

December 22, 2015 - LACK OF LEADERSHIP

The president is on vacation, so the country is safer for a few weeks. This is 2015's last roundup for him.

**Krauthammer** writes on the president's "legacy of fakery."

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*No enforcement, no sanctions, nothing legally binding. No matter, explained Kerry on "Fox News Sunday": "This mandatory reporting requirement . . . is a serious form of enforcement, if you will, of compliance, but there is no penalty for it, obviously."*

*If you think that's gibberish, you're not alone. Retired NASA scientist James Hansen, America's leading carbon abolitionist, indelicately called the whole deal "bulls---."*

*He's right. ...*

**Mark Steyn** comments on the court martial of Bowe Bergdahl and the surreal scene with his parents and the Fool.

*... The deserter may get his just deserts, but what of the man who made the "deal" for him and then honored the deserter with a Rose Garden photo-op with his Taliban-supporting dad. As I wrote on June 6th 2014:*

*The justification for Bergdahl Snr's wacky behavior - the Taliban beard, the invocations of Allah, the Arabic and Pushtu, the pledge that the death of every Afghan child will be avenged - the justification for all this is that, well, he's also been under a lot of strain. He hasn't seen his kid for half-a-decade. That could unhinge anyone. Give the guy a break...*

*But the point is he was pulling this strange stuff before his son was kidnapped.*

*Which makes that Rose Garden ceremony even more bizarre in its weird optics - the President of the United States embracing a Taliban sympathizer at the White House. There was no need to hold such an intimate photo-op. Yet Obama chose to do it. Why?*

*Given what the United States Government knew about Bergdahl at the time of that ceremony, ignorance of who he was is not a plausible explanation. ...*

The **Federalist Blog** catches the NY Times hiding bad news about the president. ... *A story published by the New York Times late Thursday night caused some major media waves. The story, which was written by reporters Peter Baker and Gardiner Harris, included a remarkable admission by Obama about his response to the recent terror attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California.*

*By Friday morning, however, the entire passage containing Obama's admission had been erased from the story without any explanation from the New York Times. ...*

Writing in WaPo, **Dan Lamothe** points out why it matters that Chuck Hagel is trashing the White House. Even someone as dense as Hagel can figure out we are worse than leaderless.

*When Chuck Hagel resigned as defense secretary last year, the narrative was clear: President Obama and he did not see eye-to-eye on how to prosecute the war against the Islamic State, so Hagel needed to go. White House officials, speaking anonymously, said at the time that the president had lost faith in Hagel's ability to lead — a charge that Hagel's advisers brushed aside.*

*Now, a little over a year later, Hagel is swinging back. In an interview with Foreign Policy magazine published Friday, he said he remains puzzled why White House officials tried to "destroy" him personally in his last days in office, adding that he was convinced the United States had no viable strategy in Syria and was particularly frustrated with National Security Adviser Susan Rice, who he said would hold meetings and focus on "nit-picky" details.*

*"I eventually got to the point where I told Susan Rice that I wasn't going to spend more than two hours in these meetings," Hagel told Foreign Policy. "Some of them would go four hours."*

*Hagel said the administration struggled with how to handle Syria — hardly a surprise, given the way Obama said in August 2012 that it would be a "red line" for the United States if Syria moved or used its chemical weapons stockpiles, but did not intervene militarily the following year when Syria did so. Hagel said that hurt Obama's credibility, even if declared stockpiles eventually were removed through an agreement reached with Damascus.*

*"Whether it was the right decision or not, history will determine that," Hagel told Foreign Policy. "There's no question in my mind that it hurt the credibility of the president's word when this occurred." ...*

The **Washington Post editors** call attention to Iran's provocations and the do-nothing administration.

*IRAN IS following through on the nuclear deal it struck with a U.S.-led coalition in an utterly predictable way: It is racing to fulfill those parts of the accord that will allow it to collect*

*\$100 billion in frozen funds and end sanctions on its oil exports and banking system, while expanding its belligerent and illegal activities in other areas — and daring the West to respond.*

*Unfortunately, the Obama administration's response to these provocations has also been familiar. It is doing its best to downplay them — and thereby encouraging Tehran to press for still-greater advantage. ...*

Before Hagel's blast, Bob Gates suggested in a WaPo OpEd we do not want another president like this one. The story is from [Market Watch](#).

*Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has been on a tear denouncing his most recent commander-in-chief, President Barack Obama.*

*His latest salvo came last week in a blistering op-ed in the Washington Post. Gates painted a picture of what our next president must be simply by listing, bullet point by bullet point, everything that Obama is not.*

*The next president, according to the Gates opinion piece, must understand the form of government we have and the need to build coalitions with the other two branches of government to get things done.*

*He or she needs to speak truthfully to the American people, not spin everything; must be resolute, not draw red lines without the firm intention of backing them up; must be a pragmatic problem solver, not an agenda-driven ideologue like our, ahem, most recent presidents; and must be restrained, in rhetoric and in his or her attitude toward the other branches of government.*

*Above all, according to Gates's conclusion, the next president must be a unifier of the country and restore civility to the political process. ...*

*... If nothing else, however, his experience in intelligence, on the National Security Council and as head of the Pentagon makes him one of the most seasoned analysts of foreign policy and national security that we have. So when he suggests we need someone as our next president with different qualities of leadership than those possessed by Barack Obama, it bears listening to.*

Abe Greenwald sums up in Commentary. Saying on Barry's watch we have had; **the meltdown of Syria, the rise of ISIS, the worst refugee crisis of our time, and homegrown terror in the United States.**

*Three days after ISIS's mass-casualty assault on Paris, Barack Obama proclaimed that the U.S. policy he had authorized to defeat the terrorist organization was nonetheless working. "We have the right strategy," he told reporters who had come with him to Turkey for the G-20 Summit, "and we're gonna see it through." The international press was incredulous. The president seemed to be standing behind his claim, made the day before the attacks, that ISIS was "contained." How could Obama still say that the fight was succeeding? Reporters fired back with a series of questions. An AFP correspondent set the tone: "One hundred and twenty-nine*

people were killed in Paris on Friday night," he said. "ISIL claimed responsibility for the massacre, sending the message that they could now target civilians all over the world. The equation has clearly changed. Isn't it time for your strategy to change?"

It was the thought on everyone's mind—and it seemed to offend the leader of the free world. He became impatient, and assured one journalist after another he was correct. By the time CNN's Jim Acosta asked bluntly, "Why can't we take out these bastards?" Obama was in high dudgeon.

"If folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they think they would do, present a specific plan," he said. "If they think that somehow their advisers are better than the chairman of my joint chiefs of staff and the folks who are actually on the ground, I want to meet them. And we can have that debate."

Eighteen days later, on December 2, U.S. citizen Syed Farook and his Pakistani wife, Tashfeen Malik, shot up a party at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. They killed 14 people, wounded 21 others, and were discovered to have built an arsenal of pipe bombs in their apartment. As information on the couple trickled in that Wednesday afternoon, Obama was giving an interview to CBS News about national security. "ISIL will not pose an existential threat to us. They are a dangerous organization like al-Qaeda was, but we have hardened our defenses," he said. "The American people should feel confident that, you know, we are going to be able to defend ourselves and make sure that, you know, we have a good holiday and go about our lives." Two days later, authorities discovered that Malik had pledged fealty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

It is no longer in dispute that the president has been overtaken by events. While he alternately scolds and reassures, ISIS fights on, gaining power and claiming lives.

**But Obama has not been blindsided; he has chosen policies that have emboldened ISIS and has rejected other options at every turn. In fact, his words in Turkey were patently false. Obama doesn't need an introduction to those who would have done things differently; he knows them well. They include two of his secretaries of defense, his former under secretary of defense, his former secretary of state, his former head of the CIA, his former Army chief of staff, the last commanding general of forces in Iraq, his former ambassador to Syria, his former deputy national-security adviser, and, yes, even his former joint chiefs chairman—among others. ...**

... All these issues, however, are but manifestations of the larger encumbering reality: Barack Obama's theological opposition to exercising effective American power abroad. The president's inflexibility on that point has nurtured the rise of ISIS and tied our hands in the fight against it. But, with so few prudent options left, his stubbornness may have made a larger conflict with ISIS inevitable, either during the remainder of his term or after it. If so, Obama will have worked for eight years to avert a fate his very actions have summoned.

Today, the president still dismisses significant "boots on the ground" in Iraq and Syria as a nonstarter. On December 6, Obama spoke from the Oval Office, saying, "We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria." He then added this bizarre coda: "That's what groups like ISIL want. They know they can't defeat us on the battlefield." ISIS wants to engage the United States in a war in order to lose? And we should therefore resist the fight? This is theology outweighing logic.

*Perhaps in this period of post-Bush America, however, a ground war against ISIS really is out of the question. But we should be clear about something. ISIS controls vast swaths of land, out in the open. In adopting the structure of a state, the group has given up some measure of the asymmetrical advantage enjoyed by terrorists who traditionally "melt away" into the shadows after an attack; ISIS, in short, can be targeted and defeated like a state. If an American commander in chief cannot even countenance deploying ground soldiers and Marines to defeat a state comprising the worst terrorist threat we've ever faced, then we might have finally forfeited our last defense against evil. We are in the final year of a presidency that unwittingly midwived a monster.*

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## Washington Post

### [President Obama's Legacy of Fakery](#)

by Charles Krauthammer

Last Saturday, Barack Obama gained the second jewel in his foreign policy triple crown: [the Paris climate accord](#). It follows his Iran nuclear deal and awaits but the closing of Guantanamo to complete his glittering legacy.

To be sure, Obama will not be submitting the climate agreement for Senate ratification. It would have no chance of passing — as with the Iranian nuclear deal, also never submitted for the Senate ratification Obama knew he'd never get. And if he does close Guantanamo, it will be in defiance of overwhelming bipartisan congressional opposition.

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Yet the climate deal brought back from Paris by Secretary of State John Kerry turns out to be no deal at all. It is, instead, a series of carbon-reducing promises made individually and unilaterally by the world's nations.

No enforcement, no sanctions, nothing legally binding. No matter, [explained Kerry](#) on "Fox News Sunday": "This mandatory reporting requirement . . . is a serious form of enforcement, if you will, of compliance, but there is no penalty for it, obviously."

If you think that's gibberish, you're not alone. Retired NASA scientist James Hansen, America's leading carbon abolitionist, indelicately [called the whole deal](#) "bulls---."

He's right.

The great Paris achievement is supposed to be global "[transparency](#)." But what can that possibly amount to when you can't even trust the reporting? [Three months ago](#), the world's greatest carbon emitter, China, admitted to having underreported its burning of coal by 14

percent (later recalculated to [17 percent](#) ), a staggering error (assuming it wasn't a deliberate deception) equal to the entire coal consumption of Germany.

I'm a climate-change agnostic. But I'm realistic enough to welcome prudent hedging against a possible worst-case scenario. I've long advocated for a [multilateral agreement](#) (unilateral U.S. actions being climatically useless and economically suicidal) negotiated with the most important players — say, India, China and the European Union — containing real limits, real numbers and real enforcement. That would be a genuine achievement.

What the climate-change conference produced instead was hot air, applauded by 196 well-fed participants. (Fourteen nights in Paris, after all.) China promises to *begin* reducing carbon emissions [15 years from now](#). India announced [it will be tripling](#) its coal-fired electricity capacity by 2030. Meanwhile, the Obama administration is effectively dismantling America's entire coal industry.

Looking for guidance on how the U.S. will fare under this new environmental regime? Take a glance at Obama's other great triumph, the Iran nuclear accord.

Does the American public know that the Iranian parliament [has never approved it](#)? And that the Iranian president has never signed it? Iran is not legally bound to *anything*. As the State Department [freely admitted](#) (in a letter to Rep. Mike Pompeo (R-Kan.) of the House Intelligence Committee), the deal "is not a treaty or an executive agreement, and is not a signed document." But don't worry. Its success "will depend not on whether it is legally binding or signed, but rather on the extensive verification measures" and our "capacity to reimpose — and ramp up — our sanctions if Iran does not meet its commitments."

And how is that going?

On Nov. 21, Iran [conducted its second test](#) of a nuclear-capable ballistic missile in direct contravention of two U.N. Security Council prohibitions, including one that incorporates the current nuclear agreement — which bans such tests for eight years.

Our response? After Iran's [first illegal launch](#) in October, the administration did nothing. A few words at the United Nations. Weren't we repeatedly assured that any Iranian violation would be [met with vigorous action](#)? No worry, again. As U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power [told a congressional hearing](#) last week, "discussions are a form of U.N. action."

The heart sinks.

It was obvious from the very beginning that the whole administration promise of "[snapback](#)" sanctions was a farce. The Iranians knew it. Hence their contempt for even the prospect of American pushback: two illegal missile launches conducted ostentatiously even before sanctions are lifted and before they receive their \$150 billion in unfrozen assets early next year.

Why not? They know Obama will ignore, downplay and explain away any violation, lest it jeopardize his transformative foreign policy legacy.

It's a legacy of fictional agreements. The proliferators and the polluters are not bound. By our own volition, we are.

Only Guantanamo remains. Within a month, one-sixth of the remaining prisoners [will be released](#). Obama will not be denied.

## Steyn On Line

### [Celebrating a Deserter in the Rose Garden](#)

by Mark Steyn

Cynicism about the politicization and corruption of all federal institutions is so widespread that this decision must be accounted something of a heartening surprise: the Army has ignored the recommendations of its investigating officer and decided that Bowe Bergdahl will [face a general court martial](#) for desertion and "misbehavior before the enemy".

For some of us, who Bergdahl was was obvious from the first day. Yours truly, [June 2nd 2014](#):

*So the Taliban get five warriors back to return to the battlefield. And in return we get some Stockholm Syndrome deserter-revert to head up the next "War is never the answer" rally.*

By contrast, the Administration was either deeply stupid, or chose to [lie to the people](#):

*Bowe Bergdahl was ...declared by the laughably misnamed "National Security Advisor" to have "served the United States with honor and distinction".*

She surely knew as she uttered those words that that was the very opposite of the truth. Nevertheless, as others pointed out the obvious, Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut chose to [double-down on the stupid](#):

*Really sad to watch Obama haters attack this kid who CHOSE to fight to protect the rest of us, just to score political points.*

What's "really sad" is that, in a nation of 300 million in which only one hundred get to be senators, Chris Murphy is one of them.

The deserter may get his just deserts, but what of the man who made the "deal" for him and then honored the deserter with a Rose Garden photo-op with his Taliban-supporting dad. As I wrote on [June 6th 2014](#):

*The justification for Bergdahl Snr's wacky behavior - the Taliban beard, the invocations of Allah, the Arabic and Pushtu, the pledge that the death of every Afghan child will be avenged - the justification for all this is that, well, he's also been under a lot of strain. He hasn't seen his kid for half-a-decade. That could unhinge anyone. Give the guy a break...*

*But the point is he was pulling this strange stuff before his son was kidnapped.*

*Which makes that Rose Garden ceremony even more bizarre in its weird optics - the President of the United States embracing a Taliban sympathizer at the White House. There was no need to hold such an intimate photo-op. Yet Obama chose to do it. Why?*



Given what the United States Government knew about Bergdahl at the time of that ceremony, ignorance of who he was is not a plausible explanation. So my question a year and a half ago remains unanswered: why did he do it? Me again, [June 9th 2014](#):

*One of those out there "fighting on my behalf" was Mark Allen. His wife Shannon challenges her husband's commander-in-chief:*

*'Meet my husband, injuries directly brought to you by the actions of this traitor. He can't give an account of what went down, because he can no longer speak. Now, which guy is a "hero" again?!? Sick.'*

*Careful, Mrs Allen. Or the court eunuchs of the Obama media will soon be accusing you of "Swiftboating" and your husband of being a "psycho".*

*Watch that Rose Garden ceremony again and ask yourself Shannon Allen's question: Which guy is the hero? Pace Susan Rice, **there are three dishonorable men in that short photo-op: a deserter who broke his oath, a father who sympathizes publicly with the enemy ...and a president lying before the nation, to make them complicit in that dishonor.** Mr Obama is unworthy of the men who fight on "his" behalf.*

The Army at least has decided it will not be made complicit in that dishonor. If there were a real press in this country, someone would ask Obama how it is that he became the first president to host a Rose Garden celebration for a deserter.

## **The Federalist Blog**

### **[The New York Times Just Memory-Holed This Devastating Obama Admission](#)**

"Obama indicated that he did not see enough cable television to fully appreciate the anxiety after the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino."

December 18, 2015 By [Sean Davis](#)

A [story published](#) by the *New York Times* late Thursday night caused some major media waves. The story, which was written by reporters Peter Baker and Gardiner Harris, included a remarkable admission by Obama about his response to the recent terror attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California.

By Friday morning, however, the entire passage containing Obama's admission had been erased from the story without any explanation from the *New York Times*. Here's the passage that was included in the story when it was published Thursday night, courtesy of [CNN's Brian Stelter](#):

Obama needs more cable news in his media diet? Revealing comment in a private meeting with newspaper columnists... [pic.twitter.com/iUH6Ey38g](http://pic.twitter.com/iUH6Ey38g)

Brian Stelter (@brianstelter) [December 18, 2015](#)

Washington Post

## Why former Pentagon chief Chuck Hagel's coming out against the White House matters

by Dan Lamothe



*Then-Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel walks into the Pentagon on Nov. 24, 2014.*

When Chuck Hagel resigned as defense secretary last year, the narrative was clear: President Obama and he did not see eye-to-eye on how to prosecute the war against the Islamic State, so Hagel needed to go. White House officials, speaking anonymously, said at the time that [the president had lost faith in Hagel's ability to lead](#) — a charge that Hagel's advisers brushed aside.

Now, a little over a year later, Hagel is swinging back. In an [interview with Foreign Policy magazine published Friday](#), he said he remains puzzled why White House officials tried to “destroy” him personally in his last days in office, adding that he was convinced the United States had no viable strategy in Syria and was particularly frustrated with National Security Adviser Susan Rice, who he said would hold meetings and focus on “nit-picky” details.

“I eventually got to the point where I told Susan Rice that I wasn't going to spend more than two hours in these meetings,” Hagel told Foreign Policy. “Some of them would go four hours.”

Hagel said the administration struggled with how to handle Syria — hardly a surprise, given the way Obama [said in August 2012](#) that it would be a “red line” for the United States if Syria moved or used its chemical weapons stockpiles, but did not intervene militarily the following year when Syria did so. Hagel said that hurt Obama's credibility, even if declared stockpiles eventually were removed through an agreement reached with Damascus.

“Whether it was the right decision or not, history will determine that,” Hagel told Foreign Policy. “There’s no question in my mind that it hurt the credibility of the president’s word when this occurred.”

The White House declined to comment on the article. However, an administration official disagreed anonymously with many assertions in Hagel’s interview. Waiting before launching cruise missiles provided a window for the chemical weapons agreement reached, the official said.

Hagel is far from the first former Pentagon chief in Obama’s administration to later criticize the president and his staff. But he just might be the most unlikely. A former Republican senator from Nebraska, he [saw eye-to-eye with Obama on many national security issues](#) before he was nominated. Like Obama, he also was a [strong critic of President George W. Bush’s war in Iraq](#) — one of the first in the Republican Party.

The two men also still have a friendly relationship, Hagel told Foreign Policy. Nonetheless, he just took several large steps down the same road as Robert Gates and Leon Panetta, who preceded Hagel at the Pentagon and later laid out their grievances in memoirs written after they left office.

Gates, who served for both President George W. Bush and Obama, [wrote in a book released early last year that he was “seething” and “running out of patience with on multiple fronts” with the administration](#). All too often, he wrote, “suspicion and distrust of senior military officers by senior White House officials — including the president and vice president — became a big problem for me as I tried to manage the relationship between the commander in chief and his military leaders.”

Panetta followed last fall with his own book, saying Obama had a “frustrating reticence to engage his opponents and rally support for his cause” and too frequently “relies on the logic of a law professor rather than the passion of a leader.” In an interview promoting the book, he added that the president had [“kind of lost his way”](#) and was partly to blame for the collapse of the Iraqi government last year because he didn’t press harder to keep American troops in the country in 2011, ahead of a complete military withdrawal.

Hagel, for his part, told Foreign Policy that he got “the hell beat out of him” figuratively at the White House for delaying in signing transfer orders to release detainees from the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, when he had concerns about the individuals involved. He also said he felt micro-managed — something that Gates, Panetta and other defense officials have all expressed.

“There is a danger in all of this,” Hagel told Foreign Policy, referring to White House micromanagement and the administration’s expanding national security staff. “This is about governance; this isn’t about political optics. It’s about making the country run and function, and trying to stay ahead of the dangers and the threats you see coming.”

*Dan Lamothe covers national security for The Washington Post and anchors its military blog, Checkpoint.*

## Washington Post - Editorial

### [Iran provokes the world as Obama does nothing](#)



*A photo released by the Iranian Defense Ministry on Oct. 11 claims to show the launching of an Emad long-range ballistic surface-to-surface missile in an undisclosed location. Iran tested a ballistic missile again in November, a U.S. official said.*

IRAN IS following through on the nuclear deal it struck with a U.S.-led coalition in an utterly predictable way: It is racing to fulfill those parts of the accord that will allow it to collect \$100 billion in frozen funds and end sanctions on its oil exports and banking system, while expanding its belligerent and illegal activities in other areas — and daring the West to respond.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration's response to these provocations has also been familiar. It is doing its best to downplay them — and thereby encouraging Tehran to press for still-greater advantage.

We've pointed out how the regime of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has unjustly sentenced Post correspondent [Jason Rezaian to prison](#) and [arrested two businessmen](#) with U.S. citizenship or residence since signing the nuclear accord. There have been no penalties for those outrageous violations of human rights. Now a United Nations panel has determined that Iran test-fired a nuclear-capable missile on Oct. 10 with a range of at least 600 miles, in violation of a U.N. resolution that prohibits such launches. Moreover, it appears likely that a second missile launch occurred on Nov. 21, also in violation of Security Council Resolution 1929.

The U.S. response? "We are now actively considering the appropriate consequences to that launch in October," State Department official Stephen Mull [testified](#) at a Senate committee hearing Thursday. In other words, there have so far been none — other than a speech by the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations blaming the Security Council for the lack of action. As for the second missile launch, the administration claims to be investigating it, though it likely has in its possession the intelligence necessary to make a judgment.

It's not hard to guess the reasons for this fecklessness. President Obama is reluctant to do anything that might derail the nuclear deal before Iran carries out its commitments, including uninstalling thousands of centrifuges and diluting or removing tons of enriched uranium. The same logic prompted him to tolerate Iran's malign interventions in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, along with the arrest of Mr. Rezaian, while the pact was under negotiation.

U.S. officials argue that Iran's nonnuclear violations make it all the more important that the nuclear deal be implemented. But that ignores the clear connections between the missile launches and Tehran's ambitions to become a nuclear power. The only practical military purpose of the missiles the regime is testing is to carry atomic warheads. And while missile launches are not prohibited by the nuclear pact itself, the separate resolution banning them remains in effect until the deal is implemented, after which a new resolution takes effect that calls on Iran not to develop such missiles for eight years.

By flouting the U.N. resolutions, Iran is clearly testing the will of the United States and its allies to enforce the overall regime limiting its nuclear ambitions. If there is no serious response, it will press the boundaries in other areas — such as the inspection regime. It will take maximum advantage of Mr. Obama's fear of undoing a legacy achievement, unless and until its bluff is called. That's why the administration would be wise to take firm action now in response to the missile tests rather than trying to sweep them under the carpet.

## **Market Watch**

### **[Ex-Pentagon chief calls for 'not-Obama' as next president](#)**

by Darrell Delamaid

Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has been on a tear denouncing his most recent commander-in-chief, President Barack Obama.

His latest salvo came last week in a blistering op-ed in the Washington Post. Gates painted a picture of what our next president must be simply by listing, [bullet point by bullet point](#), everything that Obama is not.

The next president, according to the Gates opinion piece, must understand the form of government we have and the need to build coalitions with the other two branches of government to get things done.

He or she needs to speak truthfully to the American people, not spin everything; must be resolute, not draw red lines without the firm intention of backing them up; must be a pragmatic problem solver, not an agenda-driven ideologue like our, ahem, most recent presidents; and must be restrained, in rhetoric and in his or her attitude toward the other branches of government.

Above all, according to Gates's conclusion, the next president must be a unifier of the country and restore civility to the political process.

It's a tall order, and probably less a realistic description of who will win next November than a critique of the current president and, to a certain extent, his predecessor.

Gates knows both firsthand because he was appointed Pentagon chief by President George W. Bush in 2006 and stayed on it that position well into Obama's first term, stepping down in July 2011.

His thinly veiled critique comes as many express frustration over a lack of leadership from a lame-duck president who seems more preoccupied with checking off boxes in his "legacy"

agenda — Pacific trade deal, Iran nuclear deal, any sort of climate-change deal (regardless of how meaningless) — than in putting out the fires of successive crises abroad.

This frustration culminated in widespread criticism of Obama's prime-time address Sunday on terrorism, which, clocking in at 13 minutes and coming four days after the San Bernardino, Calif., shootings, seemed to many to be too little, too late.

The Boston Herald editorialized about "[Obama's tired script](#)," while USA Today columnist James Robbins said "[the president doubles down on failure](#)."

Gates has been particularly acerbic. Last week's op-ed follows an October missive in which he refrained from criticizing Obama by name but [quoted with withering sarcasm some of the president's more sophomoric put-downs of foreign-policy critics](#). (The online version helpfully provides links to the president's speeches.)

In the October op-ed, co-authored with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Gates insisted that a no-fly zone in Syria, as recommended by the authors and many others (including Democratic front runner Hillary Clinton), is not a half-baked idea, as Obama dismissively labeled it.

Nor is recommending stronger support for Kurdish rebels, Sunni tribes, Iraqi special forces and other potential allies "mumbo-jumbo," as Obama characterized this type of suggestion.

Yet none of the declared candidates in either party so far fulfills all of Gates's bullet points for the next president.

For all of former Secretary of State Clinton's experience and grasp of government, she so far has not been the unifier Gates is looking for. Bernie Sanders's floundering in the areas of foreign policy and terrorism has exposed the narrowness of his appeal.

John Kasich, the Ohio governor who is the thinking Republican's favored candidate, has come across as too bland or too petulant in his debate appearances. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie might be resolute and likes to tout his ability to work with a Democratic legislature, but his confrontational style hardly makes him a unifier.

The freshman senators in the Republican field — Marco Rubio of Florida, Ted Cruz of Texas and Rand Paul of Kentucky — would be far too prone to the amateurism that Gates implicitly criticizes in Obama.

Gates may be just one former official. But he served two presidents of different parties in the third-ranking cabinet department and is, literally, a Boy Scout (Eagle Scout in his youth and now president of the Boy Scouts of America). He's held in high regard on both sides of the aisle.

In his long career of public service, Gates has reaped his share of criticism, especially for his time as deputy director and then director of the CIA under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

If nothing else, however, his experience in intelligence, on the National Security Council and as head of the Pentagon makes him one of the most seasoned analysts of foreign policy and national security that we have. So when he suggests we need someone as our next president with different qualities of leadership than those possessed by Barack Obama, it bears listening to.

## Commentary

### On His Watch

#### ***The meltdown of Syria. The rise of ISIS. The worst refugee crisis of our time. Homegrown terror in the United States.***

by Abe Greenwald

Three days after ISIS's mass-casualty assault on Paris, Barack Obama proclaimed that the U.S. policy he had authorized to defeat the terrorist organization was nonetheless working. "We have the right strategy," he told reporters who had come with him to Turkey for the G-20 Summit, "and we're gonna see it through." The international press was incredulous. The president seemed to be standing behind his claim, made the day before the attacks, that ISIS was "contained." How could Obama still say that the fight was succeeding? Reporters fired back with a series of questions. An AFP correspondent set the tone: "One hundred and twenty-nine people were killed in Paris on Friday night," he said. "ISIL claimed responsibility for the massacre, sending the message that they could now target civilians all over the world. The equation has clearly changed. Isn't it time for your strategy to change?"

It was the thought on everyone's mind—and it seemed to offend the leader of the free world. He became impatient, and assured one journalist after another he was correct. By the time CNN's Jim Acosta asked bluntly, "Why can't we take out these bastards?" Obama was in high dudgeon.

"If folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they think they would do, present a specific plan," he said. "If they think that somehow their advisers are better than the chairman of my joint chiefs of staff and the folks who are actually on the ground, I want to meet them. And we can have that debate."

Eighteen days later, on December 2, U.S. citizen Syed Farook and his Pakistani wife, Tashfeen Malik, shot up a party at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. They killed 14 people, wounded 21 others, and were discovered to have built an arsenal of pipe bombs in their apartment. As information on the couple trickled in that Wednesday afternoon, Obama was giving an interview to CBS News about national security. "ISIL will not pose an existential threat to us. They are a dangerous organization like al-Qaeda was, but we have hardened our defenses," he said. "The American people should feel confident that, you know, we are going to be able to defend ourselves and make sure that, you know, we have a good holiday and go about our lives." Two days later, authorities discovered that Malik had pledged fealty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

It is no longer in dispute that the president has been overtaken by events. While he alternately scolds and reassures, ISIS fights on, gaining power and claiming lives.

But Obama has not been blindsided; he has chosen policies that have emboldened ISIS and has rejected other options at every turn. In fact, his words in Turkey were patently false. Obama doesn't need an introduction to those who would have done things differently; he knows them well. They include two of his secretaries of defense, his former under secretary of defense, his former secretary of state, his former head of the CIA, his former Army chief of staff, the last commanding general of forces in Iraq, his former ambassador to Syria, his former deputy national-security adviser, and, yes, even his former joint chiefs chairman—among others.

To the many officials, civilian and military, who have opposed Obama on strategy pertaining to Iraq, Syria, and ISIS, his remonstrance in Turkey was surely surreal. Posturing aside, Obama has rejected or marginalized virtually all dissent on these issues. And as a result of his persistent obstinacy, he has chosen poorly again and again, creating a linked set of escalating crises. They began with the misguided U.S. departure from Iraq. They continued with the meltdown of Syria and Obama's persistently botched responses to it. And they have reached their apogee (so far) with the creation of more than 4 million refugees—the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our age—and ISIS's establishment of an Islamic caliphate of increasing global reach.

Despite the president's effort to frame his policies as coolly pragmatic, his decisions on Iraq, Syria, and ISIS fit a strict, even unbending, ideological pattern. His animating motivation has been to retract American power from the region and establish a new national consensus to ensure that the United States pursues a more humble foreign policy in the future.

This is a principled position, of a kind. It reflects a long-held belief in certain quarters that American military action in far-off lands and American meddling in those lands tend to do more harm than good, sowing dangerous resentment abroad.

But when a leader fails to balance this (or any) outlook against facts on the ground, principle becomes theology. And that is the situation in which the president now finds himself.

Obama's inconsistencies have helped him evade traditional ideological labels. So perhaps it suffices to say he is foremost an anti-Bushist. His conception of America's role in the world is most easily discerned in its opposition to that of his predecessor. He ran for president on a promise to end the war in Iraq—and when, as president, he told a Saudi Arabian news station, "all too often the United States starts by dictating," he was talking about George W. Bush's perceived "cowboy diplomacy." When he told an audience in France that "America has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive," he was referring to Bush's willingness to wage war without the support of the United Nations. And when in London he said, "With my election and the early decisions that we've made...you're starting to see some restoration of America's standing in the world," he was touting his departure from Bush-era policy.

What Bush wrought he would undo. And he has undone much.

As conditions in the Middle East have deteriorated, the United States has progressively lost opportunities to act. The rush of events has now mooted many of the ideas Obama rejected. The actions that could have been taken to ensure that a functioning Iraq didn't fall back into the hands of terrorists no longer apply now that ISIS controls massive sections of the country. The actions that could have contained the damage from a secular Syrian rebellion no longer have bearing on what has become an international war zone. And the actions that could have stopped a few hundred jihadists who crossed Iraq's western border into Syria no longer matter, now that their number has grown to a few hundred thousand who have founded a state. Our viable options for defeating ISIS today are far more hazardous than the options we had only a few years ago, when we could have preempted its ascendance. But Obama has held fast—and in his effort to keep America out of the Middle East muck, he may well be ensuring an American reentry into a Middle East inferno.

President Obama's first order of business was bringing the Iraq War to a close. That was his signature campaign promise, and one cannot fault him for trying to fulfill it. But ending the war in the way he did would prove to be a serious mistake. Whatever one thinks about the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraq that Obama chose to abandon had been all but pacified. In 2011, the final

year U.S. troops were on the ground, there were 54 American deaths in Iraq, a wartime low. The country suffered sectarian tensions, but nothing like those that had led to civil war in 2006. Most crucial was this: Coalition actions had defeated ISIS's brutal predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Iraqi jihad had become a bad memory.

But few of those close to the fight thought these achievements would be self-sustaining. Top Defense Department officials and military brass spent two years arguing for a continued U.S. presence in Iraq to ensure that the country didn't relapse. Obama's first secretary of defense, Robert Gates, was one such official. He hoped to leave 16,000 troops behind to consolidate American gains. Gates's successor, Leon Panetta, had the same concerns about abandoning Iraq and tried to make his case to Obama. As he later wrote:

My fear, as I voiced to the president and others, was that if the country split apart or slid back into the violence that we'd seen in the years immediately following the U.S. invasion, it could become a new haven for terrorists to plot attacks against the U.S. Iraq's stability was not only in Iraq's interest but also in ours. I privately and publicly advocated for a residual force that could provide training and security for Iraq's military.

So had others. Lloyd Austin, the last commanding general of forces in Iraq (and future commander of United States Central Command) recommended a residual American force of 23,000. Army Chief of Staff General Ray Odierno had made similar arguments in 2009, suggesting the U.S. keep 30,000–35,000 troops in Iraq after 2011. These were hardly minority opinions. At a 2011 Senate Armed Service Committee hearing, Senator John McCain asked Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey whether any military commanders supported a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. "No, Senator," Dempsey responded. "None of us recommended that we completely withdraw from Iraq." Their objections were to no avail.

Obama, certain in his purpose, would take his first step toward inadvertently facilitating a jihadist renaissance.

When it came time to negotiate an extension on the U.S. Status of Forces agreement with Iraq, Obama didn't secure a deal to keep American troops in the country. The president has claimed that he simply came up against Iraqi intransigence. But as Panetta explains, "Privately, the various leadership factions in Iraq all confided that they wanted some U.S. forces to remain as a bulwark against sectarian violence." In fact, they wanted it more than Obama. Panetta writes that "Under Secretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy did her best to press [our] position, which reflected not just my views but also those of the military commanders in the region and the joint chiefs. But the president's team at the White House pushed back, and the differences occasionally became heated."

In the end, continues Panetta, "those on our side viewed the White House as so eager to rid itself of Iraq that it was willing to withdraw rather than lock in arrangements that would preserve our influence and interests."

Theology prevailed. In December 2010, Obama declared the war over. "We're leaving behind a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq," he said. But without the United States present to exercise its leverage over then–Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, things immediately deteriorated. Maliki, a Shiite, began systematically cracking down on the country's Sunnis. The Sunnis in turn were thrown into the arms of a revitalized Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was fast exploiting the absence of American security. During this jihadist revival, militants freed one Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from a Mosul jail. He would go on to become the leader of ISIS. By 2011, Iraq's radicals were already spreading into Syria and capitalizing on a civil war that had begun months

earlier. All the warnings that had gone unheeded were proving correct. But even then, no one envisioned just how massive the new jihadist threat would become.

Unlike the Iraq War, the Syrian horror is entirely a creature of the Obama years. And here we have a much longer record of the ideas Obama rejected, the policies he chose, and the increasingly malignant repercussions of those choices.

One year into the Syrian civil war, dictator Bashar al-Assad had killed roughly 7,800 Syrians and the fighting had produced an estimated 35,000 refugees. The Obama administration had already called for Assad to step down, but had done nothing to make that happen. At the time, the central U.S. concerns were protecting Syrians from Assad's onslaught and preventing the outbreak of a larger, destabilizing conflict. In March 2012, John McCain took to the Senate floor and made a half-hour speech calling for U.S.-led air strikes on Assad's forces and the establishment of safe havens for Syrians under attack. McCain also appealed personally to Obama. "I told the president. I said, Bashar Assad is slaughtering people," he later told PBS. "We are watching genocide take place, and it is eventually going to destabilize the entire region."

At the time, McCain didn't have much support. He was the first senator to call for U.S. force against Assad. And given his own defeat at Obama's hands in the 2008 election and his growing unpopularity with the Republican base, he stood his ground alone. It is unquestionably true that American military action in the Middle East is and will always be risky and problematic. The region's pathologies ensure a deluge of recriminations against the United States, even from those asking for our help. The pandemic combination of poor governance and sectarian tension increases the chance of clashes following a decisive American strike. And we rarely have a clear sense of friend and foe in lands where parties switch allegiances based on who seems most likely to outlast the latest calamity.

But if statecraft were informed solely by caution, the United States wouldn't be standing today. There are always compelling reasons to steer clear of combat. A successful foreign policy means accounting for risk in determining what will secure the nation's interests, not evading risk altogether. McCain's warning about the coming destabilization was prescient; in any case, it's hard to imagine that American action would have been worse than the path Obama chose.

He chose inaction. The president who said he was "elected to end wars, not start them" wasn't about to go into Syria after pulling out of Iraq. What's more, European leaders had already dragged Obama against his will into an air campaign against Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi a year earlier. Post-Qaddafi Libya was now giving way to chaos, partly because of Obama's refusal to follow through with further American action. Obama's anti-Bushism had been compromised by providing air support to Libyan rebels. He wouldn't see it nullified entirely by going into Syria as well.

But the president also had other reasons for not acting in Syria. He was already working toward détente with Iran. Obama knew that the Iranian leaders were Assad's closest allies, and he feared American action against Syria would jeopardize his chance for achieving a nuclear deal with Tehran. This too fit his anti-Bushism. Bush had labeled Iran a member of the "Axis of Evil," a trio of dangerous rogue states that also included North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Obama's predecessor saw the leaders in Tehran as inflexible theocrats bent on the destruction of Israel and the West. For Bush, the only real solution to the Iran problem was eventual regime change, a toppling of the mullahs, and the establishment of Iranian democracy. Obama, by contrast, sought to treat the Iranians as reasonable actors capable of good-faith negotiations with the United States. With the Iraq War over, diplomacy with Iran became his foreign-policy

priority, and his fear of displeasing the mullahs would continue to hamper his Syria policy. Assad and his allies in Tehran took the president's measure early and, assured of the new American constraint, would escalate the civil war with impunity.

After rejecting the first call to intervene in Syria, Obama stuck to inaction (or minimal action), no matter how bad the war got and no matter the nature of the threat it posed. As he stood pat, that threat changed. When McCain had called for helping the rebels, they were mostly secular Syrians trying to unseat a merciless dictator. The best hope among them was the Free Syrian Army, a non-radical group founded by military defectors seeking to oust Assad and replace his regime with a democratic one. They openly beseeched Washington for help, but Obama's anti-Bush doctrine left them to fend for themselves.

Around the same time as McCain's Senate speech, White House Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told the *New York Times* that the U.S. would begin providing "nonlethal assistance, like communications equipment and medical supplies, directly to opposition groups inside Syria." Another administration official claimed that the U.S. had already begun sending supplies to the Free Syrian Army. But "nonlethal" ultimately meant ineffective. Supplies were meager, slow in coming, and would occasionally be seized by radical groups. Yet the administration would continue to tout such assistance, announcing new "boosts" in aid every year, even as the policy continued to fail. So while the United States stuck to fruitless gestures, the rebels increasingly looked to others who were providing them with tangible support. Those others turned out to be radical Sunni groups, such as al-Qaeda, the al-Nusra front, and ISIS. These trained jihadists were better organized than their non-radical counterparts and some enjoyed lavish funding from Gulf Arab states. The more Obama refused aggressive action, the greater the Islamist hold on the rebels.

As the anti-Assad rebellion morphed into a jihadist call to arms, Washington's array of policy options narrowed, but they didn't disappear. A new plan of action came from within the Obama administration in the summer of 2012. Then-director of the CIA, David Petraeus, proposed vetting and arming Syrian rebels covertly from bases inside Jordan. The covert element, he hoped, would allay White House concerns about being seen to meddle in Syrian affairs. Unlike McCain's early proposition, this plan enjoyed significant support in the administration, from Leon Panetta, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough, and Samantha Power, who had been handpicked by Obama to head up a new "Atrocities Prevention Board."

But the president vetoed the Petraeus plan, saying it would draw the United States into the conflict without decisively tipping the scales in favor of the rebels. His concerns here were not unwarranted, but they shouldn't have been dispositive. A year and a half into the Syrian civil war, Obama didn't accept that American inaction was itself a meaningful choice. Like action, inaction has real consequences. It gives both our allies and enemies a sense of our priorities, enabling them to recalibrate their plans accordingly. American inaction on Syria ensured that the country's toxic trends would continue to gain momentum. For Assad, it meant he could wage war with impunity; for the rebels, it meant American help wasn't coming; and for the jihadists among them, it meant an opportunity to recruit more of their dejected fellow Sunnis.

As things stood in the summer of 2012, the civil-war death toll was around 17,000 and there were more than 150,000 Syrian refugees.

On August 20, Obama held a press conference in the White House that was supposed to center on health care. Asked about Syria, the president gave an ad-libbed answer that would alter the course of history and take the administration on a bizarre foreign-policy detour. "We have been

very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is, we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized," he said. "That would change my calculus. That would change my equation." Presidential aides were reportedly baffled by Obama's response, as it didn't resemble anything they'd heard him say in private. But for all his practiced reticence, Obama had now accidentally warned Assad, on record, that America might intervene if chemical weapons came into play. He had also given the rebels hope. Unplanned or not, this became an opportunity for the United States to get on the right side of the war and thus deprive jihadists of the power they wielded in Syria as the best bet for toppling Assad.

A year later, on August 21, 2013, Assad called Obama's bluff. The dictator launched a sarin nerve-gas attack in the suburbs of Damascus, killing 1,429 civilians—426 of whom were children. The Obama administration, on the hook to act, announced reprisals. At a press conference in London, Secretary of State John Kerry tried to keep the anti-Bush doctrine together. He described the "unbelievably small, limited kind of effort" the administration had in mind. But, in the end, "unbelievably small" wasn't small enough for the president. Just days before the planned strike on Syria, Obama found himself too uncertain to give the order. After beginning a speech by saying he had the right as president to act against Syria on his own orders, he declared he was putting it up for a vote in Congress (then in recess).

This decision, it should be noted, went against the majority of Obama's advisers, who feared the president would be severely weakened by a "no" vote. On the day Congress returned, Kerry gave a press conference and managed to extricate the administration from its dilemma just as accidentally as it had stumbled into it. Kerry said, rhetorically, that Assad could avoid a U.S. strike if he gave up "every bit of his weapons to the international community within the next week, without delay. But he isn't about to [do that]." That afternoon, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, picking up on Kerry's comment, announced that Assad had accepted a Russian offer to hand over his chemical stockpile. Thereupon, the administration killed its plans for a strike on Syria.

Under the Russian arrangement, some but not all of Assad's chemical weapons were shipped out of the country. He has since gone on to use chlorine gas. The plan, however, was a thorough success for the Kremlin, establishing Russia as a massive player in the conflict. At the time, the administration bragged that it had successfully made Syria Moscow's problem. But Russian President Vladimir Putin would use his new leverage to expand his influence in Syria, eventually bringing Russia fully into the war on Assad's side, prolonging the dictator's reign, and further precluding American policy options. For Assad's part, he was now legitimized as a cooperative partner in disarmament.

Finally, jihadists inside Syria used the American retreat as a recruiting tool among Sunnis who needed little more convincing that Washington would do nothing to help them. The radicals went into overdrive. And although the Obama administration began arming rebels in lieu of striking Assad, it was much too little and far too late. On the 12th anniversary of 9/11, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released a communiqué denouncing the American-affiliated Free Syrian Army. ISIS, by now the strongest jihadist group in Syria, then declared war on what was left of the FSA, fighting it into irrelevance. Once again, Obama's inaction had become a boon to America's enemies.

At this point, more than 100,000 had been killed in the civil war and almost 2 million Syrians had been made refugees.

By the start of 2014, ISIS wasn't merely the strongest of Syria's jihadist groups; it had become the strongest party among all the country's rebels. The organization had recently taken control of the city of Raqqa, which became a beacon for foreign fighters pouring into Syria to join ISIS. Yet the president showed little concern, remarking to the *New Yorker's* David Remnick in January that "the analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a J.V. team puts on Lakers uniforms, that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant." That same month, the J.V. jihadists crossed back into Iraq and, with American troops withdrawn on Obama's promise, seized Fallujah.

As ISIS began redrawing the map of the Middle East, Obama still saw no compelling case for U.S. action and fell back on anti-Bush insinuations to defend his policy. "A strategy that involves invading every country that harbors terrorist networks is naive and unsustainable," he told a West Point audience in May. A month later, ISIS captured Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq.

That August, the world was gripped by televised images of desperate men, women, and children trapped on Sinjar mountain in northwestern Iraq. Advancing ISIS forces had surrounded tens of thousands of Yazidis, a Kurdish minority, and were waiting for them below. If the prey came down the mountain they would be slaughtered; if they didn't, they would die of dehydration. Finally, the United States stepped up. With the world watching, Obama called for air strikes on the ISIS militants and saved the Yazidis from certain death. It was his first bold move against ISIS, and it was a success. Yet he was quick to follow up this show of strength with a disclaimer, saying the United States had no intention of "being the Iraqi air force." His heroic act was a one-off.

Even as Iraq succumbed to carnage, things in Syria got worse. In June, ISIS declared a new Islamist caliphate and made Raqqa its capital. The organization had also become a rolling wave of sadism, enslaving and killing (sometimes by crucifixion) all who dared stand in its path. In July, the group took over a Syrian army base, beheaded 75 Syrian soldiers, and displayed their heads and bodies in the street. This was merely one of a string of ISIS beheadings that year. In August, ISIS released a video depicting the beheading of the journalist James Foley, the organization's first American victim.

At this point, the Syrian death toll had risen to 191,000. Refugees numbered 3 million.

One American official could take no more. In May, Robert Ford, the U.S. Ambassador to Syria, stepped down from his post, disgusted with the failure to stop either ISIS or Assad. "I was no longer in a position where I felt I could defend the American policy," he later said. "We have been unable to address either the root causes of the conflict in terms of the fighting on the ground and the balance on the ground, and we have a growing extremism threat." Ford had long pushed for giving greater support to the moderate rebels. His was just another dismissed voice of dissent.

In September, with the parade of horrors too great to ignore, Obama expanded the effort to fight ISIS. He called for American air strikes in Syria and announced that the U.S. would begin training and arming moderate Syrian rebels—two years after dismissing David Petraeus's plan to do so and one year after the Free Syrian Army had ceased to be a viable fighting force. Additionally, Obama would deploy 475 military advisers to Iraq, now that the country was overrun with ISIS militants.

In the 15 months since Obama called for greater action, it has become clear that the United States has still failed to adopt a winning strategy. ISIS has continued to make gains and export terror. Last May, it seized the Iraqi city of Ramadi. The same month, the group took over the

ancient Syrian city of Palmyra, killing locals door-to-door and destroying some of the most precious artifacts of multiple civilizations. Obama now says that ISIS is losing territory, but while updated color-coded maps tell different stories on different days, the general trend has been toward expansion. ISIS has also gained significant territory in Libya, Yemen, and South Asia.

Beyond its land claims, ISIS can now boast of a series of successful terrorist attacks. In October, the group killed 102 people in a suicide bombing at the Ankara central train station. That same month, ISIS blew up a Russian passenger plane, Metrojet flight 9268, killing 224 people over the Sinai. On November 12, two ISIS operatives blew themselves up in a Shia suburb of Lebanon, killing about 40 Lebanese. Then came the coordinated attacks in Paris and the San Bernardino shooting.

The strategy that Obama calls a success is, in reality, a combination of half measures and outdated ideas. Our air campaign in Syria has averaged a mere seven strikes a day. Almost 75 percent of planned U.S. bombing runs on ISIS never drop their payloads owing either to insufficient ground intelligence or overly strict rules of engagement. And Obama's plan to train moderate Syrian rebels has already been retired because there were so few left willing to work with the United States that the program produced only four or five fighters (at a cost of \$42 million).

Consider those sad facts in light of the enemy. Whatever language one wishes to use, ISIS now bears an inescapable resemblance to a state. It has established a set of laws and a means of enforcing them on a population of millions. It boasts a capital, designated provinces, and outlying governorates. Between collecting taxes, extorting money, seizing banks, ransoming kidnap victims, and selling oil, ISIS takes in billions of dollars annually. It has training outposts throughout the Middle East and, as we found out on November 13, organized operatives in the West. None of these achievements have taken a serious hit since the president claimed in 2014 he was stepping up the fight.

Last September, Gen. John Allen, the man Obama had picked to lead the coalition fight against ISIS, stepped down from his post. In announcing his exit, Allen cited his wife's health problems. But it did not go unnoticed that his repeated calls for increased U.S. action had also long been ignored by the White House. Allen wanted to deploy tactical air-control teams in Iraq and establish a safe zone in Syria. Even Obama's so-called ISIS czar, however, had been unable to persuade the president.

After the Paris attacks, the U.S. increased air strikes, instituted a more permissive targeting policy, and announced that "a specialized expeditionary targeting force" will help Iraqis and Kurds in raids against ISIS. But such measures are mostly cosmetic attempts to dress up a stale policy. They aren't turning the tide, and they won't do so any time soon.

Obama's repeated delays have precluded many formerly viable policy options. The rebel-training program is one example. No-fly zones over Syria are another. This plan, rebuffed years ago by the president, is no longer a possibility because of Russia's new air campaign over the country.

Another concern is that we may have been working from faulty intelligence. The Pentagon's inspector general is now examining the claims of more than 50 intelligence analysts who came forward in September, charging that their superiors had forced them to alter reports that didn't portray ISIS as definitively losing. While we await the results of the investigation, we can only wonder who in the chain of command may have been responsible for vetting intelligence for

good news. But if the claim is true, it certainly fits in with the culture of the Obama administration.

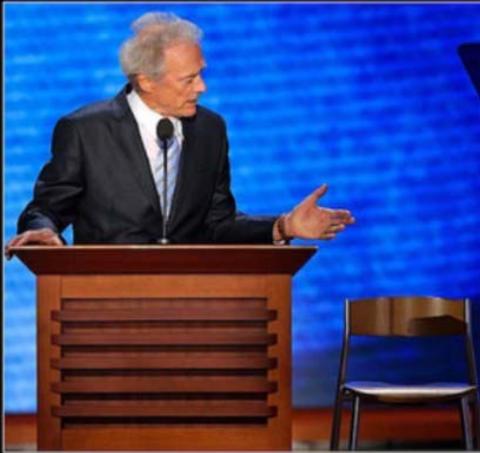
The White House has refused to see the problem for what it is. It has become clear that Assad and ISIS are complimentary parts of the same nightmare. They are perversely dependent on each other for survival: While ISIS thrives, Assad can play the role of Syria's "good cop," effectively offering a choice to those looking on: *Do you want me or the apocalyptic army of decapitating slave traders?* It's a role he has exploited to great advantage, and it's in his interest to keep ISIS in play so long as the world falls for the ploy. At the same time, ISIS can be destroyed only if Assad is taken out of power. So long as Assad is killing Syrians—and he's killed far more than ISIS has—Sunnis won't make ISIS their number-one target. The truth is that the United States needs to destroy ISIS and push to depose Assad simultaneously. But with John Kerry attempting to bring Assad and Syrian opposition parties into more talks about "power sharing," we're a long way off from getting the policy right. Obama, for his part, has contented himself with berating Americans who are wary of taking in an infinitesimal fraction of the refugees his own policies helped displace. "They are scared of three-year-old orphans," Obama chided. "That doesn't seem so tough to me."

All these issues, however, are but manifestations of the larger encumbering reality: Barack Obama's theological opposition to exercising effective American power abroad. The president's inflexibility on that point has nurtured the rise of ISIS and tied our hands in the fight against it. But, with so few prudent options left, his stubbornness may have made a larger conflict with ISIS inevitable, either during the remainder of his term or after it. If so, Obama will have worked for eight years to avert a fate his very actions have summoned.

Today, the president still dismisses significant "boots on the ground" in Iraq and Syria as a nonstarter. On December 6, Obama spoke from the Oval Office, saying, "We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria." He then added this bizarre coda: "That's what groups like ISIL want. They know they can't defeat us on the battlefield." ISIS wants to engage the United States in a war in order to lose? And we should therefore resist the fight? This is theology outweighing logic.

Perhaps in this period of post-Bush America, however, a ground war against ISIS really is out of the question. But we should be clear about something. ISIS controls vast swaths of land, out in the open. In adopting the structure of a state, the group has given up some measure of the asymmetrical advantage enjoyed by terrorists who traditionally "melt away" into the shadows after an attack; ISIS, in short, can be targeted and defeated like a state. If an American commander in chief cannot even countenance deploying ground soldiers and Marines to defeat a state comprising the worst terrorist threat we've ever faced, then we might have finally forfeited our last defense against evil. We are in the final year of a presidency that unwittingly midwifed a monster.

**NEVER DOUBT**



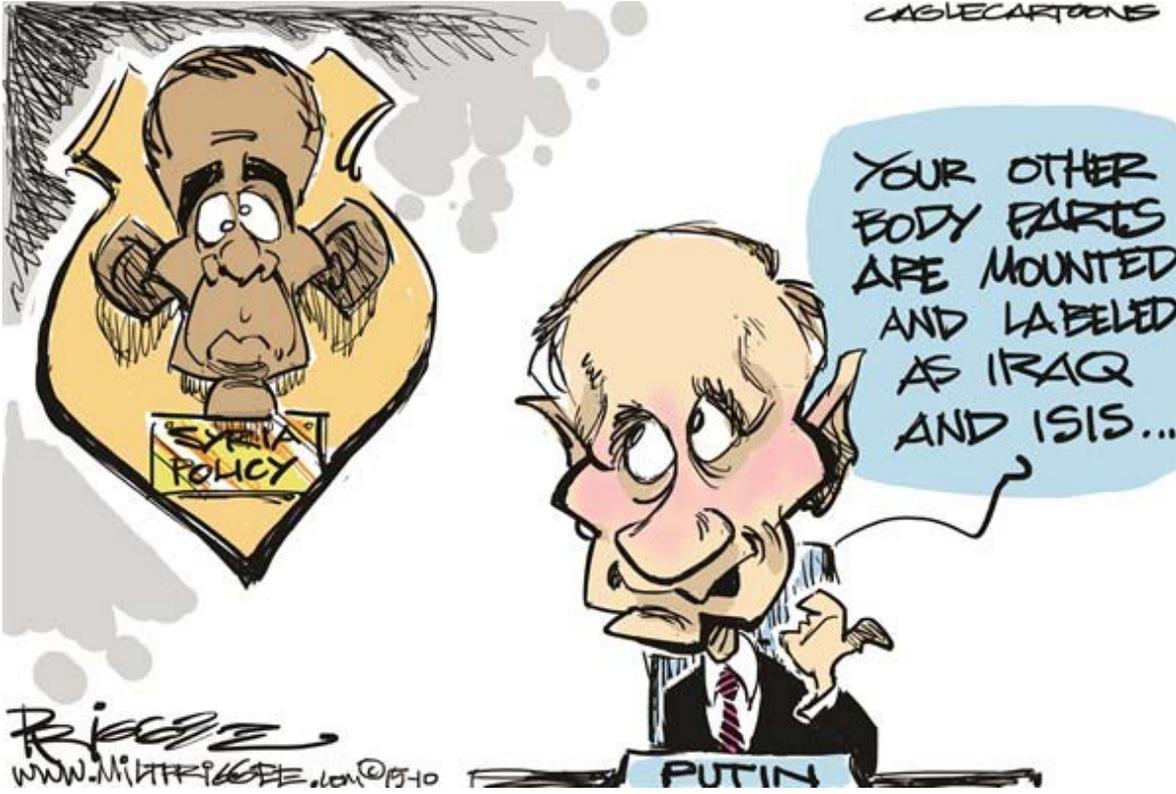
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