

September 30, 2015

More embarrassment for our foreign policy occurred this weekend at the UN. [Bret Stephens](#) writes on the "unteachable president."

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In this cheapened Hegelian world view, the U.S. can relax because History is on our side, and the arc of history bends toward justice. Why waste your energies to fulfill a destiny that is already inevitable? And why get in the way of your adversary's certain doom?

It's easy to accept this view of life if you owe your accelerated good fortune to a superficial charm and understanding of the way the world works. It's also easier to lecture than to learn, to preach than to act. History will remember [Barack Obama](#) as the president who conducted foreign policy less as a principled exercise in the application of American power than as an extended attempt to justify the evasion of it.

From Aleppo to Donetsk to Kunduz, people are living with the consequences of that evasion.

[NY Post OpEd](#) says we have "turned Putin into the world's most powerful leader." *The baton was officially transferred Monday to the world's new sole superpower — and Vladimir Putin willingly picked it up.*

President Obama (remember him?) embraced the ideals espoused by the United Nations' founders 70 years ago: Diplomacy and "international order" will win over time, while might and force will lose.

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And who'd lead this new coalition? Hint: Moscow has always celebrated the Allies' World War II victory as a Russian-led fete.

Oh, and if anyone wondered which Syrian players the coalition would rely on as allies, Putin made it clear: "No one but President [Bashar al-]Assad's armed forces and Kurd militia are fighting the Islamic State."

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And that, to borrow from Obama's speech, is bad for Syria, where the war will continue as long as Assad remains in power. It's bad for Europe and Syria's neighbors, which have no idea what to do with that war's refugees.

And it's bad for America. Because sooner or later, after more bloodshed and under even worse conditions than now, our next president will be called upon to retake the leadership baton from Putin. And that could prove tricky.

That was the views from the WSJ and the NY Post. How about a man writing for **Foreign Policy** who worked in Dem administrations?

... Indeed, according to recent reports like this one in the Washington Post, Obama, for his part, is still reportedly trying to figure out what the heck his next halfway measure should be in Syria — should he dial up more tweets from the NSC or perhaps give another speech about how bad the options are in that country? Certainly, his U.N. address on Monday did not offer any clear answers — about anything. (For those of you who missed it, here is a summary of Obama's U.N. remarks: "Good morning. Cupcakes. Unicorns. Rainbows. Putin is mean. Thank you very much.")

Perhaps I am being unfair. Despite the fact that our efforts against IS are clearly not working, cooked intelligence notwithstanding, and that the extremist group is actually gaining strength in important ways (see this weekend's New York Times story), it may be that this is all part of a grand plan on the part of the U.S. president. He wanted out of the region. He did not want to put U.S. boots on the ground. He wanted someone or a group from the region to pick up the slack.

And that's exactly what he's getting. ...

... When my guests at Foreign Policy's most recent Editor's Roundtable podcast discussed which world leader had done the best job of advancing his or her country's international influence during the Obama years, it was a near dead heat between Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Putin for the top spot. The No. 3 position went to the head of a quasi-state, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In other words, the big winners were U.S. adversaries who took advantage of the lack of resolve, vision, and unity among the leaders of the West to enhance their own standing and that of the state or aspirant state they represented.

But this was not a partisan podcast hit job. Two members of the panel (myself and Rosa Brooks) served in Democratic administrations. Instead our conversation, for what it's worth, was more a recognition of what is perhaps the moral of the more troubling elements of the Obama foreign-policy tale to date: In geopolitics, as in physics, nature abhors a vacuum.

Anne Applebaum makes the point that the Russian people suffer because of the victories our weak president has handed to him.

... In fact, Putin does not have the military muscle to project genuine influence into the Middle East. He won't be able to build up his forces stealthily, as he did in Ukraine. Nor does he get anything of material or strategic importance out of his alliance with the embattled Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad. But he will attain the appearance of influence, and that's all that matters. It could certainly be useful abroad: Together with his appearance at the U.N. for the first time in a decade and his long interview with Charlie Rose, it might — indeed, almost certainly will — help draw U.S. and European attention away from the humanitarian disaster he has created in

eastern Ukraine, and help lift the sanctions that are dragging down the Russian economy and hitting the wallets of some of his closest friends.

But the appearance of influence is even more useful at home. You and I might assume that the prospect of a Russian street revolution is far-fetched, but Putin, having watched what happened in East Germany in 1989 from his KGB office in Dresden, and having then watched what happened to Moammar Gadaffi in 2011, clearly worries about it quite often. To stave off this fate, his state-controlled television rumbles on constantly about the fecklessness of Europe and the corruption of America — just in case any Russians are tempted by the lure of democracy — as well as the total chaos that his policies have helped foment in Syria. The arrival of Russian troops, some in transit directly from the Ukrainian border, is designed to reinforce this message: Putin is ready to help another dictator reestablish dictatorship, reassert control and imprison all of his enemies, in Syria and, if needed, in Russia too. ...

... Of course, the Syrian people aren't really the point here — and the Russian people aren't either. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been bad for his countrymen and bad for his country — for its economy, its image, its influence — and a tragedy for Ukraine. Expect the same kind of outcome from his incursion into Syria too.

Another intellectual lightweight is providing cover for presidential weakness, vacillation and fecklessness. [Richard Epstein](#) writes on the "cardinal sins of Francis."

During his whirlwind tour of the United States, Pope Francis used his speeches to the U.S. Congress and the United Nations to articulate his views on the family, human life, violence, the environment, social justice, and many other issues. No one doubts the sincerity of the Pope's pursuit of goodness. And surely no one disagrees with his condemnation of aggression and hatred against the young, the vulnerable, and the poor. But too often, his political naiveté got the better of him. As a result, many of his controversial pronouncements, if rigorously implemented at the policy level, would pose a threat to overall human welfare. Specifically, his ideas about violence, the environment, and markets deserve a critical look.

The Pope responded tepidly to the epidemic of violence rocking the world today. These are not good times. The massive slaughter of Muslims, Christians, and others in [Syria](#) and across the Middle East has spawned a refugee problem of unparalleled proportions, along with the systematic destruction of cultural artifacts and religious shrines in [Palmyra](#) and elsewhere. It is all well and good for the Pope to demand that the more fortunate aid refugees in their time of need. But the reality is that the refugee crisis will never be solved unless resolute action is taken to fix the problem at its source, which could mean developing a coherent military program to meet force with force.

Here, though, the Pope goes wobbly by saying that the use of force against the Islamic State might be justified if done on a multilateral basis—a sure recipe for impasse and drift, even as thousands more are killed or sent packing until some collective response is found. ...

WSJ

An Unteachable President

For Obama, it isn't the man in the arena who counts. It's the speaker on the stage.

by Bret Stephens

Barack Obama told the U.N.'s General Assembly on Monday he's concerned that "dangerous currents risk pulling us back into a darker, more disordered world." It's nice of the president to notice, just don't expect him to do much about it.

Recall that it wasn't long ago that Mr. Obama took a sunnier view of world affairs. The tide of war was [receding](#). Al Qaeda was on a path to [defeat](#). ISIS was "a jayvee team" in "[Lakers uniforms](#)." Iraq was an Obama administration [success](#) story. Bashar Assad's days were [numbered](#). The Arab Spring was a [rejoinder](#) to, rather than an opportunity for, Islamist violence. The intervention in Libya was [vindication](#) for the "lead from behind" approach to intervention. The reset with Russia was a [success](#), a position he maintained as late as September 2013. In Latin America, the "[trend lines](#) are good."

"Overall," as he told Tom Friedman in August 2014—shortly after ISIS had seized control of Mosul and as [Vladimir Putin](#) was muscling his way into eastern Ukraine—"I think there's still cause for optimism."

It's a remarkable record of prediction. One hundred percent wrong. The professor president who loves to talk about teachable moments is himself unteachable. Why is that?

Some of the explanations are ordinary and almost forgivable. All politicians like to boast. The predictions seemed reasonably well-founded at the time they were made. Mr. Obama wasn't really making predictions: He was choosing optimism, placing a bet on hope. His successes were of his own making; the failures owed to forces beyond his control. And so on.

But there's a deeper logic to the president's thinking, starting with ideological necessity. The president had to declare our foreign policy dilemmas solved so he could focus on his favorite task of "nation-building at home." A strategy of retreat and accommodation, a bias against intervention, a preference for minimal responses—all this was about getting America off the hook, doing away with the distraction of other people's tragedies.

When you've defined your political task as "fundamentally transforming the United States of America"—as Mr. Obama did on the eve of his election in 2008—then your hands are full. Let other people sort out their own problems.

But that isn't all. The president also has an overarching moral theory about American power, expressed in his 2009 [contention](#) in Prague that "moral leadership is more powerful than any weapon."

At the time, Mr. Obama was speaking about the end of the Cold War—which, he claimed, came about as a result of "peaceful protest"—and of his desire to see a world without nuclear weapons. It didn't seem to occur to him that the possession of such weapons by the U.S. also had a hand in winning the Cold War. Nor did he seem to contemplate the idea that moral leadership can never safely be a substitute for weapons unless those leaders are willing to throw themselves at the mercy of their enemies' capacity for shame.

In late-era South Africa and the Soviet Union, where men like F.W. de Klerk and Mikhail Gorbachev had a sense of shame, the Obama theory had a chance to work. In Iran in 2009, or in Syria today, it doesn't.

Then again, that distinction doesn't much matter to this president, since he seems to think that seizing the moral high ground is victory enough. Under Mr. Obama, the U.S. is on "the right side of history" when it comes to the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine, or the killing fields in Syria, or the importance of keeping Afghan girls in school.

Having declared our good intentions, why muck it up with the raw and compromising exercise of power? In Mr. Obama's view, it isn't the man in the arena who counts. It's the speaker on the stage.

Finally, Mr. Obama believes history is going his way. "What? Me worry?" says the immortal Alfred E. Neuman, and that seems to be the president's attitude toward Mr. Putin's interventions in Syria ("[doomed to fail](#)") and Ukraine ("[not so smart](#)"), to say nothing of his sang-froid when it comes to the rest of his foreign-policy debacles.

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NY Post

[Obama has turned Putin into the world's most powerful leader](#)

by Benny Avni

The baton was officially transferred Monday to the world's new sole superpower — and Vladimir Putin willingly picked it up.

President Obama (remember him?) embraced the ideals espoused by the United Nations' founders 70 years ago: Diplomacy and "international order" will win over time, while might and force will lose.

Putin, too, appealed to UN laws (as he sees them), but he also used his speech to announce the formation of a "broad international coalition" to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

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And who'd lead this new coalition? Hint: Moscow has always celebrated the Allies' World War II victory as a Russian-led fete.

Oh, and if anyone wondered which Syrian players the coalition would rely on as allies, Putin made it clear: "No one but President [Bashar al-]Assad's armed forces and Kurd militia are fighting the Islamic State."

That, of course, isn't Obama's view. America's president said he opposed the "logic of supporting tyrants." After all, Assad "drops barrel bombs on innocent children."

But Putin has troops in Syria, is arming Assad to the teeth and signed a pact of anti-ISIS intelligence-sharing with Assad, Iran and the leaders of Iraq (the ones America fought to put in power).

And [after meeting Obama for the first time in two years Monday](#), he spoke vaguely about future "joint air attacks on ISIS." But no agreement on Assad was reached in the 90-minute meeting.

Meantime, if Obama has any realistic Syria plan of his own — beyond having Assad magically "transitioned" out of the country and simultaneously fighting ISIS — he failed to present it during his UN speech. Or any other time.

Instead, he scolded an "isolated" Putin for using force to annex Crimea and other parts of Ukraine. "Imagine if, instead, Russia had engaged in true diplomacy," said Obama. "That would be better for Ukraine, but also better for Russia, and better for the world."

Then again, imagine if Obama's eloquence were backed by, say, American-led NATO. Would Putin so easily be able to eat up Ukraine and take over Syria? Not likely.

But even as he chided Russia, China and even Iran for being steeped in the policies of the past, it was Obama who at times sounded like a throwback to days of yore.

His celebration of the United Nations was reminiscent of scenes from 1950s movies that portrayed it as a place where problems are actually resolved. In reality, along the decades (and even more so in the last six years), the UN became so paralyzed that it can no longer serve as arbiter of global security.

Obama's speech was, as ever, full of promise. His turn from using "might" to claiming to have "right" on his side and relying on diplomacy have led to America's opening up to Cuba and a key deal with Iran on nukes. But these are yet to yield positive results. "If this deal is implemented," he said of Iran, "our world is safer." Big if.

By contrast, Putin's deployment of forces in Syria and arming of Assad create facts on the ground. They have also propelled him to the top by taking initiative on today's most consequential world fight.

Although Obama received much less applause during his Monday speech than in past years, he's still well-liked at the world body. Yet those who count, the ones he scolded in his speech — Putin, Assad, China's Xi Jinping and even Iran's President Hassan Rouhani — weren't in their seats to hear his words.

Because as forceful as Obama's words are, they're rarely backed by action.

Putin? Nobody applauded him. He's more interested in being feared than liked. Then again, his words, at most, are meant to explain forceful action.

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And that, to borrow from Obama's speech, is bad for Syria, where the war will continue as long as Assad remains in power. It's bad for Europe and Syria's neighbors, which have no idea what to do with that war's refugees.

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Foreign Policy

Leave it to Vlad (and the Supreme Leader)

The Obama plan to exit the Middle East now becomes clear.

by David Rothkopf

When Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, met with journalists in New York last Friday, he took pains to note that Iran and Russia were not joining together in a "coalition" in Syria. They were sharing intelligence. They were discussing strategy. They were in constant communication. But a coalition? No.

Two days later, the Iraqi government announced it too was sharing intelligence with Russia, Iran, and Syria. So perhaps Rouhani was being literal in a different way when he disavowed being in a coalition with Russia — because what he was actually involved in was a coalition with Russia, Iraq, and Syria.

During his discussion of the non-coalition coalition, Rouhani did not hesitate to emphasize how closely aligned his country's views regarding the situation in Syria are with those of the Russians. He described them as "a mirror" of one another. Then, in recounting a conversation he had with Vladimir Putin prior to the recent Russian military buildup in Syria, he spoke of the Russian president's expressed desire to get involved in that country in order to mount a "more effective" campaign against the Islamic State (IS).

More effective than who, you might ask? (Do you really have to ask?) The implication was clear. Putin, who views a collapse in Syria as a local issue with the regime in Damascus serving as a bulwark against the spread of extremism into the gut of Russia, doesn't think much of the U.S.-led efforts to date against IS. In fact, during his address to the U.N. on Monday, Putin implied the United States was doing nothing to fight IS in Syria, [stating](#), "We should finally acknowledge that no one but President Assad's armed forces and Kurdish militias are truly fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria."

Interestingly, Rouhani also said that Putin told him that he had let Barack Obama know of his plans to dial up the heat during a conversation with the American president. This is unsettling because the United States has seemed so unprepared for the Russian escalation, although apparently the White House had a president-to-president heads-up that it was coming.

Indeed, according to recent reports like this [one](#) in the Washington Post, Obama, for his part, is still reportedly trying to figure out what the heck his next halfway measure should be in Syria — should he dial up more tweets from the NSC or perhaps give another speech about how bad the options are in that country? Certainly, his [U.N. address](#) on Monday did not offer any clear answers — about anything. (For those of you who missed it, here is a summary of Obama's U.N. remarks: "Good morning. Cupcakes. Unicorns. Rainbows. Putin is mean. Thank you very much.")

Perhaps I am being unfair. Despite the fact that our efforts against IS are clearly not working, cooked intelligence notwithstanding, and that the extremist group is actually gaining strength in important ways (see this weekend's New York Times [story](#)), it may be that this is all part of a grand plan on the part of the U.S. president. He wanted out of the region. He did not want to put U.S. boots on the ground. He wanted someone or a group from the region to pick up the slack.

And that's exactly what he's getting.

Putin has repeatedly shown that he would not hesitate to put boots on the ground (even if periodically he does resist the temptation to send his troops in wearing other pieces of their uniforms — for example, insignia as in Ukraine). Neither has Iran shown any hesitation in extending its influence in the region via either its military, military advisors, or sponsored proxy warriors, or toward using the economic, political, or intelligence means at its disposal. In fact, according to a senior Israeli official, Bibi Netanyahu's government believes that Iran has moved some 1,500 troops into Syria in recent days. The governments in Damascus and Baghdad have long been beholden to the kindness of the not-quite-strangers from Tehran and Moscow. All of these actors see the rise of the Islamic State and the civil wars in Syria and Iraq as direct and serious threats to core interests (in ways that others with proxy stakes in Syria — like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Qatar — do not).

For all of these reasons, quite apart from the more recent heads-up from Putin, the president of the United States and his advisors must have known that the most likely people to answer their wishes and step up to deal with IS must have been this non-coalition coalition. And since the United States has only taken steps to empower the Iranians of late while soft-pedaling issues that might have put us in even more adversarial positions vis-à-vis Putin, Bashar al-Assad, and the Iraqis, it seems clear that the president was perfectly comfortable giving them the room to do as they have done.

Obama's plan is now becoming clear. We'll leave Syria and Iraq to the Russians and the Iranians. Both of the war-torn countries are a mess. There is no political will in the United States to get more involved. What could go wrong? What could the long-term implications be of allowing the Russians and the Iranians to continue their clear and thus far successful strategies of extending their influence in their overlapping neighborhoods by fueling fractures within their neighbors and then stepping in and gaining influence over chunks of those neighbors, thereby also weakening their opponents? It is an approach that has given Russia bits of Georgia and Ukraine and has explained muscle-flexing in Belarus and the Baltics. It is the approach that has expanded Iranian influence from Lebanon to Yemen (not to mention, of course, Syria and Iraq).

No matter that Russia has aggressively positioned itself as a rival to the United States worldwide and that Putin has, due to domestic economic and demographic calamity, only one card to play in maintaining his 80 percent approval rating at home — which is "restoring Russian greatness" through aggression abroad. No matter that he has crushed democracy, dramatically ramped up military spending, modernized his nuclear forces, and rattled his saber aggressively. No matter that the crucial balance between Sunni and Shiite blocs in the Middle East is being

eroded as the Sunnis have sustained setback after setback (many self-inflicted) and that virtually every Sunni loss is matched by an Iranian gain. No matter that these are two of the most dangerous players in the world, both high on the list of potential adversaries our leaders in the Pentagon worry about.

We have gone from the victory-at-any-cost mindset of World War II to the exit-at-any-cost mindset of the Obama years.

While self-described “realists” may hail the restraint and President [Eeyore](#)’s unrivaled mastery of focusing on the downside to any possible U.S. action, and while the president’s defenders will no doubt also revert to the always legitimate argument that the disastrous invasion of Iraq played a big role in getting us to where we are today, they neglect a critical fact. What’s done is done. We are where we are. Let’s stipulate that Iraq was a disaster. Let’s stipulate that the Arab Spring was largely a self-inflicted wound on the part of regimes that neglected their obligations to their people and to modernity. Let’s stipulate that we had no good options in Syria.

When an American president is left with a lousy situation and no good options, then there is still the necessity of figuring out how to best advance U.S. interests going forward. (The specter of foreign fighters, the stream of refugees into Europe, and the strategic consequences of long-term control of the Middle East all underscore that we actually do have long-term interests and the “it’s not our problem argument” is just naive and shortsighted.) “It’s too hard” and “I don’t want to play” are not acceptable answers because what they produce is precisely what we have gotten: adversaries seizing the initiative and setting in motion a potential permanent redistribution of power and influence in a strategically important region of the world. (By the way, this will soon include Afghanistan, another place the U.S. plan for getting the heck out of Dodge has [floundered](#). Iran is already seeking greater influence in that country as stumbling and political infighting in Kabul and the rise of IS have raised the specter of growing instability in that battered land.)

By the way, none of this means that it will be easy for the Russian-Iranian team to defeat extremists. Nor do I think that is their primary objective at the moment. What they seek to do is gain the kind of foothold that will guarantee them critical leverage in any political settlement to come in Syria. They will either be able to keep Assad in place or, alternatively, ensure him leadership for a transition period and then have the ability to select or veto his successor. This will guarantee both of them what they have wanted most all along — continued influence in Damascus. That is what both their regional strategies require, and because the United States, Europe, the Sunnis, and even the Israelis would all be perfectly happy with that in exchange for putting a lid on IS and stemming refugee flows, it seems likely that the Russian-Iranian gambit will work. They will get what they want, and the world, including Obama, will declare it a victory. Will they work the same way to stabilize Iraq? Perhaps. But is their goal there restoring

Baghdad’s control over the whole country or just ensuring its control over a substantial portion of that country? What will that mean if IS remains active and pushed up against the Jordanian border? What will it mean if the result is further minimization of Sunni interests in Iraq and a much more pronounced Iranian threat to the Gulf states? These are questions Washington should have been asking before ceding leadership to those who lack Obama’s values but have the will to act that eludes him.

When my guests at Foreign Policy’s most recent [Editor’s Roundtable podcast](#) discussed which world leader had done the best job of advancing his or her country’s international influence during the Obama years, it was a near dead heat between Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Putin for the top spot. The No. 3 position went to the head of a quasi-state, Abu

Bakr al-Baghdadi. In other words, the big winners were U.S. adversaries who took advantage of the lack of resolve, vision, and unity among the leaders of the West to enhance their own standing and that of the state or aspirant state they represented.

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Washington Post [Putin's power plays](#)

by Anne Applebaum

It is always tempting, when writing about the Russian president, to lapse into geopolitical waffle. Though the Cold War ended a quarter century ago, we are still accustomed to thinking of Vladimir Putin as a global actor, a representative of eternal Russian interests, the inheritor of czarism/Lenin/Stalin, a man who inhabits a Kissingerian world of state actors who compete against other state actors for control over territory, all of them playing a gigantic game of Risk.

To those wearing this particular set of rose-colored glasses, Putin's recent foray into Syria makes a certain kind of sense. His amazingly well-timed decision — just before the U.N.

General Assembly session! — to [send](#) hundreds of Russian soldiers, 28 fighter jets, helicopters, tanks and artillery has been variously described as a bid to re-enter the modern Great Game of the Middle East; to extend Russian influence to the Mediterranean; to shore up the Iranian government; and to displace the United States as a regional leader.

All of which misses the main point. For Putin's entry into Syria, like almost everything else that he does, is part of his own bid to stay in power. During the first 10 years he was president, Putin's claim to legitimacy went, in effect, like this: I may not be a democrat, but I give you stability, a rise in economic growth and pensions paid on time. In an era of falling oil prices and economic sanctions, not to mention [vast public-sector corruption](#), that argument no longer works. Russians are demonstrably poorer this year than they were last year, and things look set to get [worse](#). And so his new argument goes, in effect, like this: "I may not be a democrat and the economy may be sinking, but Russia is regaining its place in the world — and besides, the alternative to authoritarianism is not democracy but chaos."

In fact, Putin does not have the military muscle to project genuine influence into the Middle East. He won't be able to build up his forces stealthily, as he did in Ukraine. Nor does he get anything of material or strategic importance out of his alliance with the embattled Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad. But he will attain the appearance of influence, and that's all that matters. It could certainly be useful abroad: Together with his appearance at the U.N. for the first time in a decade and his [long interview with Charlie Rose](#), it might — indeed, almost certainly will — help draw U.S. and European attention away from the humanitarian disaster he has created in eastern Ukraine, and help lift the sanctions that are dragging down the Russian economy and hitting the wallets of some of his closest friends.

But the appearance of influence is even more useful at home. You and I might assume that the prospect of a Russian street revolution is far-fetched, but Putin, having watched what happened

in East Germany in 1989 from his KGB office in Dresden, and having then watched what happened to Moammar Gaddafi in 2011, clearly worries about it quite often. To stave off this fate, his state-controlled television rumbles on constantly about the fecklessness of Europe and the corruption of America — just in case any Russians are tempted by the lure of democracy — as well as the total chaos that his policies have helped foment in Syria. The arrival of Russian troops, some in transit directly from the Ukrainian border, is designed to reinforce this message: Putin is ready to help another dictator reestablish dictatorship, reassert control and imprison all of his enemies, in Syria and, if needed, in Russia too.

This is not what he's going to say. Putin has just [told Charlie Rose](#) that Assad should negotiate with the “rational opposition,” that “only the Syrian people are entitled to decide” who should rule them. But Assad has already murdered quite a lot of what used to be the rational opposition, often using Russian weapons. And the “Syrian people” haven't had much say in who sells weapons to Assad, who arms the Islamic State and who fuels the conflict in their country.

Of course, the Syrian people aren't really the point here — and the Russian people aren't either. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been bad for his countrymen and bad for his country — for its economy, its image, its influence — and a tragedy for Ukraine. Expect the same kind of outcome from his incursion into Syria too.

Hoover Institution

[The Cardinal Sins Of Pope Francis](#)

by Richard A. Epstein

During his whirlwind tour of the United States, Pope Francis used his speeches to the U.S. [Congress](#) and [the United Nations](#) to articulate his views on the family, human life, violence, the environment, social justice, and many other issues. No one doubts the sincerity of the Pope's pursuit of goodness. And surely no one disagrees with his condemnation of aggression and hatred against the young, the vulnerable, and the poor. But too often, his political naiveté got the better of him. As a result, many of his controversial pronouncements, if rigorously implemented at the policy level, would pose a threat to overall human welfare. Specifically, his ideas about violence, the environment, and markets deserve a critical look.

The Pope responded tepidly to the epidemic of violence rocking the world today. These are not good times. The massive slaughter of Muslims, Christians, and others in [Syria](#) and across the Middle East has spawned a refugee problem of unparalleled proportions, along with the systematic destruction of cultural artifacts and religious shrines in [Palmyra](#) and elsewhere. It is all well and good for the Pope to demand that the more fortunate aid refugees in their time of need. But the reality is that the refugee crisis will never be solved unless resolute action is taken to fix the problem at its source, which could mean developing a coherent *military* program to meet force with force.

Here, though, the Pope goes wobbly by saying that the use of force against the Islamic State *might* be justified if done on a multilateral basis—a sure recipe for impasse and drift, even as thousands more are killed or sent packing until some collective response is found.

The Pope also sounded a sour note regarding violence in his remarks to Congress: “To imitate the hatred and violence of tyrants and murderers is the best way to take their place. That is something which you, as a people, reject.” But the U.S. and its Western allies do not “imitate”

hatred and violence by using force to resist and destroy those who threaten innocent lives. If the Pope had encouraged the prompt use of force against evil, his credibility could have been restored. But he is simply encouraging the lack of American leadership in its categorical reluctance to commit ground troops to stop the bleeding in the Middle East.

President Obama's lack of resolve has neutralized American military superiority, encouraged Putin to back the tyrant Assad in Syria, and let the Islamic State wreak havoc. Constant bromides about the need for "cooperating generously for the common good" is a recipe for standing passively to one side as a worldwide disaster plays out. The Pope's musings, [like Obama's](#), mask a weak form of moral relativism that encourages the enemies of human liberty and human dignity and abandons its friends.

The second count against Pope Francis relates to his views on the environment and, in particular, on global warming. A preservation of the global commons is not just the concern of the Pope with his transparent left-wing politics; since a landmark 1954 article by [H. Scott Gordon](#), it is common knowledge across the political spectrum, driven by Chicago-style economics, that overhunting and overfishing of unowned fish and game can lead to a tragedy of the commons. Each taker from the common gets the full benefit of the catch, but suffers only a portion of the depletion of the commons. The release of carbon dioxide or methane into the atmosphere could have the same effect.

But the science of global warming is a lot more complicated than that of the fishery. Awareness of the problem does not explain the best techniques for dealing with the threat. On this score consider two related problems. The first is to design a system that works well to curb excessive warming, chiefly from minimizing the amount of human-produced carbon dioxide and methane gas. The second is to assess the seriousness of the threat. On the first point, market economists have worked out a system of [transferable pollution permits](#) that incentivizes firms to achieve the highest level of useful output for each unit of pollution. More efficient firms can afford to buy permits from less efficient firms and still make a profit. This system has worked extremely well for pollutants like [sulfur dioxide](#), where the damage for pollution is evident.

But the second point asks the more difficult empirical question, which is just how dangerous are additional units of carbon dioxide to the environment. Even the EPA [acknowledges](#) that this is a nightmarish calculation at best. On this point, the Pope does no one any good by making [strong empirical claims](#) of the imminent peril of global warming, when there is still no clear picture as to the threat, if any, that global warming poses to the world at large.

It is clear that temperatures continue to rise, [albeit slowly](#), but it is very difficult to [establish](#) how much of that temperature increase relates to increases in carbon dioxide. Indeed, there is some question as to whether small temperature increases will have positive or negative effects on overall human welfare. No one says that about sulfur dioxide.

It is, therefore, risky to overreact to the threat if that response diverts resources that could be better devoted to dealing with other woes of the world, including the still crushing poverty in much of China, India, and Africa. Many steps are available to advance pro-environmental and pro-energy policies that do not require us to pull out all the stops on climate control. A shift to natural gas, a tax on dirty coal, and a willingness to modernize nuclear power all make far more sense than paying [continuing subsidies](#) for wind and solar power, neither of which can be stored. Inspiring rhetoric does not advance basic understandings of technical issues of institutional design.

The third count against the Pope concerns his basic—and deeply problematic—misunderstanding of economic behavior. The simple truth is that there is no substitute for economic growth in dealing with both poverty and the declining fortunes of the middle class, two issues with which the Pope is concerned. The only engine that can drive growth is a competitive market economy to which the Pope—raised in Juan Peron's Argentina—displays an unhealthy aversion.

His papal announcement is a massive misdiagnosis of the basic situation: “Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.”

The Pope's observation that “everything comes under the laws of competition” is both descriptively and normatively false. Beyond that, the government's regulation of wages, prices, and entry into the market has exacted a huge toll on the poor by reducing their opportunities for advancement. Minimum wage and rent control laws offer some short-term benefits to a few, but they create massive and permanent structural dislocations for many more, by reducing the supply of jobs and housing respectively, leaving too many people “excluded and marginalized.” The single most important insight from modern economics is that the removal of a barrier to entry will always outperform the addition of a new subsidy to existing structures. Knocking out restraints reduces administrative costs and increases production. Price controls do the opposite.

Normatively, the Pope misses the critical ingredient of [“imperfect obligations”](#) to help the poor, enforceable not by the state but by social, moral, and religious sanctions. These decentralized forms of aid do far better, dollar for dollar, than any centralized government program that is far less able to target its assistance and monitor the aid that is given. Laissez-faire capitalism always supported this project, which helps explain the huge outpouring in charitable aid for medical, religious and educational purposes in the late-nineteenth century.

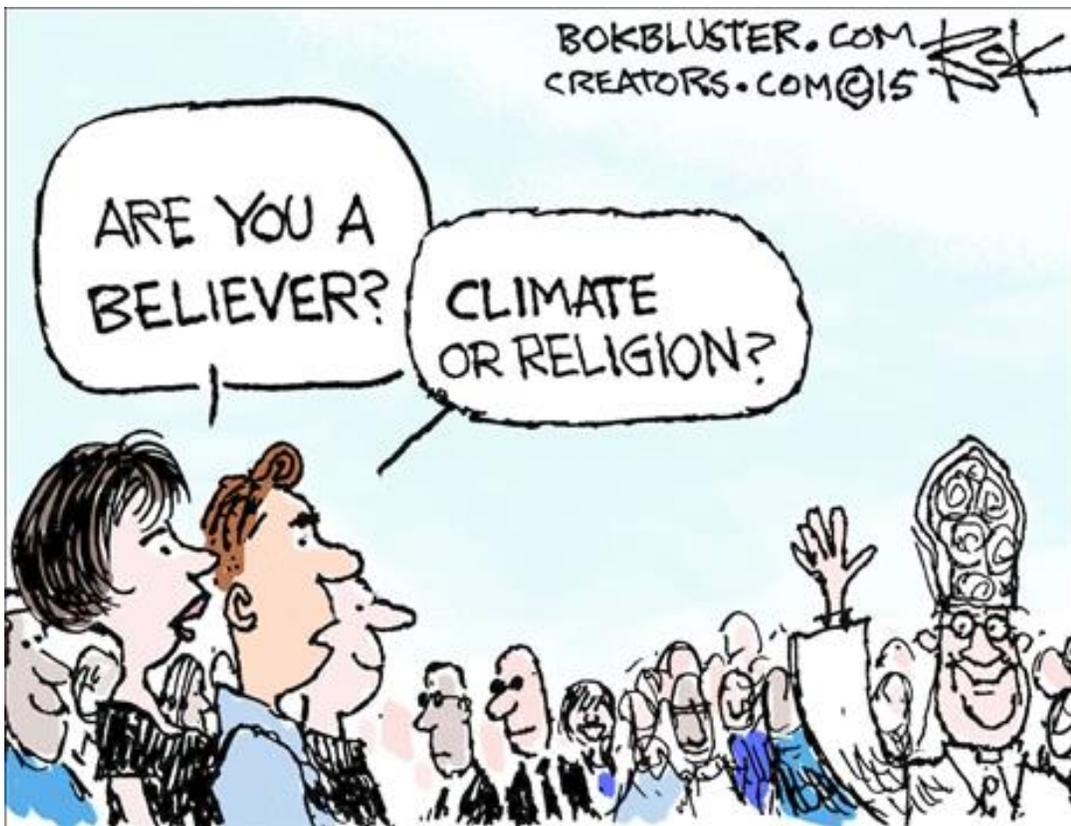
Within markets, the Pope does not understand the profound difference between competition and survival of the fittest. The former refers to laissez-faire capitalism. The latter is to a form of [social Darwinism](#). In nature, any creature may freely use force and fraud to achieve its ends. The survival of some necessarily depends on the killing and eating of others. A tenet of social Darwinism was to reject the notion of imperfect social obligations: the fortunate should not afford any aid or assistance to weaker members of the group who should be allowed to die in order to strengthen the human race.

Nor does the Pope understand how market competition works. Firms are not allowed to conscript or kill their potential customers. They must obtain their consent in order to sell them goods and services or to hire them. People with scarce resources and limited opportunities will not accept deals that in the long-term work to their systematic disadvantage. They will instead hold out for the best terms that they can obtain either in the purchase of goods and services or in the sale of their labor. A system of open competition means that no one party sits atop the market, at which point wages will be bid up and prices will be bid down so that the firm gets a normal risk adjusted rate of return, and no higher.

The situation with monopoly power, especially monopoly power controlled by the state, may call for a different response. In these cases, the monopolist knows that the potential customers or employees have nowhere else to turn, and hence the monopolist can exact a supra-competitive rate of return. It is for this reason that standard economists understand the need for some system of rate regulation to control monopoly power that often rises in transportation and communication markets. The details of these systems are enormously complicated, and it is not

possible to give a categorical answer as to how this is best done, or indeed whether in light of dynamic possibilities for competition, it should be done at all.

The Pope's broad pronouncements offer no sign that he is aware of the related question of institutional design. And they make it all too clear that he is prepared to commit the one clear transgression in economic theory, which is, especially through his uncritical support of labor unions, to support the use of government power to create monopoly institutions where competition works. That move, which has been the cause of so much human misery throughout the world, becomes a greater tragedy when it receives the moral backing of the Pope, who misuses his religious authority to speak out on secular affairs over which he has scant knowledge. The dangers of [politicization](#) are clear enough with Pope Francis. So too is the mischief that his ill-conceived progressive politics can wreak for the very people whom he most wants to help.





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