

June 23, 2014

Victor Davis Hanson posts on how "War was interested in Obama."

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Barack Obama, however, never quite realized that truth, and so just declared that "the world is less violent than it has ever been." He must have meant less violent in the sense that the bad guys are winning and as they do, the violence wanes — sort of like Europe around March 1941, when all was relatively quiet under the new continental Reich.

One of Obama's talking points in the 2012 campaign included a boast that he had "ended" the war in Iraq by bringing home every U.S. soldier that had been left to ensure the relative quiet and stability after the successful Petraeus surge. In the world of Obama, a war can be declared ended because he said so, given that no Americans were any longer directly involved. (Remind the ghosts of the recently beheaded in now al Qaeda-held Mosul that the war ended there in 2011.)

Iraq is in flames, as is "lead from behind" Libya, as is "red line" Syria, and as are those places where an al Qaeda "on the run" has migrated. Had Obama been commander in chief in 1940, he would have assured us that the wars in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France were "over" — as they were in a sense for those who lost them, but as they were not for those next in line. ...

Charles Krauthammer reminds us of the Iraq this administration inherited from W.

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Which Obama proceeded to throw away. David Petraeus had won the war. Obama's one task was to conclude a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) to solidify the gains. By Obama's own admission — in the case he's now making for a status-of-forces agreement with Afghanistan — such agreements are necessary "because after all the sacrifices we've made, we want to preserve the gains" achieved by war.

Which is what made his failure to do so in Iraq so disastrous. His excuse was his inability to get immunity for U.S. soldiers. Nonsense. Bush had worked out a compromise in his 2008 SOFA, as we have done with allies everywhere. The real problem was Obama's determination to "end the war." He had three years to negotiate a deal and didn't even begin talks until a few months before the deadline period.

He offered to leave about 3,000 to 5,000 troops, a ridiculous number. U.S. commanders said they needed nearly 20,000. (We have 28,500 in South Korea and 38,000 in Japan to this day.) Such a minuscule contingent would spend all its time just protecting itself. Iraqis know a nonserious offer when they see one. ...

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Look, I will stipulate that the president's signature recklessness is abundantly evident in Iraq. He heedlessly withdrew U.S. forces, making no effort to preserve the security gains they achieved in routing al-Qaeda, even as it became obvious that the withdrawal had evaporated those gains and invited the terror network to return with a vengeance.

Still, it was not Obama who agreed to the withdrawal schedule. It was President Bush. And it was not Obama who turned Iraq into an Islamic-supremacist state seething with anti-American and anti-Semitic hatred. Long before Obama came to power, Iraq was an Islamist country, rife with Sunni and Shiite militants who agreed on little else besides their devotion to sharia and their abhorrence of the West.

In late 2008, several weeks before Obama entered the Oval Office, I wrote here about the status of forces agreement (SOFA) the Bush administration was then entering into with the ingrate Shiite government of Nouri al-Maliki. Even then, Iraq was pulling ever closer to the terrorist regime in Iran while American troops continued fighting to protect Maliki's fledgling government from al-Qaeda jihadists — jihadists that the insidious mullahs were also supplying with money, training, and IEDs.

In the SOFA, the Bush administration agreed to strict withdrawal deadlines that invited al-Qaeda to catch its breath, wait out the United States, then resume the jihad as Americans were leaving — the better to make it look to the world like they were chasing us out. ...

*Pickings readers understand when the state wishes to achieve a goal, its efforts will usually result in the exact opposite, because "the government always f**ks up." The Telegraph's Charles Moore says the "peace president is starting to leave a legacy of war."*

... The new American foreign stance was to be chilly towards friends and nicer towards enemies. Out went the bust of Churchill from the Oval Office, and the Obama administration sent no high representative to Lady Thatcher's funeral. Israel and Saudi Arabia, America's most important allies in the Middle East, felt disrespected. There was a sharp contrast between Obama's dropping of his country's old friend Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in the face of the Arab Spring, and Putin's staunch and successful defence of his ally, Bashar al-Assad, in Syria. In Iran, the country where pro-Western feeling is strongest among the population, President Obama did nothing to fertilise the shoots of the "green revolution", and effectively let the Islamist regime develop its nuclear programme unmolested.

And, of course, he did not like anything military. He withdrew from Iraq, leaving it without US troops and without proper intelligence, and began to do the same from Afghanistan. By a paradox that often afflicts leaders who shun military affairs, he ordered quite a number of deaths. He had Osama bin Laden killed and became the master of the drone strike. When he finally came round to the idea of doing something about Assad's chemical weapons, he sought (and failed to get) what one critic in the Congress called "legislative authority for a drive-by shooting".

Mr Obama is not a pacifist. He sees the utility of force in individual tricky situations. It would not be at all surprising if he uses a bit of it soon, in drone or aerial form, in Iraq. What he does not see is its strategic value. He does not grasp, apparently, that the Pax Americana, under whose protection we have lived since 1945, has existed because it has always been backed by the credible threat of force. Weakness is provocative to bad actors, and some of the world's worst have now been provoked. This seems to have come as an almost complete surprise to the Obama White House. The Peace President is starting to leave a legacy of war. ...

These days it is pretty rare when the New Yorker gets it right, so the article by [Dexter Filkins](#) referred to here last week gets another look, this time from [Peter Wehner](#). The Filkins piece is 11,000 words, so too long for Pickings. But, the you can follow the above link if you wish. Wehner ends like this;

.. To sum up, then: post-surge, Iraq was making significant progress on virtually every front. The Obama administration said as much. The president was not engaged or eager to sign a new SOFA. A full withdrawal was the right decision. His own top advisers admitted as much. The president had long argued he wanted all American troops out of Iraq during his presidency, and he got his wish. He met his goal.

The problem is that in getting what he wanted, Mr. Obama may well have opened the gates of hell in the Middle East.

Here's [Roger Cohen](#) of the heretofore administration-friendly NY Times.

... Force in the absence of a sustained political and diplomatic strategy leads nowhere. This has been Obama's failure in Afghanistan, where the United States never invested much capital in a diplomatic solution involving negotiation with the Taliban; and in Iraq, where the president allowed American forces to withdraw without leveraging the massive U.S. investment there into ensuring that the sectarian Shiite government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki reached out to the Sunnis and Kurds.

Maliki is a Nixonian figure who sees enemies everywhere, especially among Sunnis. Like Nixon, he was elected democratically. But Obama should never have allowed Maliki to indulge his worst, petulant instincts. Now it is too late. Asking him to be inclusive won't convince a single Sunni from Mosul to Riyadh. The exercise is as pointless as asking Assad to be a democrat. It smacks of an earnest naïveté. Progress in Iraq and Syria hinges on moving beyond Maliki and Assad. ...

Harmless as an enemy and treacherous as a friend; that's what our country has become. Now the US government has turned on Maliki and wants him to leave Iraq. [Andrew Malcolm](#) writes on that and reminds what we did in Vietnam to the Diem Bros. *... If he knows what's good for him and a little history about America's deadly diplomacy when frustrated, Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, might want to change his behavior toward Sunnis rather quickly.*

And not just because the barbaric ISIL rebels are bearing down on Baghdad from the north, leaving beheadings and mass graves along the trail.

From Maliki's autocratic viewpoint, he's been quite rational. Obama proved untrustworthy with his sly maneuvers to exit Iraq quickly, making the lack of a residual U.S. troop presence appear Maliki's fault. So, the Iraqi leader instinctively surrounded himself with loyal fellow Shiites.

Last winter when Maliki sought U.S. help against advancing radical Islamists, Obama ignored him, focusing instead on his Afghan exit. So, Maliki is sidling up to Iran next door.

Obama is batting .666 ousting governments he dislikes. The Nobel Peace Prize winner was successful when he announced Libya's Gaddafi had to go. With allied help, Obama forced him to run where an angry mob could spot him and save court costs. Obama also said Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had to go, when he was no longer useful. ...

Pajamas Media - Works and Days

War Was Interested in Obama

by Victor Davis Hanson



Leon Trotsky probably did not quite write the legendary aphorism that “you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” But whoever did, you get the point that no nation can always pick and choose when it wishes to be left alone.

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One of Obama's talking points in the 2012 campaign included a boast that he had "ended" the war in Iraq by bringing home every U.S. soldier that had been left to ensure the relative quiet and stability after the successful Petraeus surge. In the world of Obama, a war can be declared ended because he said so, given that no Americans were any longer directly involved. (Remind the ghosts of the recently beheaded in now al Qaeda-held Mosul that the war ended there in 2011.)

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Of course, the Maliki government [owns most of the blame](#) for the spreading destruction of Iraq. Its retrograde exclusion of Sunnis from meaningful government helped to offer a fertile landscape to a resurgent al Qaeda. Now in extremis he seeks U.S. help. But Maliki's pathetic past chauvinistic posturing over the status of forces agreement made it easy for Obama to pull out. (Hint to former U.S. clients: never horse-trade with Barack Obama over a needed U.S. military presence by threatening to eject all Americans; he will gladly call your bluff and leave every time.)

What, then, happened to [Joe Biden's boast](#) that Iraq "could be one of the great achievements of this administration"? Biden said this after the successful Bush-Petraeus surge (that he had opposed and [declared a failure](#)) had ensured a relatively quiet country when Obama assumed office.

We know the predictable Obama script for Afghanistan. He "ended" that conflict too, or at least he will have by 2016. His habit in that accordion war was to contextualize every surge, escalation, or new operation in Afghanistan by promising a date when we would leave or deescalate. Behind the recent quietude in drone missions and the Bergdahl swap, we see Obama at work "ending" the war in the following actions: We talk with the Taliban; we deliver to them their bloodiest cutthroats (captured at a cost in American blood and treasure); and we wink that we will not be so offensive-minded as in the past.

In exchange, the Taliban promise to behave and dial down their barbarism until we "end" the war and are gone. Then, like Saigon in 1975, all hell breaks loose and the executions begin. How odd: we went into a chaotic Libya to stop the killing and were about to go into bloody Syria to stop the killing — and left a quiet Iraq to ensure it.

So older Americans who remember 1975 will recognize the outlines of the looming Afghan tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of refugees will head out of the country. Millions camped on hillsides will want to reach the U.S. Afghanistan has no seacoast, so we will not be able to call the escapees "boat people." Ending two wars will mean that our allies would lose both and eventual enemy satiation with defeat and mass-scale murdering would ensure closure.

Remember Libya? War was interested in Obama as well in Libya. ["Leading from behind"](#) did not mean that we were not at war or that we did not in the off hours bomb the Gaddafites or violate the UN resolutions by going well beyond "humanitarian aid" and a "no-fly zone." Islamic chaos followed and continues. Whatever we were doing in Benghazi, it was supposedly not war. Yet al Qaeda not only butchered our diplomatic personnel, but also used their cell phones to boast of the fact. So we jailed a video maker and thus that war too was brought to a close.

War was [sort of interested in Obama](#) in Syria. But he ended that conflict when he promised to bomb Bashar Assad's gassers, and then not so much.

The looming crisis with a soon-to-be-nuclear Iran is over too. We dropped tough sanctions, agreed to talk while centrifuges spun, and more or less took off the table any thought of military preemption. The result was Obama ended the tensions, and will leave it to others to deal with a theocratic bomb.

Perhaps war in the South China Sea is interested in Obama, given that he most certainly is not interested in it. But trying to negotiate down U.S. nuclear strategic strength with Vladimir Putin (who does not, as we do, have clients who could easily become nuclear but choose not to because of U.S. strategic guarantees) and lecturing China enough to antagonize it without much else have all our friends worried. Either we redouble our efforts to assure Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia of our unshakeable resolve to protect them, or they will either eventually go nuclear or make the necessary arrangements with an ascendant China.

Resetting Russia was a euphemism for dismantling what meager punishments we had imposed on Putin for invading Georgia. Consequently, reset ended whatever conflict we had with Vladimir Putin. And because the Crimea and Ukraine are “far off distant places” — as are the Baltic states — Obama has assured us that those conflicts are now over as well.

The war on terror?

Obama ended that as well. He fought the first battles with the powerful weapon of euphemism. Terror ended when we simply renamed it “workplace violence” or “man caused disasters” involving “overseas contingency operations.” The Islamic component vanished as well, when NASA announced a new effort [to reassure Muslims](#) that we recognized their illustrious scientific past, when James Clapper rebranded the Muslim Brotherhood as largely secular, and when John Brennan assured us that jihad was almost anything other than the use of violence to further the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

Obama won the second phase of the war on terror by shrugging that stuff happens in the Middle East. It sure does. And now that war is winding down there too, as al Qaeda annexes petro-cities, loots banks, and dismantles nation states. (Obama made health care work when he pronounced the Affordable Care Act successful, solved the IRS scandal when he declared it without a “smidgeon” of scandal, fixed the VA mess by expressing his outrage, and ended the problem with the Bergdahl swap by characterizing it as another Washington drama of much to do about nothing.)

As far as war and peace go, closure for Obama is when the United States is surrounded by war and confronted with looming conflicts, and yet has ended them all by declaring that we choose not to be interested in any of them. Obama is right about one thing: losing [is certainly a way](#) of reducing the violence.

Washington Post
[Abdication has a price](#)
by Charles Krauthammer

Yes, it is true that there was no al-Qaeda in Iraq when George W. Bush took office. But it is equally true that there was essentially no al-Qaeda in Iraq remaining when Barack Obama took office.

Which makes Bush responsible for the terrible costs incurred to defeat the 2003-09 jihadist war engendered by his invasion. We can debate forever whether those costs were worth it, but what is

not debatable is Obama's responsibility for the return of the Islamist insurgency that had been routed by the time he became president.

By 2009, al-Qaeda in Iraq had not just been decimated but humiliated by the U.S. surge and the [Anbar Awakening](#). Here were aggrieved Sunnis, having ferociously fought the Americans who had overthrown 80 years of Sunni hegemony, now reversing allegiance and joining the infidel invader in crushing, indeed extirpating from Iraq, their fellow Sunnis of al-Qaeda.

At the same time, [Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki](#) turned the Iraqi army against radical Shiite militias from Basra all the way north to Baghdad.

The result? "A sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq." That's not Bush congratulating himself. That's [Obama in December 2011 describing the Iraq](#) we were leaving behind. He called it "an extraordinary achievement."

Which Obama proceeded to throw away. David Petraeus had won the war. Obama's one task was to conclude a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) to solidify the gains. By Obama's own admission — in [the case he's now making](#) for a status-of-forces agreement with Afghanistan — such agreements are necessary "because after all the sacrifices we've made, we want to preserve the gains" achieved by war.

Which is what made his failure to do so in Iraq so disastrous. His excuse was his inability to get immunity for U.S. soldiers. Nonsense. Bush had worked out a compromise in his 2008 SOFA, as we have done with allies everywhere. The real problem was Obama's determination to "end the war." He had three years to negotiate a deal and didn't even begin talks until a few months before the deadline period.

He offered to leave about 3,000 to 5,000 troops, a ridiculous number. U.S. commanders said they needed nearly 20,000. (We have [28,500 in South Korea](#) and [38,000 in Japan](#) to this day.) Such a minuscule contingent would spend all its time just protecting itself. Iraqis know a nonserious offer when they see one. Why bear the domestic political liability of a continued U.S. presence for a mere token?

Moreover, as [historian Max Boot has pointed out](#), Obama insisted on parliamentary ratification, which the Iraqis explained was not just impossible but unnecessary. So Obama ordered a full withdrawal. And with it disappeared U.S. influence in curbing sectarianism, mediating among factions and providing both intelligence and tactical advice to Iraqi forces now operating on their own.

The result was predictable. And predicted. Overnight, Iran and its promotion of Shiite supremacy became the dominant influence in Iraq. The day after the U.S. departure, [Maliki ordered the arrest of the Sunni vice president](#). He cut off funding for the Sons of Iraq, the Sunnis who had fought with us against al-Qaeda. And subsequently so persecuted and alienated Sunnis that they were ready to welcome back al-Qaeda in Iraq — rebranded in its Syrian refuge as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria — as the lesser of two evils. Hence the stunningly swift ISIS capture of Mosul, Tikrit and so much of Sunni Iraq.

But the jihadist revival is the result of a double Obama abdication: creating a vacuum not just in Iraq but in Syria. Obama dithered and speechified during the early days of the Syrian revolution, before the jihadists had arrived, when the secular revolt was systematically advancing on the Damascus regime.

Hezbollah, Iran and Russia helped the regime survive. Meanwhile, a jihadist enclave (including remnants of the once-routed al-Qaeda in Iraq) developed in large swaths of northern and eastern Syria. They thrived on massive outside support while the secular revolutionaries foundered waiting vainly for U.S. help.

Faced with a de facto jihadi state spanning both countries, a surprised Obama now has little choice but to try to re-create overnight, from scratch and in miniature, the kind of U.S. presence — providing intelligence, tactical advice and perhaps even air support — he abjured three years ago

His announcement Thursday that he is sending [300 military advisers](#) is the beginning of that re-creation — a pale substitute for what we long should have had in place but the only option Obama has left himself. The leverage and influence he forfeited with his total withdrawal will be hard to reclaim. But it's our only chance to keep Iraq out of the hands of the Sunni jihadists of ISIS and the Shiite jihadists of Tehran

National Review

[Don't Blame Iraq on Obama Alone](#)

Some Republicans are indulging in revisionist history.

by Andrew McCarthy

I've just written *Faithless Execution*, a book positing that there is such a solid legal case of high crimes and misdemeanors committed by the president that the time is ripe to build a political case for his impeachment. I have argued, moreover, that the president's policy of appeasing and empowering Islamic supremacists has been a national-security catastrophe, catalyzing a jihadist resurgence across the Middle East.

It is pretty safe to say I am no fan of Barack Obama's. But it is just as safe to say that for Beltway Republicans to blame Obama alone for the implosion of Iraq — which is now being overrun by the same Sunni jihadists those Republicans have championed in Syria and Libya — is shameful.

Look, I will stipulate that the president's signature recklessness is abundantly evident in Iraq. He heedlessly withdrew U.S. forces, making no effort to preserve the security gains they achieved in routing al-Qaeda, even as it became obvious that the withdrawal had evaporated those gains and invited the terror network to return with a vengeance.

Still, it was not Obama who agreed to the withdrawal schedule. It was President Bush. And it was not Obama who turned Iraq into an Islamic-supremacist state seething with anti-American and anti-Semitic hatred. Long before Obama came to power, Iraq was an Islamist country, rife with Sunni and Shiite militants who agreed on little else besides their devotion to sharia and their abhorrence of the West.

In late 2008, several weeks before Obama entered the Oval Office, I wrote [here](#) about the status of forces agreement (SOFA) the Bush administration was then entering into with the ingrate Shiite government of Nouri al-Maliki. Even then, Iraq was pulling ever closer to the terrorist regime in Iran while American troops continued fighting to protect Maliki's fledgling government from al-Qaeda jihadists — jihadists that the insidious mullahs were also supplying with money, training, and IEDs.

In the SOFA, the Bush administration agreed to strict withdrawal deadlines that invited al-Qaeda to catch its breath, wait out the United States, then resume the jihad as Americans were leaving —

the better to make it look to the world like they were chasing us out. All American combat operations were to cease in mid 2009; and, at the end of 2011, all American forces would pull out of Iraq. The 2008 SOFA is the basis for the American withdrawal that Obama so anxiously consummated. It is what promised a resumption of Islam's eternal, internecine bloodletting between Sunnis and Shiites that now has Iraq on the verge of collapse.

To listen to Republicans and those who foolishly repeat their revisionist history, you would think Obama inherited the Iraq so delusionally envisioned by Islamic-democracy-project devotees: a free, pluralistic democracy that would be a reliable counterterrorism ally and a thorn in totalitarian Iran's side.

In reality, Iraq remains an incorrigible sharia society in which the persecution of religious minorities and homosexuals is routine. Far from democratizing the country in any cultural sense, Bush officials fortified these tendencies by encouraging Iraq's adoption of a constitution that enshrined Islam as the state religion and sharia as a primary source of law. Under American occupation, Iraq continued to shun diplomatic relations with Israel and to cheer the "resistance" waged by Hamas and Hezbollah. It sought closer ties with Tehran, a desire the Bush administration indulged on the fantasy rationale that Iran had a strong interest in a stable Iraq — even as everyone knew Iran was fueling anti-American terrorism in Iraq by both Shiite and Sunni jihadist cells.

Why did President Bush agree to the SOFA on his way out of office (under the pressure of a December 31, 2008, expiration of the U.N. mandate approving U.S. military operations there)? Because it was the best deal he could get in an Islamist country that despises America.

Beginning in 2003, fatwas calling for violent jihad against American forces in Iraq were issued by influential sharia jurists, including Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi and Sheikh Abdulla bin Bayyah (who are now Obama administration consultants). Because our government eschews the study of Islamic-supremacist ideology, most Americans remain unaware that these fatwas represented a mainstream interpretation of sharia in the Muslim Middle East: If Western forces occupy Islamic territory, and especially if they are peddling concepts like Western democracy, they must be driven out — even if, in their own minds, they are do-gooders trying to make life better for Muslims.

The Iraqi mindset was obvious in public polling: In 2008, four in ten Iraqis continued to see Americans as legitimate terror targets — and the figure had recently hovered close to six in ten. Fully 80 percent of Iraqis said they wanted Americans to vacate their country. In the one vestige of Iraqi democracy about which the Bush administration could brag, the nation's holding of popular elections, candidates competed with each other over who could most strenuously condemn the United States and demand that our troops leave yesterday.

It is certainly understandable that after thousands of lost lives and hundreds of billions of wasted dollars, veterans of the war in Iraq are incensed to see the triumphant march of an al-Qaeda offshoot — the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (greater Syria or "the Levant") — through cities they once heroically wrested from terrorist control. After all the American sacrifice, it is infuriating to watch jihadists triumph while Obama idles.

But is it fair to blame these developments on our overmatched commander-in-chief?

Many of us on the right supported the toppling of Saddam Hussein. He was a terror supporter. In those post-9/11 days, there was reason to believe our government was serious about dealing with terror-supporting regimes as if they were terrorists. If Saddam was the next domino to fall after the Taliban, all to the good — it didn't seem like he'd be the last.

But then the Bush doctrine morphed from a crackdown on the jihad into a reimagining of the Middle East. When democracy predictably didn't take, the dreamers decided to define democracy down rather than admit failure. "Democracy" somehow became fully compatible with repressive sharia, and we fantasized that anti-Western Islamic supremacists were democratic allies and that Iran would play a constructive regional role.

It was absurd. Yet it was the unquestioned premise for concluding, in 2008, that a sharia state gravitating ever further into Iran's orbit — an Iraqi state that was dependent on the loyalty of Shiite militias and was already in a simmering conflict with its restive Sunni minority — could be trusted in the imminent draw-down, then complete absence, of American troops to preserve the security gains hard won by American bravery and know-how.

Our troops did astonishing work given the severe limitations placed on them. It was not within their capabilities, though, to democratize Iraq — not unless we were willing to occupy that country for generations with a firm purpose to stamp out its sharia culture. And while our troops demolished al-Qaeda in Iraq, it was not within their capabilities to conclusively defeat a global enemy by demolishing it in one country.

In 2008, we announced we were leaving and provided a timeline for our departure under circumstances where a new American president, bitterly opposed to the war in Iraq, was about to assume power. From that point on, al-Qaeda's return was inevitable.

Has President Obama been a disaster in Iraq — as in every other place? Sure he has. The security situation in Iraq steadily deteriorated as American forces departed. Maliki was sufficiently desperate that he'd surely have renegotiated the SOFA if Obama had been interested in preserving what our troops had fought for. Obama, however, is all about Obama: He wanted to run for reelection as the president who "ended" the war in Iraq, just as he is now legacy-chasing to be the president who "ended" the war in Afghanistan — even if "ending" really means al-Qaeda and its allies win.

Let's not pretend, though, that America's Middle East mess is strictly an Obama production. Today, a Sunni jihadist in Iraq might be killed by an American drone in support, incredibly, of the Iranian military intervention to prop up Iraq's Shiite government. But if that same Sunni jihadist instead crosses the border into Syria, he will be given American-supplied weapons to fight against the Iranian military intervention that props up Syria's Shiite government.

That kind of insanity does not happen overnight. It happens after more than 20 years of willful blindness to the ideology of our enemies, and more than 20 years without a strategic vision of the global jihadist challenge.

Telegraph, UK

[Barack Obama's self-regarding goodness is bad news for the rest of us](#)

The would-be Peace President, by failing to grasp strategy, will leave a legacy of war

by Charles Moore

People blame the new horrors in Iraq on the American-led invasion in 2003. But the exact reason why the country is in civil war today is because the Americans are not there. If US troops were still present, the fanatical ISIS, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", would not have swept through the north of the country and now be threatening Baghdad.

The US constitution forbids the President to have more than two terms in office. This may be a valuable restraint on power, but it also means that any two-term president stops governing quite soon after his re-election. Instead he tries to secure his “legacy”. The more he thinks about this, the more it trickles away.

Barack Obama had a legacy earlier than any other American president. He was the first black president before he was even inaugurated. Very shortly after that, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. From the start, he was supposed to go down in history as “the Peace President”. This has all turned into a tremendous disadvantage.

Mr Obama was right about the need to change tone after the presidency of George W Bush. Some of the fierce antagonisms of the Bush era dissolved in his rhetoric. Europeans, in particular, felt what it said on the poster – “Hope”. But in the Muslim world, the people who were bitterly anti-American for reasons way beyond the invasion of Iraq were not converted or even appeased. Nor did anti-Western wolves like Vladimir Putin want to lie down with the new American lamb. They watched and waited to see what Mr Obama would do.

He made lots of speeches, mostly good ones, but each slightly less interesting than the last. He held out the hand of friendship, but many people refused to take it and it began to hang a bit limp. America had no quarrel with Islam, he told audiences in Cairo and Istanbul, but this had no effect on those extreme Muslims who believe that Islam itself is, and always will be, a quarrel with the West.

The new American foreign stance was to be chilly towards friends and nicer towards enemies. Out went the bust of Churchill from the Oval Office, and the Obama administration sent no high representative to Lady Thatcher’s funeral. Israel and Saudi Arabia, America’s most important allies in the Middle East, felt disrespected. There was a sharp contrast between Obama’s dropping of his country’s old friend Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in the face of the Arab Spring, and Putin’s staunch and successful defence of his ally, Bashar al-Assad, in Syria. In Iran, the country where pro-Western feeling is strongest among the population, President Obama did nothing to fertilise the shoots of the “green revolution”, and effectively let the Islamist regime develop its nuclear programme unmolested.

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In the case of Ukraine, the White House seemed to accept the false analysis that the place is a “failed state”, riven by ethnic divisions, although far-Right racist parties in its recent elections got far smaller percentages than they did in the Euro-elections in Greece or Hungary. And the great majority of those polled say they want to stay in Ukraine. America is not doing enough to shore up

the country whose independence it accomplished. Putin's changing of national boundaries by the threat of force (as happened in Crimea) and his attempts to incite civil war in eastern Ukraine are a serious attack on the agreed post-Cold War order of Europe. Yet Obama's strongly worded protests have not produced much action. One can almost sympathise with Mr Putin when he exclaimed: "I won't take any more calls from that man."

In the case of Iraq, so great has been the White House preoccupation with not being Bush-like that it has no other policy. Colin Powell, the former US Secretary of State, famously invoked the "Pottery Barn rule" – "You break it, you own it". Mr Obama thought that he did not break it himself (which was true), and drew the mistaken conclusion that therefore he did not own it. He did own it, simply because he is President of the United States. When he disowned it, in 2011, he ensured that it would break once more. No doubt his administration is right in all the hard things it lays at the door of the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. But that is no self-exculpation. America left the country to him, declaring it stable. Yesterday, Mr Obama described the current situation as a "regional problem", which wrongly implies that it's not much to do with him.

It could be that Mr Obama truly believes that American power can no longer be sustained in the world, though this is not what he says. It could even be that he is right. Certainly China is rising and the US is not, and he is wise to "pivot" to Asia with this in mind. But he does not have a scheme of orderly withdrawal from global responsibilities, or of better burden-sharing. Rather than reshaping existing institutions such as Nato for new circumstances, he tends to let them decay.

One suspects that his mental model for political change in the world comes from the Civil Rights movement in the United States. In that history (or, at least, the myth of that history), peaceful moral suasion by the oppressed acted upon the consciences of the powerful. This is an important story for a great, free, self-improving country like America. But it is a fat lot of good as the basis of foreign policy. Indeed a fat lot of Mr Obama's rather self-regarding goodness is a problem for the rest of us.

All my life, many people, by no means all of them on the Left, have complained about the extent of American power. They have seen it as bungling, bullying, crude, even oppressive. Sometimes, particularly in regard to the Middle East, they have been right. Europhiles have sought to counter American power by building up the EU's strength. Nationalists have sought to expel it and be "ourselves alone". But they have said these things and made these gestures in the knowledge that US power has been real. Will they be pleased if what they thought they wished for is actually happening? It feels as if the world is in for a more dangerous time than any since the Carter/Brezhnev era of the late Seventies – or worse, because more unpredictable.

Alert readers who have got this far will notice that I have not mentioned Britain's role in all these unsettling changes. This is because we have barely got one.

Contentions

What Kind of Iraq Did Obama Inherit?

by Peter Wehner

A very intense debate has broken out about who, from the American side of things, is responsible for the unfolding disaster in Iraq: President Obama or his immediate predecessor. That argument is less important than salvaging the current situation, which is ominous, but it's not unimportant. The historical record matters.

A fair-minded reading of the facts, I think, shows that when Mr. Obama was sworn in, the Iraq war had more or less been won. Things were fragile to be sure. But the errors that were made during the occupation of Iraq following the fall of Saddam, which were extremely costly, were corrected in 2007. That was when President Bush made what is in my estimation his most impressive decision. In the face of enormous political opposition, with the nation weary of the war, Mr. Bush implemented a new counterinsurgency strategy, dubbed the “surge” and led by the estimable General David Petraeus. It resulted in startling gains.

By the time the surge ended in 2008, violence in Iraq had dropped to the lowest level since the first year of the war. Sectarian killings had dropped by 95 percent. By 2009, U.S. combat deaths were extremely rare. (In December of that year there were no American combat deaths in Iraq.) Iraq was on the mend. Even Barack Obama, who opposed the surge every step of the way, [conceded in September 2008](#) that it had succeeded in reducing violence “beyond our wildest dreams.”

As importantly, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, himself Shia, was leading efforts against Shia extremists (including routing Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army in April 2008). Political progress was being made, with Sunnis willing to join the national government. In addition, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had been dealt a devastating defeat, in good part because of the “Anbar Awakening.” This was significant because Iraq is where al-Qaeda decided to make its stand; its defeat there was therefore quite damaging to it.

If you want to understand how good things were in Iraq post-surge, consider what Vice President Joe Biden [told Larry King on February 11, 2010](#):

I am very optimistic about Iraq. I think it's going to be one of the great achievements of this administration. You're going to see 90,000 American troops come marching home by the end of the summer. You're going to see a stable government in Iraq that is actually moving toward a representative government. I've been there 17 times now. I go about every two months, three months. I know every one of the major players in all the segments of that society. It's impressed me. I've been impressed, how they have been deciding to use the political process, rather than guns, to settle their differences.

So by the admission of the top figures in the Obama administration, they were quite pleased and very optimistic about the situation in Iraq. And no wonder: Iraq was a functioning (if fragile) democracy and an American ally (if a difficult one) in the Middle East. At least it was until President Obama failed in 2011 to get a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) agreement, which set into motion a series of events that have led to where we are.

Defenders of Mr. Obama are now insisting that the president is fault-free when it comes to the SOFA failure. But this is an effort at revisionism. On the matter of the SOFA, [this story](#) by the *New Yorker's* Dexter Filkins makes it clear that (a) the Maliki government (which is certainly problematic) wanted to maintain a U.S. presence in Iraq; (b) it would have made a significant difference in keeping Iraq pacified; and (c) the Obama administration was not serious about re-negotiating a SOFA agreement. In the words of Mr. Filkins:

President Obama, too, was ambivalent about retaining even a small force in Iraq. For several months, American officials told me, they were unable to answer basic questions in meetings with Iraqis—like how many troops they wanted to leave behind—because the Administration had not decided. “We got no guidance from the White House,” [James Jeffrey, the American Ambassador to Iraq at the time] told me. “We didn’t know where the President was. Maliki kept saying, ‘I don’t know what I have to sell.’ ” At one meeting, Maliki said that he was willing to sign an executive agreement granting the soldiers permission to stay, if he didn’t have to persuade the parliament to

accept immunity. The Obama Administration quickly rejected the idea. “The American attitude was: Let’s get out of here as quickly as possible,” Sami al-Askari, the Iraqi member of parliament, said.

And then there’s this:

Ben Rhodes, the U.S. deputy national-security adviser, told me that Obama believes a full withdrawal was the right decision. “There is a risk of overstating the difference that American troops could make in the internal politics of Iraq,” he said. “Having troops there did not allow us to dictate sectarian alliances. Iraqis are going to respond to their own political imperatives.” But U.S. diplomats and commanders argue that they played a crucial role, acting as interlocutors among the factions—and curtailing Maliki’s sectarian tendencies. [emphasis added]

To sum up, then: post-surge, Iraq was making significant progress on virtually every front. The Obama administration said as much. The president was not engaged or eager to sign a new SOFA. A full withdrawal was the right decision. His own top advisers admitted as much. The president had long argued he wanted all American troops out of Iraq during his presidency, and he got his wish. He met his goal.

The problem is that in getting what he wanted, Mr. Obama may well have opened the gates of hell in the Middle East.

NY Times

The Diplomacy of Force

by Roger Cohen

OSLO — If there is one rule of international affairs that the Obama administration has forgotten or never learned, it is that mediated settlements reflect power balances. The principal way such balances are changed is through force.

This is not a popular thing to say in a peacenik moment, when the aversion to the use of military action in the United States is running high after the failure of the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But as the disasters in Syria and Iraq (now an undifferentiated, jihadi-infested “Syraq theater”) illustrate, plenty of people can die when force is abjured and the place of military action in diplomacy is forgotten.

“I’d say it’s an iron law that mediation reflects power balances,” said David Harland, a specialist in armed conflict resolution who heads the Geneva-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue.

I got to know Harland in Bosnia a couple of decades ago. For more than three years, as with Syria today, world leaders threw up their hands while the war festered. Then, through a brief burst of NATO bombing, the power balance between the long-dominant Serbs on one side, and the Bosnian and Croat armies on the other, was changed. That shift laid the foundation for peace.

Dictators from Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia to Bashar al-Assad in Syria don’t sue for peace on a whim. They do so because their options have narrowed. They do so because a kernel of fear has begun to twist in their gut. There was a moment in the Syrian conflict when decisive military aid to the opposition could have changed Assad’s calculation. President Obama mouthed vague promises of arms and allowed Assad to regroup. The Syrian disaster, with its more than 150,000 dead, demonstrates why “Don’t do stupid stuff” does not cut it as a United States foreign policy.

Four years after the Bosnia bombing, a further NATO intervention in Kosovo changed the balance of forces there and led to Milosevic's fall. Fifteen years later, there has been successful mediation of the long-festering Serbia-Kosovo conflict

The point, of course, is not to use force for its own sake. War is a terrible thing, as the 100th anniversary next week of the outbreak of World War I reminds everybody. But diplomacy unbacked by any credible threat of force or attempt to change the balance of power is vain.

The converse is also true: Force in the absence of a sustained political and diplomatic strategy leads nowhere. This has been Obama's failure in Afghanistan, where the United States never invested much capital in a diplomatic solution involving negotiation with the Taliban; and in Iraq, where the president allowed American forces to withdraw without leveraging the massive U.S. investment there into ensuring that the sectarian Shiite government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki reached out to the Sunnis and Kurds.

Maliki is a Nixonian figure who sees enemies everywhere, especially among Sunnis. Like Nixon, he was elected democratically. But Obama should never have allowed Maliki to indulge his worst, petulant instincts. Now it is too late. Asking him to be inclusive won't convince a single Sunni from Mosul to Riyadh. The exercise is as pointless as asking Assad to be a democrat. It smacks of an earnest naïveté. Progress in Iraq and Syria hinges on moving beyond Maliki and Assad.

Perhaps it is a coincidence that all this has occurred at a moment when the credibility of American power has eroded significantly. Perhaps, but I don't think so. Obama's retreat from his Syrian red line was a signal moment noted around the world. It was a mistake. Very few people now believe this president is ready to be tough enough when needed.

In his recent West Point commencement speech, Obama said: "U.S. military action cannot be the only, or even primary, component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail." This is true. It also missed the point. Force can be, sometimes must be, an essential component of persuasive American diplomacy advancing the national interest.

Obama also said: "The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it: when our people are threatened; when our livelihoods are at stake; when the security of our allies is in danger." The advance of the ISIS jihadis in Iraq meets this test; the United States cannot accept a jihadi state within a state closer to Europe and itself than Afghanistan was in 2001.

Will the president back his words with deeds in this instance? He should.

IBD

Beware of history, Washington has decided Iraq's Maliki must go

by Andrew Malcolm



South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem BEFORE

California's Dianne Feinstein is chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, an oxymoron in many minds.

But she knows a lot of classified stuff, including what the Obama administration thinks about the bloody political and military mess American inattention has helped create in Iraq.

On Wednesday she was talking on Capitol Hill about the Iraqi crisis, the hundreds dying brutally and the paralyzing pickle Obama finds himself in deciding what, if anything, to do to avoid the United States' military sacrifices and success being flushed down the drain.

And setting an ominous precedent for the unfolding Afghanistan withdrawal that Obama has portrayed so rosily.

Feinstein said: "The Maliki government, candidly, has got to go if you want any reconciliation."

If he knows what's good for him and a little history about America's deadly diplomacy when frustrated, Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, might want to change his behavior toward Sunnis rather quickly.

And not just because the barbaric ISIL rebels are bearing down on Baghdad from the north, leaving beheadings and mass graves along the trail.

From Maliki's autocratic viewpoint, he's been quite rational. Obama proved untrustworthy with his sly maneuvers to exit Iraq quickly, making the lack of a residual U.S. troop presence appear Maliki's fault. So, the Iraqi leader instinctively surrounded himself with loyal fellow Shiites.

Last winter when Maliki sought U.S. help against advancing radical Islamists, Obama ignored him, focusing instead on his Afghan exit. So, Maliki is sidling up to Iran next door.

Obama is batting .666 ousting governments he dislikes. The Nobel Peace Prize winner was successful when he announced Libya's Gaddafi had to go. With allied help, Obama forced him to run where an angry mob could spot him and save court costs. Obama also said Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had to go, when he was no longer useful.

But then Obama declared that President Bashir al-Assad had to go for his brutal treatment of fellow Syrians. But Assad's got Russia's Putin on his side and Putin's got Obama cowed. So, Assad's still got the palace.

Now, it's Maliki who's seen as Obama's living obstacle to imposing the phony national unity that Britain envisioned after World War I when it drew up the region's artificial national boundaries oblivious to religious, ethnic and tribal loyalties that have ruled there for centuries.

Here's an instructive related story about Southeast Asia, another region with deep colonial history and American meddling. In 1963, Maliki had just become a teenager in Iraq. Little Barry Soetoro was learning to eat dog in a Jakarta Muslim household. And President John F. Kennedy was confidently striding into the military morass that would become the Vietnam War.



South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem AFTER

See if any of this sounds familiar: South Vietnam's president was an autocrat, Ngo Dinh Diem, who ran the army and corrupt country with a close circle of loyalists including his brother as secret service chief.

As the only leader around to fight communism, Diem was supported by the U.S., which sent supplies and thousands of military advisers to train soldiers against insurgents infiltrating from the north.

Diem was Catholic. Contrary to American advice, he packed the government and army with loyal Catholics, not unlike Chicago Democrats actually. Or Maliki with his Shia brethren packing Iraq's government and officer corps.

South Vietnam's Buddhists felt discriminated against. They began agitating. Diem cracked down, shooting demonstrators. Some monks even killed themselves in fiery protests to attract TV cameras.

As American Democrats, the Kennedy administration felt South Vietnam would be stronger against communism with more religious and ethnic diversity and inclusiveness. Diem didn't.

Already, Kennedy had been unsuccessful with an armed overthrow of Cuba's Fidel Castro, using a CIA-trained invasion by exiles at the Bay of Pigs. The autumn of 1963 arrived with a presidential reelection bid only 14 months away. Kennedy asked the same question as King Henry II: Will no one rid me of this troublesome problem?

Somehow, a tight circle of Vietnamese army generals got the idea that Diem must go. They also got the impression that if a coup ousted the Diem brothers, Americans wouldn't seriously object. And military support would continue, as long as (*wink, wink*) the Diems were delivered to Saigon's airport for flight into exile.

The coup occurred Nov. 2. From a hiding place, terrified Diems phoned U.S. Amb. Henry Cabot Lodge for help. He promised safe exit. Soon after, the generals somehow discovered the hiding place, arrested the brothers and put them, bound, in an armored personnel carrier.

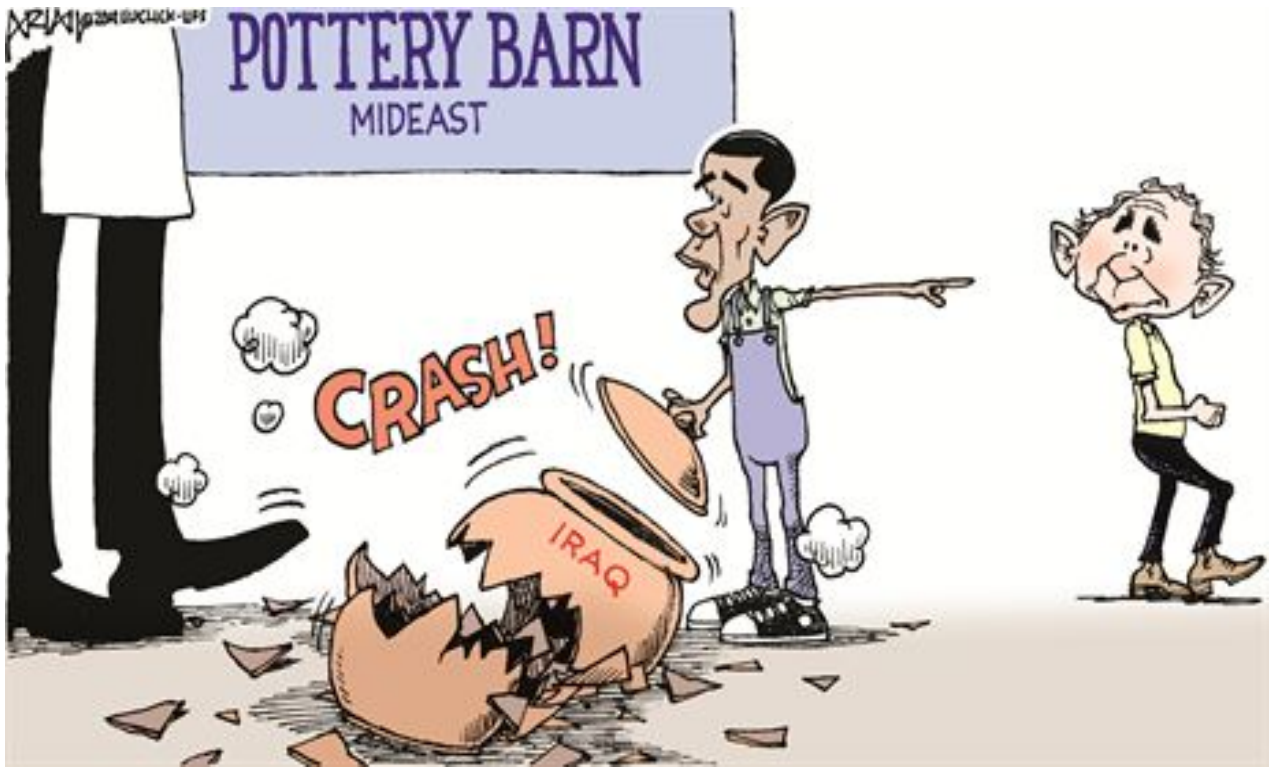
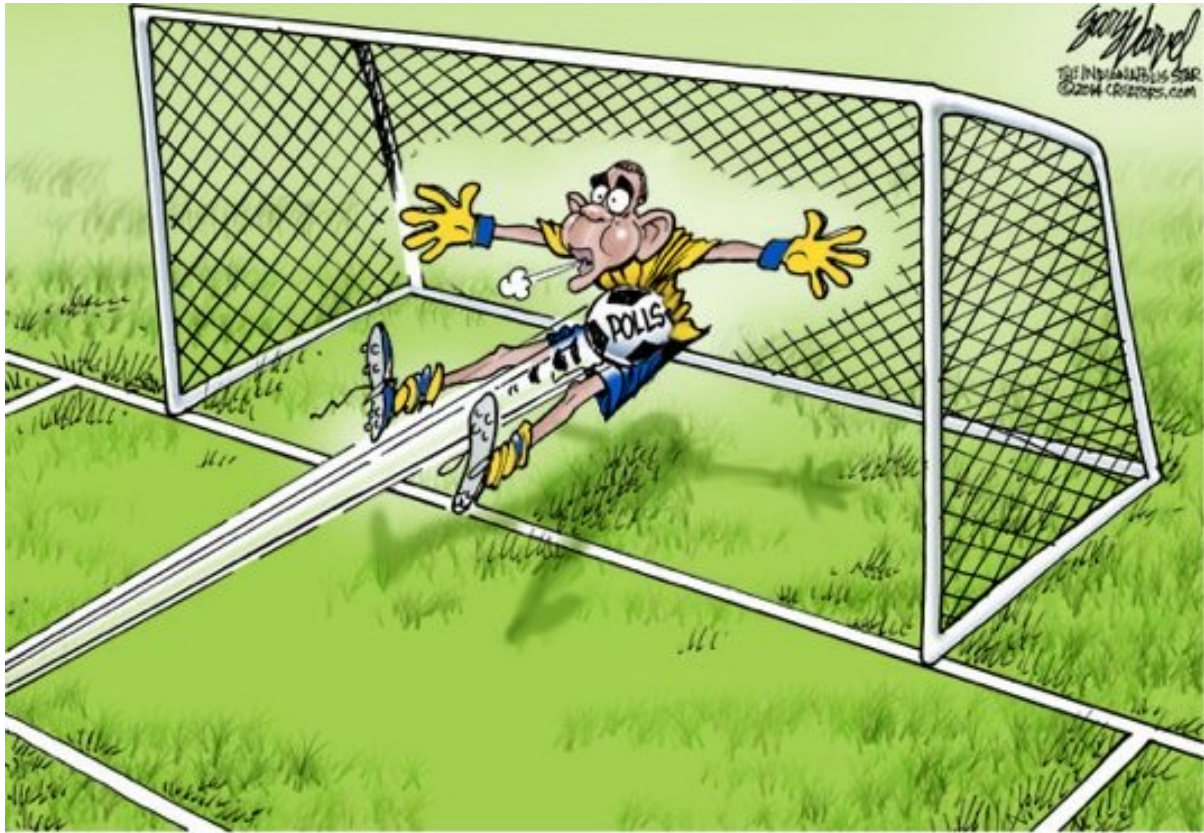
When the APC arrived at the airport, both Diems were inside, both with bullets in their head. This event launched a long chaotic period of political and military instability with countless coups and counter-coups.

Three weeks after the Diem murders, President Kennedy was assassinated. Then, his assassin was assassinated. Then Kennedy's brother, Robert, was assassinated.

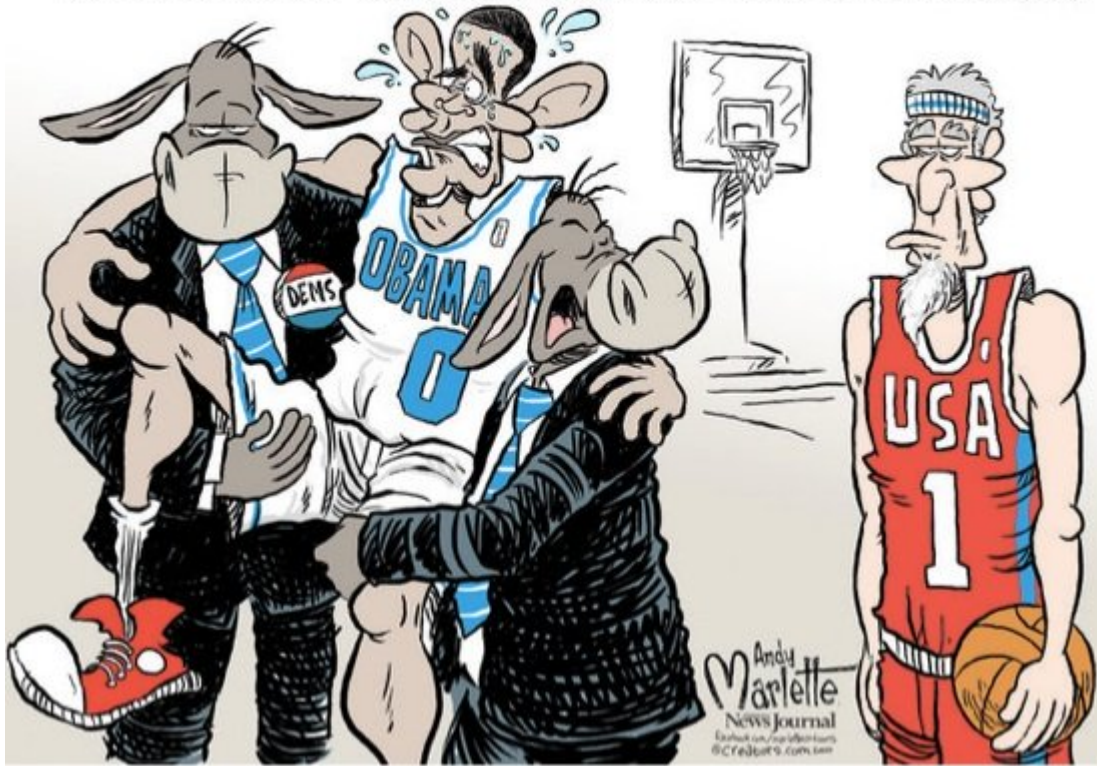
For years, the United States was convulsed with bitter war and racial divisions, many lethal. Upwards of one million Vietnamese perished in the conflict. Another 58,300 Americans were killed.

In April of 1975, the insurgents conquered South Vietnam anyway.





"HE'S STILL THE GREATEST EVER... HE JUST HAS CRAMPS."



**According to the Law of Infinite Probability,
one day this should occur...**



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