

July 2, 2014

James Kirchick says this administration is worse than Carter's.

... rather than respond to the collapsing world order by supporting our allies and undermining our adversaries, the Obama administration dithers. It is an indication of just how worrisome the situation is that many in Washington are pining for the resolve and fortitude of Jimmy Carter.

For months, the beleaguered Ukrainians have requested the most basic of military aid. The administration sends Meals Ready to Eat. Even hard-hitting, "sectoral" sanctions aimed at the Russian economy are viewed as too provocative.

Last year, Obama declared a "red line" on Syrian dictator Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own people. Assad's deployment of such weapons, the world was told, would constitute the sort of breach of international law and norms requiring an American response.

When Assad did use such weapons, Washington allowed itself to be co-opted into a farcical deal — proposed by that most altruistic of world leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin — that saw the purported removal of Assad's chemical arsenal. The message from Washington to Assad: You can continue murdering your people en masse and destabilizing the entire Middle East, but just do so using conventional weapons.

But even that solution was full of holes. Days ago, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons announced that evidence it has gathered from the field "lends credence to the view that toxic chemicals, most likely pulmonary irritating agents such as chlorine, have been used" against civilians. Two senior administration officials working on Syria, special advisor for transition Fred Hof and Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, resigned their posts rather than continue participating in this charade.

Few take America, least of all Secretary of State John Kerry, at its word anymore. Earlier this week, Kerry demanded that Russia urge separatists in Ukraine to disarm "within the next hours, literally."

Or what? This empty threat followed months of similar reprimands from Washington. ...

John Fund posts on Kirchick's article.

As someone who actually lived through the dreary declinism of the Carter era, it's hard to imagine a president could put in a weaker and more spineless performance in foreign policy.

But James Kirchick of the Foreign Policy Initiative lays out the case that Barack Obama has taken the trophy of incompetence abroad from Jimmy Carter.

A particularly pungent quote

Global instability is on the rise and faith in America's stabilizing presence is on the decline, and all we have from Washington are empty, millennial-friendly buzz phrases. "Leading from behind" was how one, too-clever-by-half administration official termed Obama's global strategy. Hitting "singles" and "doubles" is Obama's own, jocular assessment of his foreign policy. And now, "Don't do stupid s—" is the mantra being repeated throughout the halls of the White House and State Department.

"Don't do anything at all" seems more apt a description of this administration's approach. ...

Jennifer Rubin calls it a "perfect storm of foreign policy incompetence."

... Convinced al-Qaeda was dead, insistent we could retreat from the world and determined to treat terrorism as a series of criminal justice matters, the White House's perfect storm of foreign policy incompetence has made for a far more dangerous and unstable Middle East than the one they found in 2009. And those who helped implement or cheered these moves and misjudgments will have a lot to answer for. It remains to be seen whether and at what cost (human and financial) we can reverse the terrorists' momentum and re-establish U.S. influence in the region.

Foreign policy failures are perfectly matched with domestic failure. Joel Kotkin posts on the alliance between government and the 1%. Of course this is not what the president had in mind. He said he wanted to punish the 1% with taxes to pay for middle class benefits. But, since the government always f**ks up achieving goals, the exact opposite is the result.

Thanks to their cozy relationship with the Obama administration, a new class of super-wealthy oligarchs keeps getting more powerful while the country's middle class shrinks.

When our current President was elected, many progressives saw the dawning of a new epoch, a more egalitarian and more just Age of Obama. Instead we have witnessed the emergence of the Age of Oligarchy.

The outlines of this new epoch are clear in numerous ways. There is the diminished role for small business, greater concentration of financial assets, and a troubling decline in home ownership. On a cultural level, there is a general malaise about the prospect for upward mobility for future generations.

Not everyone is suffering in this new age. For the entitled few, these have been the best of times. With ever more concentration of key industries, ever greater advantage of capital over labor, and soaring real estate values in swanky places such as Manhattan or San Francisco which, as one journalist put it, constitute "vast gated communities where the one percent reproduces itself." The top hundred firms on the Fortune 500 list has revenues, in adjusted dollars, eight times those during the supposed big-business heyday of the 1960s.

This shift towards oligarchy well precedes President Obama's tenure. It was born from a confluence of forces: globalization, the financialization of the economy, and the shift towards digital technology. Obama is not entirely to blame, it is more than a bit ironic that these measurements have worsened under an Administration that has proclaimed income inequality abhorrent. ...

In an article titled "Barney Fife Meets Delta Force," Charles Cooke reports on the military equipment finding its way to public safety goobers.

... Historians looking back at this period in America's development will consider it to be profoundly odd that at the exact moment when violent crime hit a 50-year low, the nation's police departments began to gear up as if the country were expecting invasion — and, on occasion, to behave as if one were underway. The ACLU reported recently that SWAT teams in the United States conduct around 45,000 raids each year, only 7 percent of which have anything whatsoever to do with the hostage situations with which those teams were assembled to contend. Paramilitary operations,

the ACLU concluded, are “happening in about 124 homes every day — or more likely every night” — and four in five of those are performed in order that authorities might “search homes, usually for drugs.” Such raids routinely involve “armored personnel carriers,” “military equipment like battering rams,” and “flashbang grenades.” ...

NY Daily News

Barack Carter

Obama is leaving America weaker on the world stage than Carter did

by James Kirchick

On foreign policy, Barack Obama is worse than Jimmy Carter.



For decades, Carter's presidency was synonymous with weakness on the world stage. The late 1970's was the era of double-digit inflation, a worldwide oil crisis, Iranian hostages and Soviet military advances from Latin America to Afghanistan. So pathetic was America's predicament at the time that the late Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy mounted a primary challenge to Carter from the left.

Obama's rise to power mirrored his Democratic predecessor's in many ways. Both men came to office in the wake of widespread public disenchantment with the political establishment, and promoted themselves as outsiders and breaths of fresh air. Both men spoke of surmounting what they portrayed as Americans' exaggerated anxieties about the dangers hyped by fear-mongering conservatives.

For Carter, in a 1977 commencement speech, it was “our inordinate fear of communism” that Americans needed to overcome. For Obama, in his 2009 Cairo address, it was the “fear” and “mistrust” that had grown between the West and Muslim world in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Both men came into office emphasizing the promotion of human rights as a crucial dimension of American foreign policy. And both men gave the impression that their good intentions would be enough to accomplish these Herculean tasks.

Unfortunately, as is often the case, the reality of the world came crashing down.

It is barely remembered today, but, for all the derision heaped upon Carter as a weak and feckless President, he eventually responded to foreign aggression in tough and concrete ways. In November 1979, Iranian revolutionaries — fresh after having overthrown the American-allied Shah

— seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking 52 American diplomats hostage. In December, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.

Gone was the President Carter who had scolded Americans for their “fear” of the communist behemoth.

By January, Carter announced a series of proposals directed at weakening America’s adversaries. First was a 5% increase in defense spending, a move that angered many of his Democratic allies in Congress who had taken to slashing the defense budget in the wake of the Vietnam War.

In his State of the Union address, Carter announced what would later come to be known as the Carter Doctrine: that the United States would use military force to protect its vital interests in the Persian Gulf.

Next came an embargo on grain and agricultural technology to the Soviet Union. Carter also declared that the United States would boycott the 1980 Moscow summer Olympics unless the Soviets withdrew their troops from Afghanistan. When they did not, he began covert funding of Afghan rebel fighters.

Conservatives like to credit Ronald Reagan with ending the Cold War. To the extent that the collapse of the Soviet Union was brought about by American policies and not the internal contradictions and weaknesses of the communist system itself (a debate that engages historians to this day), the last year of the Carter administration laid the groundwork.

The correlations between the world situation in the twilight of the Carter administration and in the second Obama term are hard to ignore. Once again, Russia has invaded a neighbor. Only this time, that neighbor is on the European continent, and Moscow went so far as to annex — not merely attack — its territory. And once again the Middle East is in flames, with the prospect of another Islamist movement taking control over a state, this time in Iraq.

But rather than respond to the collapsing world order by supporting our allies and undermining our adversaries, the Obama administration dithers. It is an indication of just how worrisome the situation is that many in Washington are pining for the resolve and fortitude of Jimmy Carter.

For months, the beleaguered Ukrainians have requested the most basic of military aid. The administration sends Meals Ready to Eat. Even hard-hitting, “sectoral” sanctions aimed at the Russian economy are viewed as too provocative.

Last year, Obama declared a “red line” on Syrian dictator Bashar Assad’s use of chemical weapons against his own people. Assad’s deployment of such weapons, the world was told, would constitute the sort of breach of international law and norms requiring an American response.

When Assad did use such weapons, Washington allowed itself to be co-opted into a farcical deal — proposed by that most altruistic of world leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin — that saw the purported removal of Assad’s chemical arsenal. The message from Washington to Assad: You can continue murdering your people en masse and destabilizing the entire Middle East, but just do so using conventional weapons.

But even that solution was full of holes. Days ago, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons announced that evidence it has gathered from the field “lends credence to the view that toxic chemicals, most likely pulmonary irritating agents such as chlorine, have been used” against civilians. Two senior administration officials working on Syria, special advisor for transition Fred

Hof and Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, resigned their posts rather than continue participating in this charade.



Few take America, least of all Secretary of State John Kerry, at its word anymore. Earlier this week, Kerry demanded that Russia urge separatists in Ukraine to disarm “within the next hours, literally.”

Or what? This empty threat followed months of similar reprimands from Washington.

Two days earlier, Kerry was in Cairo meeting with Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, Egypt’s military dictator. The United States had just released millions of dollars in military aid to Egypt, aid that had been frozen after al-Sisi launched a coup to topple the country’s democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president last year. “We also discussed the essential role of a vibrant civil society, free press, rule of law and due process in a democracy,” Kerry told the New York Times.

Hours after Kerry’s plane took off, an Egyptian court demonstrated the country’s commitment to “free press, rule of law and due process” by sentencing three Al Jazeera journalists to long prison sentences.

So convinced was he that American presence, rather than absence, causes problems, Obama hastily exited Iraq in 2011 rather than try to negotiate an agreement that would have left a stabilizing American military force in the country.

Obama and his surrogates endlessly complain about the “disaster” they inherited from the Bush administration there, but the country was largely pacified by the time Obama entered the White House. Today, due largely to American absenteeism in the region, Islamist militants that make Al Qaeda look like a Rotary Club control a large chunk of the country.

Obama’s hands-off approach seems to be aimed at appeasing a domestic constituency that sees diplomacy, no matter how toothless, as the best way to maintain peace. A recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Project finds that an overwhelming 91% of “solid liberals” believe that “good diplomacy” is the best way “to ensure peace” while only 5% see “military strength” as having that effect.

But even “good diplomacy” is too much to expect from this administration. Over the past six years, no issue received more diplomatic attention from Obama, as well as Kerry and his predecessor Hillary Clinton, than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite countless trips to the region from high-ranking American officials, the parties are further apart today than they were when Obama swore the oath of office.

Along with Israeli-Palestinian peace, global nuclear disarmament was the other grand Obama diplomatic project. This was always woolly-headed - but this goal, no matter how well-intentioned, was dealt a devastating blow with Russia’s invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. In 1994, Ukraine signed (with the U.S., Great Britain and Russia), the Budapest Memorandum, which stipulated that, in exchange for delivering its then-considerable nuclear weapons stockpile to Moscow, Kiev’s territorial integrity would be assured.

Now that Russia has blatantly violated the terms of that document, how can Obama convince a nuclear weapons-aspirant state like Iran that it does not need such an arsenal to ensure its own survival?

The administration and its supporters are banking upon hopes that Americans will remember their distaste for the foreign policy of George W. Bush as some sort of salve against its own, present-day failures.

The other day, former President Bill Clinton lashed out at the Bush administration, telling NBC News that “what happened in Syria wouldn’t have happened in Iraq” had the U.S. not invaded in 2003. Given the sectarian fissures opening up across the region thanks in large part to the Obama administration’s allowing the Syrian morass to fester for so long, confidently predicting that the tremors would have left Iraq untouched were Saddam Hussein still in power is a wild claim.

And keep in mind that this was the same President Clinton who himself bombed Iraq, signed the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act committing the United States to Hussein’s overthrow, and who vocally supported “Bush’s war” — along with the vast majority of his Democratic colleagues.

Global instability is on the rise and faith in America’s stabilizing presence is on the decline, and all we have from Washington are empty, millennial-friendly buzz phrases. “Leading from behind” was how one, too-clever-by-half administration official termed Obama’s global strategy. Hitting “singles” and “doubles” is Obama’s own, jocular assessment of his foreign policy. And now, “Don’t do stupid s---” is the mantra being repeated throughout the halls of the White House and State Department.

“Don’t do anything at all” seems more apt a description of this administration’s approach.

Kirchick is a fellow with the Foreign Policy Initiative.

The Corner

It's Official; Barack Obama is Worse than Jimmy Carter

by John Fund

As someone who actually lived through the dreary declinism of the Carter era, it's hard to imagine a president could put in a weaker and more spineless performance in foreign policy.

But James Kirchick of the Foreign Policy Initiative [lays out the case](#) that Barack Obama has taken the trophy of incompetence abroad from Jimmy Carter.

A particularly pungent quote

Global instability is on the rise and faith in America's stabilizing presence is on the decline, and all we have from Washington are empty, millennial-friendly buzz phrases. "Leading from behind" was how one, too-clever-by-half administration official termed Obama's global strategy. Hitting "singles" and "doubles" is Obama's own, jocular assessment of his foreign policy. And now, "Don't do stupid s—" is the mantra being repeated throughout the halls of the White House and State Department.

"Don't do anything at all" seems more apt a description of this administration's approach.

Right Turn

Obama's perfect storm of foreign policy incompetence

by Jennifer Rubin

President Obama's foreign policy flubs and misjudgments were on full display on the Sunday shows as guests, moderators and panels bemoaned the potential for an ISIS-dominated state in the center of the already volatile Middle East. On "Face the Nation," [Sen. John Barrasso did an effective job laying out the threat we face:](#)

I see ISIS as a direct threat to the United States, they have the capacity, and I believe they have the intent. They have stated in, in terms of their opposition and the whole Western world.

They are the richest, most powerful and most savage group of terrorists in the history of mankind, and they've taken over an area, truly, the size of Indiana, bordering Syria, as well as Iraq. So that is the direct threat to the United States.

He recommends in effect that we reverse key components of the president's policies, beginning with Syria. He argued, "I think that we should be arming and should have been arming some of the opposition in Syria. I would not negotiate with Iran, they are not our friends, they'll try to use this as leverage to have a nuclear weapon. But I don't think we should be the air power for Iran coming in on the ground. Additionally, we ought to today be developing American energy resources and finally, we ought to stop the clock button on Afghanistan in terms of withdrawing troops from there." And he added that the pull-out from Iraq with no stay-behind force was a tragic error: "The President made a campaign promise that he would withdraw the troops, he withdrew the troops, and I believe he did not push hard to get [a status of forces agreement]. He wanted to get this thing confirmed by the parliament, would have been very difficult to do. And now, he said, 'Well, their word would have been good enough,' so the President is somewhat backtracking on his decision, and the way he laid it out."

It is interesting that in his [third presidential debate with Mitt Romney](#), Obama excoriated his opponent for the notion that we needed to leave troops behind. He wasn't arguing then that he had tried and failed, but rather bragging that he knew better than to leave troops behind: "Now, you just gave a speech a few weeks ago in which you said we should still have troops in Iraq. That is not a recipe for making sure that we are taking advantage of the opportunities and meeting the challenges of the Middle East." Apparently it was.

Put simply, we should do the opposite of what Obama has been doing for 5-and-a-half years. The centrality of the president's failure in Syria shouldn't be underplayed, as [Mike Crowley of Time magazine pointed out](#):

Syria is the festering wound which is producing this infection that has contaminated Iraq. Syria is where ISIS has drawn its strength, power, money and territory before this splits into Northern Iraq. So you saw President Obama say, "I'm asking Congress for \$500 million for a Pentagon program to arm and train the rebels," that is a real reversal from his position in the past couple years where he says, "We don't want to get too involved with that."

Secretary Kerry on his travels to the region met with the new sort of quote/unquote "moderate, Syrian opposition leader," so I think they're taking another look at that Syria policy to say, "Is that an important component of beating back ISIS, of draining it of its strength?" at the same time of working with these other regional actors. Again, it's a Rubik's Cube, and getting it right, it's going to be extremely hard. . . .

So you think Iraq is the problem from hell, it's actually the problem from hell number two.

The President was already struggling to find some way to put some water on this raging fire in Syria, which I really think is producing the ISIS with the power and the ambition and the threat, possibly, to the Western United States that is storming into Iraq now.

So part of what's happening here is, "How do we solve the political situation in Iraq? What do we do about Maliki?" But I think the White House is taking another look at Syria and saying, "Maybe, finally, some of these critics who are saying we're not doing enough might be right, and we're gonna go back at it." And you saw the President make, I thought, a fairly dramatic announcement, asking Congress for \$500 million to train and arm the Syrian rebels. Although, still not a clear policy.

The idea that we had no interest in Syria, a fallacy put forth by the far right and far left, proved to be a fundamental error coming on top of another fundamental error, not leaving U.S. troops behind in Iraq. As former deputy national security adviser [Elliott Abrams wrote recently](#), "Defenders of the President's inaction have always claimed that all the proposed lines of action in Syria, from bombing Assad's air force to arming the rebels, are risky. Tragically for Syrians, and now for Iraqis, and perhaps soon enough for the rest of us, the consequences of a failure to act were given far too little weight. Regime brutality against the majority Sunni population of Syria and intervention by foreign Shia forces (Iranian and Hezbollah) have attracted a far larger and more dangerous group of jihadis than ever existed in Afghanistan, one whose threat to European and American allies and interests keeps growing."

He counsels:

What has been missing in Syria since 2011 is Western, and especially American, leadership and determination, but it is not too late for a new policy. The early goal of a quick departure for Assad and transition to democracy in Syria is now impossible to attain. More disorder and suffering are

certain. But Syria need not be an endless source of refugees, a center of inhuman suffering at the hands of a vicious minority regime, and a worldwide gathering place for jihadi extremists. Needed now are a serious and coordinated effort to assist the nationalist elements of the rebels, and organize assistance for them from others in the region — Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar are the most critical — and American (and if possible British and French) willingness to use force directly to punish chemical warfare and erode Assad's air power. Those remain essential steps of a new policy that can over time diminish the tragedy being suffered by the Syrian people and the threat Syria now poses to regional stability and European and American security interests.

Convinced al-Qaeda was dead, insistent we could retreat from the world and determined to treat terrorism as a series of criminal justice matters, the White House's perfect storm of foreign policy incompetence has made for a far more dangerous and unstable Middle East than the one they found in 2009. And those who helped implement or cheered these moves and misjudgments will have a lot to answer for. It remains to be seen whether and at what cost (human and financial) we can reverse the terrorists' momentum and re-establish U.S. influence in the region.

Daily Beast

[Dawn of the Age of Oligarchy: the Alliance between Government and the 1%](#)

by Joel Kotkin

Thanks to their cozy relationship with the Obama administration, a new class of super-wealthy oligarchs keeps getting more powerful while the country's middle class shrinks.

When our current President was elected, many progressives saw the dawning of a new epoch, a more egalitarian and more just Age of Obama. Instead we have witnessed the emergence of the Age of Oligarchy.

The outlines of this new epoch are clear in numerous ways. There is the diminished role for small business, greater concentration of financial assets, and a troubling decline in home ownership. On a cultural level, there is a general malaise about the prospect for upward mobility for future generations.

Not everyone is suffering in this new age. For the entitled few, these have been the best of times. With ever more concentration of key industries, ever greater advantage of capital over labor, and soaring real estate values in swanky places such as Manhattan or San Francisco which, as one journalist put it, constitute "vast gated communities where the one percent reproduces itself." The top hundred firms on the Fortune 500 list has revenues, in adjusted dollars, eight times those during the supposed big-business heyday of the 1960s.

This shift towards oligarchy well precedes President Obama's tenure. It was born from a confluence of forces: globalization, the financialization of the economy, and the shift towards digital technology. Obama is not entirely to blame, it is more than a bit ironic that these measurements have worsened under an Administration that has proclaimed income inequality abhorrent.

Obama's Oligarchs

Despite this administration's occasional rhetorical flourishes against oligarchy, we have seen a rapid concentration of wealth and depressed conditions for the middle class under Obama. The stimulus, with its emphasis on public sector jobs, did little for Main Street. And under the banner of

environmentalism, green cronyism has helped fatten the bank accounts of investment bankers and tech moguls at great public expense.

Wall Street grandees, many of whom should have spent the past years studying the inside of jail cells for their misbehavior, are only bothered by how to spend their ill-gotten earnings, and how not to pay taxes on it. The Obama Administration in concert with the Congress , have consented to allow the oligarchy to continue paying capital gains taxes well below the income tax rate paid by poor schmuck professionals, small business owners and high-skilled technical types.

In this, both political parties are to blame. Republican fealty to the interests of the investor class has been long-standing. But Obama and the Democrats are also increasingly backed in their “progressive” causes by the very people -- Wall Street traders, venture capitalists and tech executives -- who benefit most from the federal bailouts, cheap money, low interest rates, and low capital gains tax rates.

Large financial institutions also have benefited greatly from regulations that guaranteed their survival while allowing for increased concentration of financial assets. Indeed in the first five years of the [Obama Administration](#) the share of financial assets held by the top six “too big to fail” banks soared 37%, and now account for two-thirds of all bank assets.

“Quantitative easing,” the government’s purchase of financial assets from commercial banks, essentially constituted a “too big to fail” windfall to the largest Wall Street firms, notes one former high-level official. By 2011, pay for executives at the largest banking firms hit new records, just three years after the financial “wizards” left the world economy on the brink of economic catastrophe. Meanwhile, as “too big to fail” banks received huge bailouts, the ranks of [community banks](#) continues dropping to the lowest number since the 1930s, hurting, in particular, small businesspeople that depend on loans from these institutions.

This tilt towards of the financial elites, as [Elizabeth Warren](#) has noted, occurred during both the Bush and Obama Administrations. “The government’s most important job,” she remarks, “was to provide a soft landing for the tender fannies of the banks.”

Warren’s observation reflects the influence exercised by the oligarchs in both parties, a bipartisan alliance of the super-rich to buy government influence and protect their wealth. A recent [Mercatus Center](#) report found that [politically connected banks received larger bailouts from the Federal Reserve during the financial crisis than financial institutions that spent less or nothing on lobbying](#) and contributions to political campaigns. [Another study](#) by two University of Michigan economist found a strong correlation between receiving TARP assistance and a company’s degree of connectedness to members of congressional finance committees.

As well as they have done lately, Wall Streeters have not been the only oligarchs to thrive under Obama. The tech industry, once an exemplar of dynamic capitalism, has become increasingly dominated by a handful of firms and their venture capital backers. These tech fortunes are greatly enhanced by monopolistic control of key markets, whether in [search](#) (Google); [computer operating systems](#) (Microsoft); [internet retail sales](#) (Amazon); or [social media](#) (Facebook). All of the tech giants are incessantly trying to extend their dominion into control of people’s lives, whether by tying them to a device, like the new [Amazon phone](#), or by re-selling people’s data to advertising.

These tech companies, which author [Rebecca MacKinnon](#) (labels) calls “the sovereigns of cyberspace,” all enjoy strong, even intimate, ties to the Obama Administration. They have little reason to fear anti-trust crackdowns or scrutiny of their increasingly gross [violations of privacy](#) from friendly government lawyers.

Of course, if things ever soured with the Democrats, the oligarchs can always look for benefactors among Republicans legislators, as Facebook and Google are already doing,. After all, [most Republicans](#), particularly in the Senate, embraced the bailout of the large financial institutions -- the very essence of the crony capitalism that favors large, well-connected institutions over smaller ones.

For the most part, the oligarchs have lined up with Obama from the start. Indeed, at his first inaugural, notes one sympathetic chronicler, the biggest problem for donors was to find sufficient parking space for their private jets. As an observer at the left-leaning [Huffington Post put it](#), "the rising tide has lifted fewer boats during the Obama years -and the ones it's lifted have been mostly yachts."

The War Against Small Business

If Obama has proven a god-send for the oligarchs, he has been less solicitous of small business. Long a key source of new jobs, small business start-ups have declined as a portion of all [business growth](#) from 50 percent in the early 1980s to 35% in 2010. Indeed, a [2014 Brookings](#) report, revealed small business "dynamism," measured by the growth of new firms compared with the closing of older ones, has declined significantly over the past decade, with more firms closing than starting for the first time in a quarter century.

There are many explanations for this decline, including the impact of offshoring, globalization and technology. But much can be traced to the expansion of regulatory power. Small firms, according to a 2010 report by the [Small Business Administration](#), spend one-third more per employee than larger firms on staff who can help them meet with federal dictats. The biggest hit to small business comes from environmental regulations, which cost 364% per employee more for small firms than large ones. Small business owners and self-employed professionals also have also been among those [most impacted](#), through the cancellations of their health care policies, by the Affordable Care Act.

The Politics of Oligarchy

To be sure, every society has its Oligarchs, those who take leadership and lay foundations for the future. Economically, the oligarchs are necessary as creators and investors in new economic potential. The great 19th century robber barons, though often exceedingly ruthless in their practices, left an enormous legacy in the form of industries such as steel, utilities and railroads that underpinned the industrial era. But only later, due to reforms and the further expansion of the economy, did the oligarch's work translate into mass affluence.

The need to put limits on oligarchic power was clear to leaders such as [Theodore Roosevelt](#) who labeled his era's moguls as "malefactors of great wealth." In the early 20th century, many progressives and populists, as well as a growing socialist movement, rose to oppose oligarchy. But for most this was not so much an anti-capitalist, or even anti-market movement as a concern great power and wealth concentrated in the hands of the few. That seem fear of concentrated, anti-democratic power worried the founders, like [Jefferson](#) and [Madison](#), who confronted a very different kind of oligarchy during the war for independence.

"We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few," Supreme Court justice [Louis Brandeis](#) once noted, "but we can't have both."

These sentiments are still valid. Many, if not most Americans, recognize that our political economy is not working for the majority of the country. The vast majority recognize the reality of [crony](#)

[capitalism](#) and understand that government contracts go to the politically connected. More troubling still, less than one third [believe](#) the country even operates under a free market system. Most suspect that the American dream is falling increasingly out of reach. By margins of [more than two to one](#), Americans say they enjoy fewer economic opportunities than their parents, and that their offspring will have far less job security and disposable income.

Today, Americans increasingly see the same threat Brandeis saw. American politics has ceased to function as a rising democracy and come to resemble an emerging plutocracy. These days, political choice is fought over by dueling groups of billionaires appealing to right and left to see who will best look after their interests. This can be seen in the emergence of conservative oligarchs like the energy billionaire [Koch Brothers](#) or the heirs to the Wal-mart fortune, who have emerged as the ultimate bêtes noires for Democrats like Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

Yet Reid and other Democrats have less problem with their own oligarchs. Among the .01 percent wealthiest Americans who increasingly dominate political giving, the [largest contributions](#) besides the conservative Club for Growth went to Democrat aligned groups such as Emily's list, Act Blue and Moveon.org. Seven of the ten Congressional candidates most dependent on the money of the ultra-rich were Democrats. In 2012, President Obama won eight of the country's ten wealthiest counties, sometimes by margins of two-to-one or better. He also triumphed easily in virtually all the top counties with the highest concentrations of millionaires and among wealthy hedge fund managers.

The Oligarchs pervasive influence buying from both parties undermines the very structure of the democratic system as well as a competitive economy. It allows specific interests -developers, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, renewable or fossil fuels producers - enormous range to make or break candidates. As the powerful battle, the middle classes increasingly become spectators. It's not far off from the decadent phase at the end of Greek democracy or the late Roman Republic, examples that resonated with our classically educated founders.

Many Americans today are [alarmed](#), and rightfully so, by this concentration of wealth and power. But right now this grassroots reaction mainly finds its expression from the political fringes. The Tea Party, for example, had its origins in opposition to the bank bailouts that followed the financial crisis. This, not surprisingly, has made some [large bank executives](#) as wary of this right-wing movement as they were of Occupy Wall Street.

In contrast, the oligarchs have little to fear from the mainstream of either party, though there are signs that smoke is wafting over the political horizon. The defeat of house majority leader Eric Cantor partly reflected concern over his incessant [lobbying](#) and cozying up to Wall Street. Similarly, nascent opposition to Hillary Clinton's corporatist campaign is coming from at least some Democrats, notably Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren. The recent shift leftwards of the Democratic Party, epitomized by New York's Bill de Blasio but [spreading nationwide](#) testifies to growing unrest among the grassroots.

These voices, both right and left, are still far from the main corridors of federal power but they are getting closer. The oligarchs should not rest too comfortably. An observer of gilded age America may have also assumed that the oligarchic power of the robber barons and industrial magnates would continue to wax inexorably. Yet, there comes a time -- as occurred in the early years of the last century and again in the 1930s -- when the political economy so poorly serves the vast majority that it ignites a political prairie fire. We are not there yet, in either party, but if the corrupt bargain between the oligarchs and the political class goes unbroken, the wait may not be long.

National Review

Barney Fife Meets Delta Force

Hypermilitarized police departments are more dangerous than whatever they fight.

by Charles W. Cooke

Nestled awkwardly among the usual guff, the outrage website *Salon* this week took a welcome flyer and accorded space to something genuinely alarming. “A SWAT team,” the headline screamed, “blew a hole in my 2-year-old son.” For once, this wasn’t hyperbole.

The piece’s author, Alecia Phonesavanh, described what it felt like to be on the business end of an attack that was launched in error by police who believed a drug dealer to be living and operating in her house. They “threw a flashbang grenade inside,” she reported. It “landed in my son’s crib.” Now, her son is “covered in burns” and has “a hole in his chest that exposes his ribs.” So badly injured was he by the raid that he was “placed into a medically induced coma.” “They searched for drugs,” Phonesavanh confirmed, but they “never found any.” Nor, for that matter, did they find the person they were looking for. He doesn’t live there. “All of this,” she asks, “to find a small amount of drugs?”

Historians looking back at this period in America’s development will consider it to be profoundly odd that at the exact moment when violent crime hit a 50-year low, the nation’s police departments began to gear up as if the country were expecting invasion — and, on occasion, to behave as if one were underway. The ACLU reported recently that SWAT teams in the United States conduct around 45,000 raids each year, only 7 percent of which have anything whatsoever to do with the hostage situations with which those teams were assembled to contend. Paramilitary operations, the ACLU concluded, are “happening in about 124 homes every day — or more likely every night” — and four in five of those are performed in order that authorities might “search homes, usually for drugs.” Such raids routinely involve “armored personnel carriers,” “military equipment like battering rams,” and “flashbang grenades.”



The Pentagon has donated hundreds of MRAP vehicles to police departments nationwide.

Were the military being used in such a manner, we would be rightly outraged. Why not here? Certainly this is not a legal matter. The principle of posse comitatus draws a valuable distinction between the national armed forces and parochial law enforcement, and one that all free people should greatly cherish. Still, it seems plain that the potential threat posed by a domestic standing army is not entirely blunted just because its units are controlled locally. To add the prefix “para” to a problem is not to make it go away, nor do legal distinctions change the nature of power. Over the past two decades, the federal government has happily sent weapons of war to local law enforcement, with nary a squeak from anyone involved with either political party. Are we comfortable with this?

The Right’s silence on the issue is vexing indeed, the admirable attempts of a few libertarians notwithstanding. Here, conservatives seem to be conflicted between their rightful predilection for law and order — an instinct that is based upon an accurate comprehension of human nature and an acknowledgment of the existence of evil — and a well-developed and wholly sensible fear of state power, predicated upon precisely the same thing. As of now, the former is rather dramatically winning out, leading conservatives to indulge — or at least tacitly to permit — excuses that they typically reject elsewhere. Much as the teachers’ unions invariably attempt to justify their “anything goes” contracts by pointing to the ends that they ostensibly serve (“Well you do want schools for the children or don’t you? Sign here”), the increasingly muscular behavior of local police departments is often shrugged off as a by-product of the need to fight crime. This, if left unchecked, is a recipe for precisely the sort of carte blanche that conservatives claim to fear.

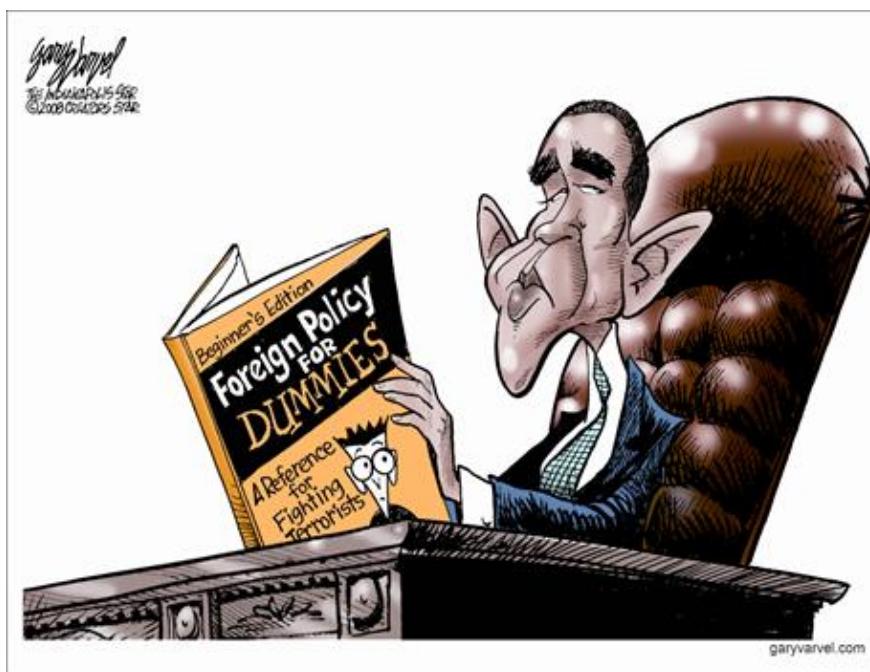
Leaving aside the central moral question of the War on Drugs — which is whether the state should be responding to peaceful transactions and consensual behavior with violence — there is, it seems, considerable room between law enforcement’s turning a blind eye to the law and its aping the military in its attempt to uphold it. The cartels of Mexico and drug lords of America’s larger cities are one thing; but two-bit dealers and consumers of illicit substances are quite another. In the instance that *Salon* recorded, the person that authorities “were looking for, wasn’t there.” “He doesn’t even live in that house,” Phonesavanh confirmed. But suppose that he had, and that he’d been dealing drugs as charged? Does this alone make the case for the tactics? I suspect not. Instead, attempting to catch a violator in the act by releasing military vehicles full of machine-gun-wielding men, storming a home in the dead of night, and performing a no-knock raid that results in a two-year-old’s being pushed into a coma might, one suspects, be overkill — in many similar cases, literally so. The question for conservatives should be this: If cowboy poetry is no justification for federal intrusion, can drug dealing be said to serve as an open invitation for the deployment of the ersatz 101st?

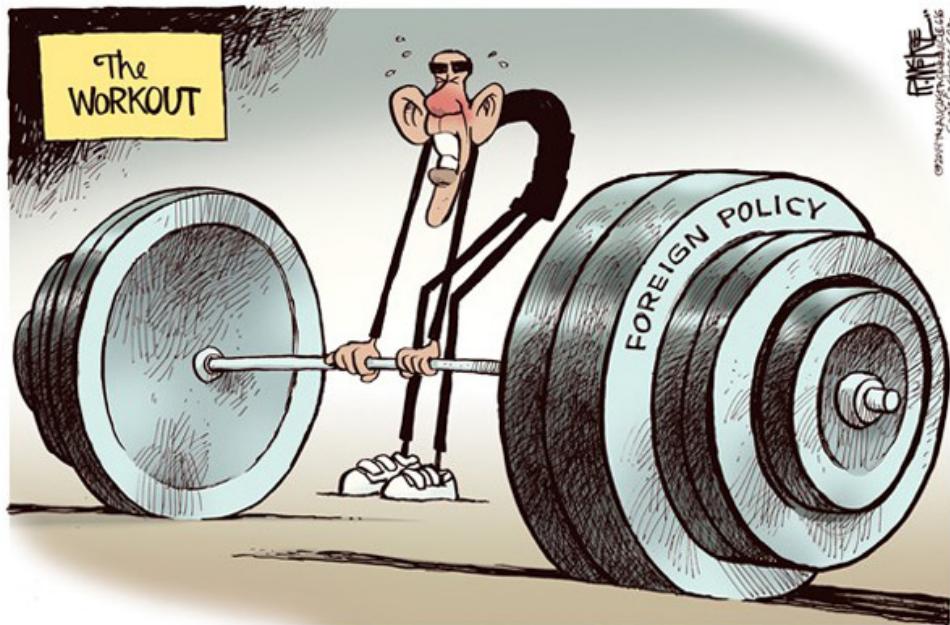
In the more febrile of the Right’s quarters, the sight of MRAPs being delivered to the chief of police in Westington, Mont., has given rise to all forms of regrettable silliness — to visions of black helicopters and reeducation camps and an America on the verge of being taken by force by the gun-toting rangers of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Nevertheless, a small amount of latent paranoia has served America well, and Chekhov’s advice that “one must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it” should be applied to governments as rigorously as to aspiring playwrights. Once the holders of the monopoly on violence are accorded the latest weaponry, there will always be the temptation to use it. Likewise, once one has taken the mental and linguistic leap of ascribing to domestic law enforcement the imprimatur of “war,” one may be inclined to reach for the trigger that little bit more quickly. The disaster at Waco, Texas, was, it seems, more cock-up than conspiracy. But the recognition in the aftermath that the whole bloody mess could have been avoided if local officers had taken the time to chat with the victims should haunt us to this day. Rushing in at 100 miles per hour rarely works out, whatever the ill that one is attempting to resolve.

The Left's current inclination is to spin offenses out of straw — having no major battles left to fight, it seeks to detect microaggressions; with overt bigotry so thin on the ground, the dog whistles have come out; and with the barriers to the Declaration's maxim having been largely removed, the focus has shifted to the structural and the invisible. But first-degree burns and holes in the chest are different things altogether — not to be dismissed or downplayed — and that the issue is being raised by an outlet known for its absurdity should not dull its impact. Will the Right acknowledge the scale of the threat, applying its usual mistrust of power to a favored group, or will its usually alert advocates leave themselves willfully in the dark until, one day, a flashbang with their name on it is tossed through the window to wake them up with a start?



THE EMPTY CHAIR





OBAMA'S FOREIGN POLICY

'The day I'm inaugurated the muslim world will look at the U.S. differently.'

~Candidate Obama, 21 Nov 2007

Politifake.org

You're right. They see the U.S. as weak.

