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Barack W. Bush: Unilateral War In Syria

Jacob Heilbrunn
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Barack W. Bush. Joe Cheney. Here they come. Girded for a war that the British took one look at and bailed out on before it even began. Announcing that they are prepared to go it alone. Who said that unilateralism went away with George W. Bush?

Obama said acting unilaterally was a bad thing when he campaigned for office in 2008. That was then. Obama, who has followed in Bush's footsteps on national security surveillance measures,

as the *Washington Post's* extensive revelations about the reach of government spy agencies show today, is about to go to war again.

Vice-president Joe Biden sounds like Cheney redivivus when he declares that there is "no doubt" that Bashar al-Assad authorized the use of weapons of mass destruction. All that's missing is a reference to yellow cake or the claim that this enterprise will be a cake walk. Meanwhile, the White House is engaging in magisterial Bush-speak, invoking the defense of the homeland: "The president of the United States is elected with the duty to protect the national security interests in the United States of America," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest. Well, yes. But this dodges the real question, which is: Will he be protecting America's national security interests by attacking Syria? Or will he undermine them?

The strongest case for launching an attack centers on American credibility and international norms. The shadow of the 1936 Italian invasion of Abyssinia when Mussolini employed chemical weapons and the League of Nations proved toothless looms large here. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, says that strikes against airfields and a promise to supply moderate opposition forces would be a punitive response that "sends the message that use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated and will be costly for the regime." But the Obama administration is simply asserting that it has the authority to embark on one and that Americans should trust its asseverations about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. As Obama put it, "we do have to make sure that when countries break international norms on weapons like chemical weapons that could threaten us, that they are held accountable."

Both Democratic and Republican legislators remain skeptical. As the *Los Angeles Times* observes, "Lawmakers have become increasingly vocal on the need for congressional authorization of military action, and more than 160 House lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans, have signed letters demanding a vote in Congress." Maybe Obama can't make the case because he doesn't wholly believe it in himself. Obama himself has clearly been reluctant to embroil the United States in the Syrian conflict.

Thus his own plan for intervention seems quite limited--no no-fly-zone, no troops on the ground. It is more, you could say, about what it is not than about what it is. Which has frustrated the liberal hawks and neocons. Charles Krauthammer, for example, says that Obama is being shamed into war and needs to do more: "If Obama is planning a message-sending three-day attack, preceded by leaks telling the Syrians to move their important military assets to safety, better that he do nothing. Why run the considerable risk if nothing important is changed?"

In 2002 Obama called Iraq a "dumb war." Is this one any smarter?