the Cold War over, even if the dreaded Reagan had something to do with it. They're also a little suspicious of Iran. (I'm not talking about the left wing lunatics here – they're hopeless.)

When bringing up the subject of foreign policy, it's not necessary, although tempting, to bring up what incompetents Obama-Hillary-Kerry have been, or even to refer to such titanic moments of ineptitude as Obama's whispered message to Putin about his future "flexibility" after election or the repellent non-reaction of our president to the freedom movement in Iran.

Those events may be a bridge too far for our liberal friends. They may not be able to "contain" them, as the shrinks would say. But they are perhaps ready to share a little mutual misery about the state of things, a furrowed brow or two, that could lead them to do some quiet thinking when at home – that is, when not in front of you, lest they embarrass themselves. People change – not many, but they do.

Streetwise Professor

[Kerry & Lavrov Negotiate Ukraine's Surrender in Paris: Were All the Rooms in Munich Booked?](#)

by Craig Pirrong

Following up on Putin's phone call to Obama, Kerry is making a detour to Paris to negotiate with Lavrov over the fate of Ukraine.

Lavrov has laid out Russia's terms, and intimates that Obama and Kerry have accepted the principles underlying these terms.

First, Russia demands that Ukraine adopt a new constitution that establishes a federal structure that gives each region considerable autonomy. Translate this to mean that these regions would be able to pull a Crimea. Or, more accurately, that Russia would be able to pull a Crimea, slicing off pieces of Ukraine and splicing them onto Russia.

Crucially, Lavrov said: "I can say that 'federation' is no longer a taboo word in our negotiations." Meaning that if he is telling the truth (always a big if) Obama has conceded that Ukraine's constitutional order is up for negotiation, on Moscow's terms.

Second, Russia demands that Ukraine's new constitution incorporate guarantees that Ukraine will not join Nato or any other alliance.

In brief: the Secretary of State of the United States is traveling to Paris to negotiate the constitution of a sovereign country, without the presence of that country. The end state of this negotiation would be to turn Ukraine into a Russian satrapy, to be gobbled up piecemeal, and with no ability to conduct an independent foreign policy.

Lavrov's teaser is that Russia has no intention of invading Ukraine. But if you read his words closely, you will understand that he means Russia has no intention of invading if its terms are

accepted. Otherwise, Ukraine is a fascist, Nazi threat to Russia and to Russian “compatriots.” And we know what Putin believes such a threat justifies.

The 1930s analogies keep coming, fast and furious. Here the analogy is Munich, where France and Germany negotiated Czechoslovakia’s fate with Hitler, without the Czechs being present. The Czechs called the agreement the Munich Diktat. Will the Ukrainians call this the Paris Diktat?

There are other similarities. The pretext of the Germans in 1938 was and Russia in 2014 is the necessity of protecting co-ethnics allegedly threatened by independent nations not invited to the negotiations. Munich resulted in the handover of the major industrial region of Czechoslovakia to Germany: the likely outcome of an agreement on Putin’s terms would be to handover Ukraine’s main industrial region to Russia. The Munich negotiations took place under the threat of a German invasion of Czechoslovakia if Hitler’s terms were not accepted, and German troops were massed on the border to carry out that threat. The Paris negotiations are taking place under the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine if Putin’s terms are not accepted, and Russian troops are massed on the border with the capability to carry out that threat.

Once upon a time “No More Munichs!” was a catchphrase in US foreign policy. No longer, apparently. Obama and Kerry seem to be saying “Why Not Munich?”

Even if no agreement comes of these talks, or talks that follows, it is deeply shameful that the United States would even engage in such a negotiation on such terms with such a nation. Deeply shameful.

IBD

[Is Sebelius headed under Obama's bus now?](#)

by Andrew Malcolm

Acknowledgment from the podium. It's one of the most powerful public tools available to any American politician. And it's free.

Thank their good friend so-and-so in front of a large crowd. It's a predictable staple of Barack Obama's repetitive rhetoric nowadays.

In fact, next to telling his audience to be seated and mentioning himself a few dozen times, uttering an endless list of acknowledgments is how the former Real Good Talker begins most speeches-- mayors, Congress members, principals, a local organizer he never met until two minutes before.

So, it was unusually revealing Tuesday afternoon that an ebullient Obama launched his ObamaCare 'enrollment' victory lap in the White House Rose Garden with not one single acknowledgment. He was not going to share this self-congratulatory moment with anyone.

"Four-score and seven years ago," the Democrat began. No, not really. But he used the same construction. "Six months ago today, a big part of the Affordable Care Act kicked in as healthcare.gov and state insurance marketplaces went live," Obama intoned. (Scroll down for [C-SPAN video](#) of the full remarks.)

Obviously, Obama did not describe exactly how six months ago the healthcare.gov website went live--by dropping dead. But he announced to the properly enthusiastic crowd of staffers that 7.1 million people had enrolled. (Applause)

The photo op was added to Obama's daily schedule only after assurances that his namesake legislative program had reached the goal his Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, had naively set back in September. Imagine how heroic Obama could have appeared now if she'd low-balled estimates by saying they hoped to enroll maybe four million, five max.

Still unrevealed by this most transparent administration in history is what these 7.1 million people have done and who they are: How many have really enrolled by paying? How many were previously uninsured? How many are merely grabbing at ObamaCare because their previous satisfactory plans were canceled?

Obama declared ObamaCare is here to stay, dismissing rising premiums as normal, although he promised they'd decline, and criticism of the law's flaws as the normal mess of democracy. This law, said the president, who's exempt, "is working."

About two-thirds of the way through his 2,200-words Obama apparently had second thoughts about taking all the credit.

He thanked "all the members of Congress who are here today." He thanked "countless Americans who fought tirelessly to pass this law, and who organized like crazy these past few months to help their fellow citizens just get the information they needed."

Then, Obama thanked two -- and only two -- people by name -- ex-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who said we'd have to pass the bill to learn what was in it. And he thanked Dick Durbin, the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate. Strangely, Obama did not thank the Senate's top Democrat, Harry Reid, who runs that place for the moment.

Even more striking, however, Obama did not even mention Sebelius, the face of this long, painful implementation struggle. Not one word, though she was sitting right in front of him.

In his best-seller "The Amateur" (that's what Bill Clinton called Obama in private), Edward Klein describes Obama's legendary lack of gratitude among fellow Democrats and donors back in Chicago, where the president travels today to accept more campaign money.

Sebelius knows how this game of politics can be played. Her father, John Gilligan, was a one-term governor of Ohio, and she was governor of Kansas for six years until Obama plucked her from Topeka to try to run the cumbersome HHS. She's been with him every loyal step of these endless 1,897 days.

Sebelius has absorbed tons of congressional abuse, including Sen. Max Baucus, an ObamaCare architect covering his own caboose, predicting to her face that the healthcare program's roll-out would be "a huge train wreck."

Sebelius has endured mocking and audience laughter on 'The Daily Show.' She took the fall for Obama during the doomed roll-out by professing to a CNN reporter that Obama knew nothing of

the malfunctioning website for days after Oct. 1. Seriously? The cabinet secretary didn't mention to her boss the unfolding disaster that would make him a serial liar?

Sure, she made some gaffes, as all public officials do. With TV cameras rolling at a Florida photo op, Sebelius cheerily asked one ObamaCare navigator what she was doing. The worker's reply: She couldn't anything because the healthcare.gov website had crashed again.

Asked if she was going to resign in those anguishing days early last October, Sebelius told reporters the people she worked for were quite satisfied with her job performance. Later, she apologetically explained that she knew she really works for the American people.

If Washington was the Kremlin, Pyongyang or Chicago, such a glaring public omission of praise for a senior aide by the supreme leader would be a sure sign she was on the way out the door of the office or airplane. We'll soon see.

Meanwhile, Obama unintentionally added a moment of humor to his self-celebration of how easily ObamaCare allegedly reached 7.1 million enrollment: "We didn't make a hard sell."

Al Jazeera

Don't pop the cork for 'Obamacare'

Untangle the administration's enrollment numbers to see how overstated they are

by Shikha Dalmia

Despite the last-minute fiasco of the federal "Obamacare" website's shutting down before the Monday sign-up deadline, Barack Obama's administration is rejoicing that the program met its original [enrollment target of 7 million people](#). "No one expected us to come back from the brink ... but we have," [gushed](#) White House spokesman Jay Carney.

But Americans don't seem to be sharing the administration's enthusiasm: Support for the law hit new lows last week.

So why are Americans enrolling with such a heavy heart? Namely because the Affordable Care Act has created more losers than winners.

President Bill Clinton famously predicted that "Obamacare" would start getting popular the day after it was signed. But an Associated Press/GfK poll last week found that support for the law has dropped 13 percentage points since 2010. Only [26 percent](#) of Americans now say they favor it, compared with 39 percent then. Similarly, a Wall Street Journal/NBC poll a few weeks ago revealed that only [29 percent](#) of independents support the law.

The administration blames this on misleading attacks funded by deep-pocketed conservative groups. The Washington Post's Wonkblog has [accused](#) Republicans of trying to build a "national narrative populated only with wrenching horror stories." But if Americans are buying Republican horror stories over the administration's hype, that's because those comport more with their experience.

“Obamacare” promised to cut the ranks of the uninsured and offer those already covered a better deal while bending the cost curve. Such rosy predictions, however, are not panning out.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected in February that the ACA would slash the nation’s 48 million–strong uninsured population by 13 million. (This was scaled back from its previous projection of 19 million, as The Washington Examiner’s Philip Klein [notes](#).) But the ACA is not close to hitting even that more modest target.

Consider how its three main mechanisms for extending coverage have fared.

First off, the exchanges: The 7 million enrollment figure that the administration is bandying about is misleading. The actual number of uninsured covered by the marketplace will be much smaller. For starters, if the current trend continues, [20 percent](#) of the 7 million will drop out without paying. Out of the remaining 5.6 million, only about half were likely previously uninsured. Why? Because [reliable early surveys](#) found that a whopping 65 to 90 percent of those flocking to the exchange already had insurance. Even assuming that uninsured people were waiting until the end to sign up, it is hard to see how that figure would exceed 50 percent, given that 6 out of 10 uninsured people [surveyed](#) by the Kaiser Family Foundation recently didn’t know about the March 31 deadline and after being told about it, half of them still planned to remain uninsured.

Second, Medicaid. The administration claims that the ACA’s expansion of Medicaid has allowed 4 million to [4.5 million](#) uninsured people to gain coverage. But a substantial portion of that stems from regular Medicaid growth (unrelated to “Obamacare”). In January, Real Clear Politics’ Sean Trende [estimated](#) the number to be closer to 400,000, although he expected that number to improve. And last month, Avalere, a health advisory company, [put](#) the new enrollees due to Obamacare at 2.4 million to 3.5 million. (Some states are [reporting](#) higher rates of uninsured Medicaid enrollment, but it is unclear how representative or reliable they are or how many of these uninsured might have been covered even under the old eligibility criteria.)

Things are not likely to get better next year. The new ‘Obamacare’ sign-ups are so skewed toward the old and the sick that some experts expect premiums to double.

Third, the provision that allows 26-year-olds to stay on their parents’ plans. The administration claims that this provision has extended coverage to 3 million young people. But that assumes that all of them were previously uninsured, almost certainly a false assumption, given that at least some portion of them are college students with university coverage or self-employed with insurance from the individual market.

But even if one accepts this 3 million figure, all of that will add up to significantly fewer uninsured people gaining coverage than the CBO’s 13 million projection.

However, that overstates the ACA’s success in tackling the uninsured if you consider all the people who have lost coverage.

Among the ACA’s first acts was to abolish almost 5 million so-called junk plans in the individual market — plans that didn’t meet its standards. The administration backed off for a year after a massive outcry. But it was too late for most insurance companies to restore them. In addition, many large employers such as Target, Home Depot and Walmart have dumped coverage for tens of thousands of part-time workers.

These insurance refugees constitute at least half the people buying coverage from the “Obamacare” exchanges. But if they don’t qualify for subsidies, they face higher out-of-pocket costs for plans that cover things they don’t need and leave out things they do.

For example, The Los Angeles Times [found](#) last year that middle-income consumers in California face an estimated 30 percent rate increase in their insurance bills “due to several factors tied to the health care law.” Such factors include limitless lifetime coverage and many benefits such as hair prosthetics for cancer patients that many people don’t care about. But what patients do care about — their choice of doctors and hospitals — they can’t get because that would further bump up premiums. (The usually excitable Ann Coulter wrote a sobering account of her difficulty in finding her choice of providers under even the most expensive “Obamacare” plans [here](#).)

Nor are things likely to get better next year. That’s because the mix of the new “Obamacare” sign-ups is so skewed toward the old and the sick that some experts are expecting premiums to [double](#).

So, to recap: “Obamacare” has extended coverage to a far smaller portion of the uninsured than expected, caused millions of others to lose coverage, raised out-of-pocket costs for many middle-income consumers, diminished patient choice of doctors and hospitals and exposed Americans to future premium hikes.

This is why Americans are not popping the cork. Nor should the administration.

Shikha Dalmia is a columnist and a Reason Foundation senior analyst.

NY Times

Costs, Benefits and Masterpieces in Detroit

by Robert H. Frank

Most of the paintings on my walls are by artists I know personally. And although some of these works are hauntingly beautiful, they wouldn’t command much on the open market.

But the prices fetched by famous artists have spiked sharply in recent decades. That is not because their paintings have become any better. Rather, it’s that these works have become trophies in bidding wars among the superrich.

That fact has implications for museum policies in general, and in particular for the valuable collection in the [Detroit Institute of Arts](#). That collection includes canvases by van Gogh, Picasso, Rembrandt, Rivera, Gauguin, Degas and many others. The city of Detroit, which owns many of the paintings, filed for [bankruptcy](#) last year, citing its inability to service its many billions in debt. The presiding judge authorized the city to explore the possibility of selling assets, including those paintings.

Since then, worried creditors have been eyeing those treasures. Christie’s, the auction house, [has estimated](#) that the core of the collection would sell for \$454 million to \$867 million. But those figures cover only a fraction of the museum’s art; [others have put the total](#) value much higher.

Foundations and individual donors have already pledged hundreds of millions to keep the collection off the auction block, but whether they will succeed remains uncertain.

With Detroit's sense of history and civic pride on the line, how much should its boosters be willing to pony up? It's an emotionally charged question, and few people would want the institute's art to leave the city. Yet officials cannot responsibly ignore the costs and the benefits of the choices ahead.

One way to think about the decision is to imagine Detroit as a new municipality about to build a museum stocked and operated at taxpayer expense. Which paintings should it display?

Perhaps the most important principle of economics is that an action should be taken only if its benefit, broadly construed, exceeds its cost. This principle counsels that a painting should be displayed if the resulting gains — primarily, the pleasure that museum visitors take in seeing it, in addition to any indirect benefits, like those for civic pride and tourism — add up to more than the corresponding costs.

Some people say that because it's so hard to put a dollar figure on such benefits, this principle is of little practical use in Detroit. But the benefits must be substantial — how else to explain the extraordinary efforts of private donors to save the collection?



The Wedding Dance," by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, has long been part of the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. One estimate put the painting's value at up to \$200 million.

Fortunately, costs are easier to estimate, and those for displaying a painting derive largely from its market value. Consider [“The Wedding Dance.”](#) a 16th-century work by the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Detroit museum visitors have enjoyed this painting since 1930. How much would it cost to preserve that privilege for future generations?

A tidy sum, as it turns out. According to Christie’s, this canvas alone could fetch up to \$200 million. Once interest rates return to normal levels — say, 6 percent — the forgone interest on that amount would be approximately \$12 million a year.

If we assume that the museum would be open 2,000 hours a year, and ignore the cost of gallery space and other indirect expenses, the cost of keeping the painting on display would be more than \$6,000 an hour. Assuming that an average of five people would view it per hour, all year long, it would still cost more than \$1,200 an hour to provide the experience for each visitor.

Notwithstanding the crudeness of these approximations, we can say that even a very wealthy taxpayer would be reluctant to pay anything close to \$1,200 an hour for the privilege of viewing this painting. And that suggests that most taxpayers think the same money could deliver much greater value if spent in other ways. Of course, the painting might still justify its cost if other indirect benefits were large enough.

Yet the point remains that prices affect the options we face. Relative to famous art, lesser-known works have become much cheaper in recent years, despite no evidence of any decline in their quality. In a rational world, this change would encourage curators to invest more heavily in emerging artists.

Many of these artists produce works that are deeply affecting, yet surprisingly affordable. Talented curators could assemble collections of their art that would delight visitors and draw fulsome praise from critics. And as those works became better known, their value would climb rapidly.

Ownership by public or nonprofit institutions is also not a prerequisite for public exhibition of prized art. The superrich pay so much for these works largely because they are already so famous. Yet being chosen for prominent display in public spaces was how many of these works became famous in the first place. If fewer museums owned them, the rich would have good reason to lend them more often for public display, as indeed many already do, thus preserving and enhancing their value. If sold, many of the institute’s famous works would return as loaners, along with such works from other collections.

If billionaires choose to bid up the prices of trophy art, that’s their privilege. And because most of them will die with large fortunes unspent, they can buy what they want without having to buy less of other things they value. But because money for worthy public purposes is chronically in short supply, city officials and true philanthropists must grapple with agonizing trade-offs.

Yes, communities benefit from famous paintings, but they also benefit from safer roads and better schools.

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You MEAN APRIL 15th WAS A REAL DEADLINE? I ASSUMED IT WAS MORE OF AN "OBAMACARE DEADLINE."

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