

September 2, 2014

Back to President Bystander. Craig Pirrong of Streetwise Professor gets a few shots.

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I am sure that the Pentagon presented Obama with multiple strategies, and that he found none of them to his liking.

No doubt none of the options were all that palatable. Primarily because his previous decisions have left the United States with a set of choices that range between bad and terrible. But there are certainly several that would be better than nothing, which is what he is choosing to do. I would surmise that part of the reason that Obama is refusing to choose any of them, which would involve getting more deeply involved in Iraq and bombing Syria, is that by choosing them, he would be drawing attention to his own blunders. ...

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The president says things aren't worse, it's just that we get more news now, what with social media and all. Craig Pirrong has comments.

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No, actually. Obama is apparently trying to rebut claims that he bears some responsibility for the fraught state of the world, and to resist pressures that he needs to act more decisively against Putin, and ISIS, and Assad, and . . . by claiming that the current world isn't really that much different than it's ever been. It's just that we notice it more because of Twitter and the nightly news. ...

Noemie Emery writes on why the left keeps defending the failed presidency.

... When Republicans fail, it's always their fault, but when things fall apart under Democrats, larger forces are always at work. In the first volume of his work, Reagan biographer Steven F. Hayward took a stroll with us down memory lane to the last time this happened, under one James Earl Carter: "The job of President is too difficult for any single person because of the complexity of the problems and the size of government," pronounced the historian Barbara Tuchman. "As the country goes to the polls in the 47th national election, the Presidency as an institution is in serious trouble," wrote the columnist Joseph Kraft. Political scientist Theodore Lowi said the presidency had become too big for even the likes of a Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Perhaps the burdens have become so great that, over time, no President will be judged adequate," said U.S. News and World Report. And Newsweek added, "The Presidency has in some measure defeated the last five men who have held it—and has persuaded some of the people who served them that it is in danger of becoming a game nobody can win."

There was much more of that, but as Hayward points out, this line of thought stopped being talked about halfway through Reagan's first term. "There's a . . . reason for that," he noted. "The elite complaints . . . always abstract from the substantive views and actions of the occupant. The possibility that 'maybe we have a crappy president'" refuses to enter their minds.

Especially it refuses to enter their minds when the president in question is not only the spokesman for their favorite political outlook, but the embodiment of all of their dreams. If liberals felt compelled to protect a peanut farmer from Georgia, what must they feel for an Ivy League-trained exotic from Hyde Park, a man of the world and messiah, a speaker and writer, but never a doer; themselves, in short, to the ultimate power; themselves as they dreamed they could be? And that is the problem: If he fails, then they fail, and that cannot happen. So the fault is in the stars, in the cards, in unfair expectations—anywhere but where it should be.

Matthew Continetti calls the second term 1,461 days of summer vacation.

The headline was brutal. "Bam's Golf War: Prez tees off as Foley's parents grieve," read the cover of Thursday's New York Daily News. Obama's gaffe was this: He had denounced the beheading of James Foley from a vacation spot in Martha's Vineyard, then went to the golf course. Seems like he had a great time. Such a great time that he returned to the Farm Neck Golf Club—sorry, membership is full—the next day.

Technically, Obama's vacation began on August 9. It is scheduled to end on Sunday, August 24. With the exception of a two-day interlude in D.C., it has been two weeks of golf, jazz, biking, beach going, dining out, celebrating, and sniping from critics, not all of them conservative, who are unnerved by the president taking time off at a moment of peril.

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... Criticizing the president the other day, Joe Scarborough nonetheless conceded, "[Presidents are always working, whether on a golf course or behind a desk.](#)" But is that actually so? What, exactly, does President Obama do? He seems to learn everything from the papers—from the IRS scandal to the VA scandal to the mobilization of the Missouri National Guard. International events routinely take him by surprise. His professional activities include fundraising—[40 events this year so far](#)—and perfunctory addresses to the public. He goes through the presidential motions: meeting with officials and foreign dignitaries, holding press conferences, sitting for interviews, shipping MREs to endangered populations, ordering air strikes. But there is no passion behind these activities, no restless energy, no managerial competence, no sense of purpose or mission or strategy, none of the qualities associated with leadership in business, politics, and culture.

[Donors complain](#) the president does not schmooze, or even have much interest in what they are doing or thinking. Democrats on the Hill have the same complaint. "[Obama Is Seen as Frustrating His Own Party](#)," read the headline on the front-page of the Times this week. The story opened with a telling anecdote. The congressional leadership was meeting with the president at the White House. Harry Reid complained to President Obama that Mitch McConnell is holding up judicial nominations. Obama scoffed. "You and Mitch work it out," he told Reid. He wasn't interested.

What does interest Obama is celebrity: His own, and that of others. He enjoys opportunities to expound on the world, as though he were an essayist for the New Yorker, which he surely will be soon after leaving office. He wants to be recognized in public, during his choreographed stops outside the White House, and during "major speeches" that lead to applause but no discernible change in affairs, and during appearances on talk shows, [the more mindless the better](#). He likes intimate gatherings of rich and famous people, people who enjoy notoriety—though not nearly as much as he—people of means, people of uniform opinion on the state of the world, the economy, and, most importantly, the state of Barack Obama. He is interested in good food, in good company. He likes golf.

And he is interested in television. He watches HBO. Last winter, when the network's CEO visited the White House for a state dinner, the president asked him for copies of "True Detective," and of "Game of Thrones." Obama watches "House of Cards." He subscribes to the theory that we are living in the rather oxymoronic "golden age of television." [According to CBS](#), "His go-tos include 'Breaking Bad,' 'Mad Men,' and 'Homeland.'" So we know how Obama has spent at least 275 hours of his presidency. Did he punch out before watching Carrie go crazy?

...

...In the 1990s, America had a holiday from history. Today, it has a president on holiday. The boundary separating vacation from vocation has disappeared. The party won't end for years. And the hangover will be severe.

Jonah Goldberg reminds us of how some in the media called him the "Chess Master."

... You remember the Chess Master right? Here's Bob Herbert [describing](#) him back in 2009:

Mr. Obama is like a championship chess player, always several moves ahead of friend and foe alike. He's smart, deft, elegant and subtle. While Lindsey Graham was behaving like a 6-year-old on the Senate floor and Pete Sessions was studying passages in his Taliban handbook, Mr. Obama and his aides were assessing what's achievable in terms of stimulus legislation and how best to get there.

Here's Barack Obama describing his favorite person:

"I think I'm a better speechwriter than my speechwriters," Obama told him. "I know more about policies on any particular issue than my policy directors. And I'll tell you right now that I'm gonna think I'm a better political director than my political director."

Yesterday at his news conference, the president said he doesn't have a strategy yet for the Islamic State. The blowback required the White House to send out his spinners like a farmer sending out his sons in search of a wayward hog. Personally, I don't care that the president doesn't have a strategy for the Islamic State — yet. One of the downsides of leading from behind is that it by definition allows problems to fester and become more complex. ("In other news today, six people burned to death as firefighters watched another building burn to the ground as part of Fire Chief Obama's 'firefighting from behind' initiative.") ...

Streetwise Professor

[Obama Wore a Tan Suit Because He Much Prefers You Obsess Over Its Color, and Ignore the Fact That It's Empty](#)

by Craig Pirrong

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So it's not that "we" don't have a strategy: it's that Obama doesn't. I am sure that people in the DoD are simply beside themselves.

Obama did indicate that whatever his strategy ends up being, it will start with John Kerry going to the Middle East to build a coalition. You know, the John Kerry that is a laughingstock in the region. The John Kerry who is pretty much despised by everyone that matters: I am sure that even the nations he has sucked up to, namely Qatar and Turkey, have zero respect for him. The John Kerry that hasn't negotiated anything lasting and serious. The John Kerry who routinely travels to Geneva to be humiliated by Lavrov and the Iranians.

Kerry's one-one-claim to accomplishment as Secretary of State is negotiating a deal among the Afghan presidential candidates for an audit of the country's disputed election. No sooner did he get on the plane than the principals to the agreement started arguing. The audit has not taken place, and is not likely to take place anytime soon.

But Kerry will put that robust coalition together, have no fear.

On Ukraine, Obama couldn't utter the "I" word—invasion. [He said, in effect, move along, there's nothing new to see here:](#)

"I consider the actions that we've seen in the last week a continuation of what's been taking place for months now," Obama said, noting Russian President Vladimir Putin has ignored opportunities to find a diplomatic end to the dispute.

This is true. Russia has been invading for months, so its reinforcement of the invasion *is* just a continuation. Obama's bloodless indifference and inaction are also just a continuation. He is just waving Putin on, and Putin will just step on the accelerator.

For his part, Putin delivered a truculent statement that can be viewed as a victory speech, and as a signal of his intention to expand the conflict. He praised the rebels in Donbas for "intercepting Kiev's military operation," and called on them to mercifully let surrounded Ukrainian forces to retreat to avoid a "needless loss of life." He demanded Ukraine cease military actions, declare a cease fire, and negotiate with the rebels.

The title of the talk was ominous: "An address to the militia of Novorossiia." You know, of course, that Novorossiia encompasses far more than the Donbas.

Facing no real resistance from Merkel and Obama, Putin is going to push forward.

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Obama Channels My Great-Grandfather

by Craig Pirrong

My grandfather told a story about his step-father, Bill Wilcox. Wilcox “shot” oil wells (the fracking of its day) in West Virginia and southeastern Ohio. He lived in very rough coal mining country, and newspapers were something of a rarity.

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“The world has always been messy. . . . We’re just noticing now in part due to social media.” “Second reason people are feeling anxious is that if you watch the nightly news, it feels like the world is falling apart.”

No, actually. Obama is apparently trying to rebut claims that he bears some responsibility for the fraught state of the world, and to resist pressures that he needs to act more decisively against Putin, and ISIS, and Assad, and . . . by claiming that the current world isn’t really that much different than it’s ever been. It’s just that we notice it more because of Twitter and the nightly news. (Aside: who under age 70 watches the nightly news?)

Hardly. At least for the last century, and perhaps more, people even in remote rural areas have had access to world news, and could understand what was going on. Even though if-it-bleeds-it-leads has always been the motto of the media, people could distinguish between the normal mayhem, and truly exceptional times.

Obama is under attack because current circumstances are far more dire than in recent memory—including during the Twitter era; because Obama bears considerable responsibility for some of the chaos (especially ISIS); and because he seems totally overmatched in dealing with the situation (and indeed seems rather disinterested). It is not a matter of perceptions distorted because people are aware of things they wouldn’t have known about before because of new information technology. The perceptions are well-grounded.

Would that Obama deal forthrightly with the reality, rather than suggest that people are overreacting due to information overload. But this is a man who can’t even tolerate criticism of his choice in suits.

One other note about the fundraiser. Obama threw red meat about Republicans to the partisan- and very, very .1 percent-crowd. As described by Mark Knoller of CBS: “Pres again slammed GOP as ‘captured by an ideological, rigid, uncompromising core that won’t compromise & always wants its own way.’” His attacks on Republicans are far more pointed, and far more strident, than his criticism of Putin. He delivers his domestic partisan attacks with zeal and real intensity. His disparaging remarks about Putin are perfunctory and delivered without any

passion whatsoever. Attacking Republicans, he speaks from his core: criticizing Putin, he reads from the Teleprompter. In contrast, Putin vents about the US with an intensity similar to Obama's when he goes after Republicans.

It's clear what rouses Obama's passion. And it ain't world affairs, even when the world is careening towards disaster. This isn't a Twitter-driven perception. It's a reality.

Weekly Standard

Nobody's Fault

Liberals make excuses for Obama

by Noemie Emery

All of a sudden, people have noticed that we are in trouble, and many are saying it isn't the president's fault. All the bad news, from Iraq to Ukraine, from Libya and Syria to the Mexican border, just seems to have happened: Obama was standing there, golfing or shaking hands with donors, and, like a burst of bad weather, the winds blew, the skies opened, and things went to hell. Mysterious forces conspired against him, terrible setbacks occurred for no reason, and we were left with effects without a cause. His supporters commiserate with him and note his bad fortune at being in office at a time when events make his life difficult. Or they worry about the effect of all these misfortunes on his legacy. "Can Obama Weather the Current Geopolitical S—storm?" *Mother Jones's* David Corn wondered recently. Judging from recent poll numbers—36 percent approve of his conduct of foreign relations—the answer appears to be "no."

The reasons offered for why bad things aren't his doing fall into three different categories: (1) The system is broken, the country is polarized, and the Republicans have become too insane to deal with; (2) stuff happens, and no one at all can do much about it; and (3) people think that the president ought to be Superman and solve all their problems, which is really expecting too much. As Joshua Keating wrote on July 21 in *Slate*: "There's a tendency to judge U.S. foreign policy on the condition of the world at any given moment rather than the success of actual actions taken," as if the condition and the actions can have no conceivable link. "U.S. leverage is limited," wrote Robert Kuttner in the *Huffington Post* a day earlier. "U.S. projections of . . . bravado or prudence have little to do with" how recent events have come out. Added to this is the fact that we lack the easy simplicities of the good old days when Hitler and Stalin were murdering millions. "Republican jingoists scapegoat President Obama for all the world's ills and try to impose a simple story of weakness and strength on events of stupefying complexity," Kuttner added, complaining that today's wars lack the grandeur and moral simplicity of the Cold War, and of course World War II. "Who are the good guys and bad guys in Syria and Iraq?" Corn concurred: "Barack Obama is in charge . . . at a time when the world seems to be cracking up more than usual. . . . There are no simple fixes to these nuance-drenched problems. . . . None of these matters are easily resolved."

"Obama isn't stalled out because he can't lead," writes Norman Ornstein in the *Atlantic*. No, the Democrats' woes stem from the fact that the Republican party today is a fanatical opposition, bent for no very good reasons on bringing the president down. On a less partisan note, Chris Cillizza in the *Washington Post* looks back on our last three two-term presidents, and sees three men who campaigned as uniters turned into dividers by circumstance, or for reasons beyond

their control. “Being president is the most powerful job in the world, at which you will most certainly fail,” he warns office-seekers, citing the arcs carved by both Obama and Bush 43: high marks at the start, a long slow deflation, and then a collapse in year six. What was the cause? “The decline of the bully pulpit as a persuasion mechanism . . . the deep partisanship . . . not only in Congress, but also in the electorate . . . the splintering of the mainstream media . . . the need to be ever-present . . . the difficulty of trying to drive home your preferred message of the day.”

Next on the list is the “Green Lantern Syndrome,” or the tendency to see presidents as mythical comic-book heroes, able to fly, see around and through anything, and pick up tall buildings. Thus in the *Nation* Eric Alterman foams at the mouth as he lambastes Maureen Dowd for indulging the “now platitudinous Beltway belief that Obama should just fix everything, already” instead of standing by, fundraising and hanging around with movie and rock stars, as the country and world go to hell. In Republican years, the fish rots from the head, but with Obama it’s merely preposterously high expectations.

And how do these theories stand up to inspection? Not all that well. As to the idea that stuff simply happens, sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. At the end of World War II, for example, nothing on earth could have dislodged the Soviet Army from Eastern Europe once it was there, but the fact that Western Europe stayed out of the Communist orbit was entirely owing to men. It was the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and the formation of NATO that stopped the Communist advance in the middle of Europe, done by the will of Harry S. Truman with the ardent support of his next two successors, who held the line until the screws were tightened many years later by Ronald Reagan, and the Soviet empire collapsed from within.

Those years too were filled with “nuance-drenched problems,” and Truman, along with Dwight D. Eisenhower, Reagan, and John F. Kennedy, had to walk a very fine line between being weak enough to invite Russian aggression and aggressive enough to risk nuclear war. Replace Harry S. Truman with Henry A. Wallace (and make the three others a little less resolute) and the Cold War would have ended a whole lot less happily. Replace Barack Obama with John McCain, Mitt Romney, or Hillary Clinton, and Iraq would be now pretty much as it was when George W. Bush left it, with no jihadist state formed in the heart of the desert, ready and willing to bring the war home. When one thing goes wrong, it may be an accident, but when five do at once—Iraq, Syria, Libya, Ukraine, and our border—the man at the helm may have something to do with it, and a foreign policy based largely on John Lennon lyrics may be the proximate cause.

As for partisanship, it’s true that Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama ran as uniters and ended by further dividing the country, but this outcome was not foreordained. Clinton ran as a moderate, a “new kind of Democrat,” but at the start of his tenure behaved very much like an old one, picking his cabinet by bean-counting diversity standards, and allowing his wife to draft a huge, complex health care reform bill that was vastly unpopular. Knocked on his heels in the 1994 midterms, he triangulated his way back to the center, signed welfare reform, and seemed on his way to brokering a historic and bipartisan deal on reforming entitlements when he was impeached on perjury charges related to his affair with a college-age intern, which put the culture wars back on the boil and ended his term on a less pleasant note. Bush entered under a cloud, as the very close recount was always going to leave the losing side feeling cheated, and made a catastrophic mistake after September 11, when he did not convene a war cabinet with Democrats in it, which would have tied both parties into the war effort, given the Democrats a greater stake in its success (and part of the blame for any mistakes), and would have expanded

the pool of people from whom he was taking advice. With this, the course of the war might have gone very differently, Bush might have changed course in 2004, and not 2006, when public opinion was turning against him, and the Democrats might not have been able to weasel so easily out of their prior support for the war.

But Clinton and Bush were models of outreach compared with Obama, who burst on the national scene in July 2004 with a magnificent paean to red-and-blue unity, but by August 2009, acting as president, was tearing the country apart. Using the fiscal crisis as the pretext he needed to enact a progressive agenda, he passed extensive big-spending bills with no consensus behind them. But it was his passage of health care reform in the face of fierce opposition, expressed in surprise GOP wins in two big statewide elections, that brought him the resistance he deserved, especially when he used a technical loophole to ram Obamacare through Congress after Scott Brown's capture of the "Ted Kennedy seat" in ultra-blue Massachusetts made it impossible to pass it in the legitimate, normal, and time-honored way.

"Liberals really do not understand emotionally the extent to which the Tea Party was created by the Affordable Care Act and the feeling that its government was simply steamrolling it," as Megan McArdle tells us, correctly—a fact that eludes Obama's apologists in the media, who seem to regard Tea Party resistance as an inexplicable phenomenon with which Obama's own actions had nothing to do. And as for the Green Lantern part, they might have a better case if Obama hadn't campaigned as the Green Lantern, a creature possessed of magical powers who could not only lift us all up into new ways of being but cause the rise of the oceans to halt.

Obama's campaign rallies were revival meetings at which people fainted. Allusions were made to biblical figures, Moses and Jesus being just two of them, and his acceptance speech at his nominating convention in Denver featured a grandiose stage with Greek columns, suggesting parallels to Zeus. He was no commonplace politician but an exceptional figure and man. "Many of the president's supporters thought they were voting for the Green Lantern in 2008," observed Sean Trende, reeling off a long list of speeches in which Obama had promised "A nation healed. A world repaired. An America that believes again." As Trende put it, "The notion that Obama could provide unique leadership, rise above the old political rules, end the partisan bickering . . . and transform the country was the central theme of his presidential campaign."

But when the transformative figure fails to deliver even commonplace competence, the letdown is even more terrible. Which leads to the last of all the excuses: The job is now simply too big.

When Republicans fail, it's always their fault, but when things fall apart under Democrats, larger forces are always at work. In the first volume of his work, Reagan biographer Steven F. Hayward took a stroll with us down memory lane to the last time this happened, under one James Earl Carter: "The job of President is too difficult for any single person because of the complexity of the problems and the size of government," pronounced the historian Barbara Tuchman. "As the country goes to the polls in the 47th national election, the Presidency as an institution is in serious trouble," wrote the columnist Joseph Kraft. Political scientist Theodore Lowi said the presidency had become too big for even the likes of a Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Perhaps the burdens have become so great that, over time, no President will be judged adequate," said *U.S. News and World Report*. And *Newsweek* added, "The Presidency has in some measure defeated the last five men who have held it—and has persuaded some of the people who served them that it is in danger of becoming a game nobody can win."

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Free Beacon

[1,461 Days of Summer](#)

Column: Obama’s endless second-term vacation

by Matthew Continetti



President Obama golfs with former NBA star Alonzo Mourning in Martha's Vineyard

The headline was brutal. “Bam’s Golf War: Prez tees off as Foley’s parents grieve,” read [the cover](#) of Thursday’s [New York Daily News](#). Obama’s gaffe was this: He had denounced the beheading of James Foley from a vacation spot in Martha’s Vineyard, then went to the golf course. [Seems like he had a great time](#). Such a great time that he returned to the Farm Neck Golf Club—sorry, [membership is full](#)—the next day.

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Attacking the president for vacation is usually the job of the out party. But these days it is the job of all parties. Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, ISIL, Ebola, child migrants on the border, racial strife in Ferguson, an American murdered by the caliphate—critics say the president [who danced to every song at Ann Jordan's birthday party](#) seems remote and aloof from, and even mildly annoyed by, such concerns.

I disagree. Not with the judgment that Obama is detached, [dialing it in](#), contemptuous of events that interfere with his plans. I disagree with the idea that this August has been different, in any meaningful way, from the rest of Obama's second term. For this president, the distinction between "time off" and "time on" is meaningless. For this president, every day is a vacation. And has been for some time. He is like Cosmo Kramer of *Seinfeld*. "[His whole life is a fantasy camp](#)," George Costanza says of his friend. "People should plunk down \$2,000 to live like him for a week." Imagine what they would pay to live like Obama.

Uncomfortable with all of the golf on Martha's Vineyard? It is but [a fraction of Obama's habit](#). Since 2009, the president has played [more than 185 rounds](#), typically with Wall Street cronies such as [Robert Wolf](#) and sports celebrities such as Alonzo Mourning, Tony Kornheiser, and Michael Wilbon. So devoted to golf is Obama that [he wears Game Golf](#), which tracks how well a golfer shoots. Game Golf is not something you wear as a lark. You use it to study and hone your game. The hours on the course are just the start; there are also the hours spent analyzing results at home. Obama is not golfing like an amateur. He's golfing like a man who wants to join the PGA tour.

While on vacation, the Obamas dined at [Atria](#), where the cioppino costs \$42 and sides include olive oil whipped potatoes and truffle-parmesan fries. But fine dining is not something the Obamas limit to the beach. They are foodies, patronizing the best restaurants in Chicago, D.C., Old Town, New York, Key Largo, and Los Angeles. I have been to some of these restaurants; the president has great taste. Recently, as part of his "[bear is loose](#)" shtick, he has visited sandwich places, bars, and coffee shops. He meets the public, he becomes associated with a fashionable locale, and he spends a few dollars on small businesses. It's a good thing. Here, at last, is an Obama initiative that does not harm the economy.

Good food is not a luxury for Obama. It is a staple. Before the president departed for Martha's Vineyard, he shared a limo ride with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey. The general explained to the president the situation in Iraq. He warned of horrible consequences for the Yazidis, for Iraq, and for the United States if the jihadists conquered Mt. Sinjar and took Erbil. Obama decided to meet with his national security team. The presidential limo was diverted. Guess where it had been going. "The Italian dinner in Georgetown with Michelle Obama would have to wait," [Politico reported](#).

Think two weeks in Martha's Vineyard sends the wrong message? On July 31, Katy Perry performed at the White House. She was there to celebrate the Special Olympics—a worthy cause. But the same standard applies. If cutting loose in Martha's Vineyard while ISIL is rampaging abroad is "bad optics," so is hosting a [teenage dream](#) while, in the words of Chuck Hagel, the "[Middle East is blowing up](#)." Propriety is not a word one associates with Katy Perry.

The refrain of her latest hit: “So let me get you in your birthday suit / It’s time to bring out the big balloons.” She’s not talking about party favors.

In the 1990s, we heard about the all-night delivery-pizza brainstorm sessions in the Clinton White House. In the teens, we hear about the soporific, self-congratulatory gourmet dinner parties where Obama is the star. In May, [the New York Times recently reported](#), the president “was up well past midnight” hosting Ken Burns and his wife, two business executives, and hedge fund billionaire Tom Steyer—Democratic donors all. “Previous dinners at the White House,” the *Times* said, “have drawn varied celebrities, including Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith, Morgan Freeman, and Bono.” When Obama travels overseas, he is more interested in organizing dinners of “[interesting Italians](#)” than in organizing the Free World, such as it is, against autocrats and Islamists.

These long, languid, pretentious meals have become routine. Earlier this week, when Obama returned to Washington for a vacation “break,” he did not take all of his meals at the White House. One night he had dinner at the home of Sam Kass, the chef and health activist who is [engaged to MSNBC host Alex Wagner](#). Dinner lasted [five hours](#). Again: This was during his *break* from vacation.

At another dinner earlier this year, in Paris, the president spent two hours at [Restaurant Helen](#), where he drank champagne and caught up with old friends. A French investor seated nearby told the *Times* that Obama “seemed quite relaxed and glad to be with friends, without stress.” I do not doubt it.

Criticizing the president the other day, Joe Scarborough nonetheless conceded, “[Presidents are always working, whether on a golf course or behind a desk](#).” But is that actually so? What, exactly, does President Obama do? He seems to learn everything from the papers—from the IRS scandal to the VA scandal to the mobilization of the Missouri National Guard. International events routinely take him by surprise. His professional activities include fundraising—[40 events this year so far](#)—and perfunctory addresses to the public. He goes through the presidential motions: meeting with officials and foreign dignitaries, holding press conferences, sitting for interviews, shipping MREs to endangered populations, ordering air strikes. But there is no passion behind these activities, no restless energy, no managerial competence, no sense of purpose or mission or strategy, none of the qualities associated with leadership in business, politics, and culture.

[Donors complain](#) the president does not schmooze, or even have much interest in what they are doing or thinking. Democrats on the Hill have the same complaint. “[Obama Is Seen as Frustrating His Own Party](#),” read the headline on the front-page of the *Times* this week. The story opened with a telling anecdote. The congressional leadership was meeting with the president at the White House. Harry Reid complained to President Obama that Mitch McConnell is holding up judicial nominations. Obama scoffed. “You and Mitch work it out,” he told Reid. He wasn’t interested.

What does interest Obama is celebrity: His own, and that of others. He enjoys opportunities to expound on the world, as though he were an essayist for the *New Yorker*, which he surely will be soon after leaving office. He wants to be recognized in public, during his choreographed stops outside the White House, and during “major speeches” that lead to applause but no discernible change in affairs, and during appearances on talk shows, [the more mindless the better](#). He likes intimate gatherings of rich and famous people, people who enjoy notoriety—though not nearly as much as he—people of means, people of uniform opinion on the state of

the world, the economy, and, most importantly, the state of Barack Obama. He is interested in good food, in good company. He likes golf.

And he is interested in television. He watches HBO. Last winter, when the network's CEO visited the White House for a state dinner, the president asked him for copies of "True Detective," and of "Game of Thrones." Obama watches "House of Cards." He subscribes to the theory that we are living in the rather oxymoronic "golden age of television." [According to CBS](#), "His go-tos include 'Breaking Bad,' 'Mad Men,' and 'Homeland.'" So we know how Obama has spent at least 275 hours of his presidency. Did he punch out before watching Carrie go crazy?

This is the life: international travel, motorcades, sycophants and courtiers, tables at the best restaurants, round after round of golf, parties in a cool house, watching the best television shows, meeting all these renowned figures—and having them kiss up to you—ruminating over your legacy, over the causes of polarization, over the geopolitical situation, understanding other peoples' motivations better than they do. Kramer has nothing on Obama. Politics, terrorists, Iran, Putin, Congress are all distractions. Best to enjoy the experience to the utmost. You are only president once.

In the 1990s, America had a holiday from history. Today, it has a president on holiday. The boundary separating vacation from vocation has disappeared. The party won't end for years. And the hangover will be severe.

National Review

[Shhh, Mr. President](#)

by Jonah Goldberg

Because I have been on an extended road trip, I haven't followed the news as closely as I might ("They don't call it a multi-state killing spree for nothing" — The Couch). But from the broad brushstrokes I take it that the president is just crushing it. Everything is falling into place. He had to send Joe Biden off to Office Depot to get more notepads because he's checking off everything on his to-do lists so quickly. (Biden came back with a ten-gallon jug of Elmer's glue, some pink-unicorn duct tape, and an office chair he won't stop spinning around and around and around in. "Wheeeeeee!") By this time next week, expect to have Elvis's "Taking Care of Business — In a Flash" [logo](#) painted on the tail of Air Force One.

Oh wait, that must be the road hypnosis talking ("You're losing it man, keep it together." — The Couch). Suddenly Joe Biden stops swiveling in his chair and announces in his most stentorian voice: "Attention White House. Attention White House. The Chess Master has left the building. Wheeeeeeeeeee!"

You remember the Chess Master right? Here's Bob Herbert [describing](#) him back in 2009:

Mr. Obama is like a championship chess player, always several moves ahead of friend and foe alike. He's smart, deft, elegant and subtle. While Lindsey Graham was behaving like a 6-year-old on the Senate floor and Pete Sessions was studying passages in his Taliban handbook, Mr. Obama and his aides were assessing what's achievable in terms of stimulus legislation and how best to get there.

Here's Barack Obama describing his favorite person:

"I think I'm a better speechwriter than my speechwriters," Obama told him. "I know more about policies on any particular issue than my policy directors. And I'll tell you right now that I'm gonna think I'm a better political director than my political director."

Yesterday at his news conference, the president said he doesn't have a strategy yet for the Islamic State. The blowback required the White House to send out his spinners like a farmer sending out his sons in search of a wayward hog. Personally, I don't care that the president doesn't have a strategy for the Islamic State — yet. One of the downsides of leading from behind is that it by definition allows problems to fester and become more complex. ("In other news today, six people burned to death as firefighters watched another building burn to the ground as part of Fire Chief Obama's 'firefighting from behind' initiative.")

How to deal with the Islamic State *right now* is a very tough question, particularly if you're Barack Obama. What bothers me is his decision to announce to the world he has pretty much no idea what he's doing. Taking your time to formulate a strategy, even — especially! — a strategy necessitated by your own mistakes and inattention is entirely defensible.

But when the world already thinks you're weak, vacillating, and overwhelmed, saying in the pithiest way possible that you're weak, vacillating, and overwhelmed strikes me as a mistake. But hey, what do I know, I'm just a guy transporting a dingo across the continent.

Of course, if Obama was a Chess Master who sees ten moves ahead, this would all be an elaborate rope-a-dope. Like Michael Corleone, he would wait for his enemies to show themselves and reveal their motives. China is suddenly testing our resolve in the Pacific? "Excellent," Obama says behind tented fingers. The Russians are calling our bluff? "Ahhh...the game is afoot." Egypt and the U.A.E. are writing us off as a paper tiger? "Just as I expected," quoth the Chess Master to his briefer. The Germans can't be counted on to stay loyal? "Of course. Of course." The Poles have made it clear they consider the U.S. an unreliable, even dangerous ally? "I am disappointed I was so right about them all along." The Iranians pour Hezbollah into Syria? "Rouhani's a pimp. He never could have outfought Ahmadinejad. But I didn't know until this day that it was Khamenei all along."

The Chess Master was testing our friends and exposing our real foes. Like the sea snake that guy in *Gladiator* described, Obama let his prey nip and bite at him and now, in a shockingly mixed metaphor, the Venus fly trap snaps shut for the Labor Day Massacre.

The reality, alas, is that Obama is — and has always been — out of his depth on the international stage. Given the prestige of the presidency and the incredible institutional forces behind the office, particularly when a liberal is elected, it takes time to burn through all of the political capital that comes with the job. But Obama has been throwing that political capital on an Oval Office bonfire like so much kindling on a clean and safe Anchorage night. In yet another metaphor that threatens to burn out the dilithium crystals, the credibility inferno is reaching China Syndrome proportions ("You should have said 'literally' a lot! Literally means 'pay attention to how smart my metaphors are.' Wheeeeeee!" — Joe Biden). For a depressing but brilliant analysis of this meltdown, see Bret Stephens's piece in the new Commentary coincidentally titled "The Meltdown."

Remember the famous SNL clip where Phil Hartman plays Ronald Reagan? He's an amiable dunce in public, but get him behind closed doors and he's a master strategist? Well, maybe that stuff about Obama being the liberal opposite of Reagan is true. Out in public, he seems like he's the Chess Master (though I never saw it). But get him behind closed doors and he's in the chair next to Biden shouting "I can spin faster than you!"



LET'S PLAY
"OBAMA'S NATIONAL SECURITY"

I'LL DRAW RED LINES,
YOU KEEP STEPPING OVER THEM,
THEN I SEND YOU TWEETS.



