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Barack Obama's Foreign Policy Dilemma

By Justin Raimondo

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The War Party is facing a dilemma: how to do an end run around the doggedly "isolationist" American people, who have had it up to here with the overseas adventurism of our out-of-control leaders? After a decade-plus of uninterrupted warfare, with a new intervention waxing on the horizon as soon as the previous one wanes, polls show increasing support for a foreign policy of minding our own damn business. Nor is this an abstract consideration: the last time our Washington elites decided it was time to call out the troops – with Syria as the new target – ordinary Americans surprised the political class by rising up in opposition en masse.

This anti-interventionist backlash has instilled a certain caution in Washington: not that they've learned their lesson, and will now cease and desist from sticking their noses in every nation's business. Far from it: they've just decided that discretion is the better part of valor, so to speak, and are now determined to go about it a bit more subtly. "Shock and awe," as per Iraq, is out of date: Washington's new game is "subvert and overthrow," as in Ukraine. The idea is to create volatile situations by stealth, which we can then "respond" to: most useful in this regard are "democracy-promotion" schemes operating under the radar, which are designed to effect regime-change in targeted countries.

Yet that old trick shows signs of wearing thin: Americans are even less enthusiastic about intervening in Ukraine than they were in Syria – not a good sign, as far as the War Party is concerned. So what's the solution, from their point of view?

It's high time for the political class to launch yet another campaign – not a military effort overseas but a propaganda blitz right here at home. The target is "isolationism."

The problem with this campaign, however, is that there is no such creature as an "isolationist," not here nor practically anywhere, except perhaps in North Korea. That isn't stopping them, however, because this straw man is enormously useful. It lets the interventionists avoid having to make a real argument against their actual opponents. Thus we see Barack Obama, in his latest foreign policy peroration, taking on none other than George Washington:

"At least since George Washington served as Commander-in-Chief, there have been those who warned against foreign entanglements that do not touch directly on our security or economic well-being. Today, according to self-described realists, conflicts in Syria or Ukraine or the Central African Republic are not ours to solve. And not surprisingly, after costly wars and continuing challenges here at home, that view is shared by many Americans."

Note the substitution of "realist" for the usually favored "isolationist." Note also that no mention is made of how the Commander-in-chief in Washington's day wasn't empowered to take the nation to war all by himself: he had to go to Congress and ask permission.

Turning to his critics who say he isn't intervening enough, the President continues:

"A different view from interventionists from the left and right says that we ignore these conflicts at our own peril; that America's willingness to apply force around the world is the ultimate safeguard against chaos, and America's failure to act in the face of Syrian brutality or Russian provocations not only violates our conscience, but invites escalating aggression in the future."

As you can see, Obama gets a little more passionate when he describes the interventionist option, and that's hardly an accident. Yet he can't afford to come down on the interventionist side too strongly:

"And each side can point to history to support its claims. But I believe neither view fully speaks to the demands of this moment. It is absolutely true that in the 21st century American isolationism is not an option...."

We're not supposed to notice how he smuggled the "isolationist" epithet in there to describe what was previously portrayed as "realism." Oh well: "isolationism," "realism," same difference! Right?

So why isn't realism – oops, I mean isolationism – an option? Because History has deprived us of agency:

"We don't have a choice to ignore what happens beyond our borders. If nuclear materials are not secure, that poses a danger to American cities. As the Syrian civil war spills across borders, the capacity of battle-hardened extremist groups to come after us only increases. Regional aggression that goes unchecked – whether in southern Ukraine or the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world – will ultimately impact our allies and could draw in our military. We can't ignore what happens beyond our boundaries."

Oddly, every concrete example proffered by the President only underscores the degree to which the problems we supposedly face are of our own making. Those nukes wandering around the former Soviet Union wouldn't be so footloose and fancy free if we got together with the Russians – who have even more of an interest in securing them – and rounding them up. Yet this isn't happening because of the anti-Russian campaign that has been ongoing at least since the Bush administration and has been accelerated recently by the US-sponsored "revolution" in Ukraine. And for this President to complain about the capacity of "battle-hardened" jihadists to come after us after *arming and training* these same folks in Syria defies reason.

Yet the President has to pretend he's making a sensible "centrist" argument, rather than constructing a case for global intervention: this is the whole point of his West Point speech, the woof and warp of the "Obama Doctrine" as it will no doubt be dubbed. It is a dull pragmatism tinged with the President's obligatory moralizing – we must "make sure our children and grandchildren grow up in a world where schoolgirls are not kidnapped."

This is juxtaposed against a cartoon caricature of interventionism which supposedly holds that "every problem has a military solution." In order to make the promiscuous interventionism of his first term seem relatively cautious, Obama inveighs against "our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences – without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required." In other words: those *Republicans*, you *know* how they are!

How he can talk this way while Libya descends into Syria-like chaos is anyone's guess. Nor is our Ukrainian adventure working out as planned – and who knows but that Kiev could soon come to resemble Tripoli, with rival militias battling for control.

Citing Eisenhower on the horrors of war, the President avers that he's "haunted" by the deaths of US soldiers during the Afghan "surge" – and he doesn't say it, but clearly his audience of cadets understood this to mean they had died in an unwinnable war – i.e. for nothing. A bitter pill to swallow: no wonder the general impression of the President's reception at West Point was that it was decidedly cool. Oblivious to the effect he was having on his audience, Obama ploughed ahead: who, *me* send "you into harm's way simply because I saw a problem somewhere in the world that needed to be fixed?" Not on your life! (Although I do remember something about how this administration wanted to fix an alleged problem in Syria, but never mind, it's probably just my imagination.)

So he's not an interventionist in the mode of George W. Bush, and he's sure no George Washington; so what's the Sensible Centrist position, the midpoint between these two presidential extremes?

"Here's my bottom line: America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will. The military that you have joined is and always will be the backbone of that leadership. But U.S. military action cannot be the only – or even primary – component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail. And because the costs associated with military action are so high, you should expect every civilian leader – and especially your Commander-in-Chief – to be clear about how that awesome power should be used."

Translation: nothing is really going to change. That's because the goal of American foreign policy – global supremacy – is unchanged. They're just going to go about it a bit more cautiously, always looking over their shoulder at American voters and hoping to get away with as much as possible before anyone notices.

All but proclaiming victory in the "war on terrorism," Obama points to a new terrorist threat – Al Qaeda 2.0, the decentralized localized legacy of Osama bin Laden, who in death has seemingly spawned a number of imitators. No, we aren't going to "invade every country that harbors terrorists" because that "would be naïve." Instead, we're going to be smart and "partner" up with the tyrannous regimes that give rise to these movements in the first place: not only that, but we're going to ladle out \$5 billion – to start – to countries like Yemen, Bahrain, and the Central Asian oligarchies of the former Soviet Union.

Nixon tried this during the Vietnam war: almost as soon as he entered office he announced his ostensible goal of withdrawing all US forces via "Vietnamization." The plan was similar to the one now being implemented in Afghanistan: train and equip a native force to take up the brunt of the fighting and gradually withdraw in increments. Four years, an incursion into Cambodia, and rivers of blood later, the Vietnamese army collapsed, the commies took Saigon, and the model of how not to fight a war was established for future Presidents to study and learn from.

Or not....

Anyone who thinks this speech represents any significant change in an administration that has intervened as capriciously as its predecessor will be shocked and saddened by the news Obama is stepping on the gas in the Syrian civil war, determined to arm and give diplomatic support to mythical Syrian "moderates." He's still playing ball with Hillary Clinton: this was her big project, along with the Robespierre-like Samantha Power and the sinister tyrant-hugging Susan Rice.

Amid the hypocritical cant and highflown rhetoric – "I believe in American exceptionalism *with every fiber of my being!*" – the President even managed to get in a bit about how we needn't worry about the Surveillance State: "We're putting in place new restrictions on how America collects and uses intelligence – because we will have fewer partners and be less effective if a perception takes hold that we're conducting surveillance against ordinary citizens."

Never mind that this "perception" is incontestably true, as Edward Snowden has shown beyond any doubt. Lying is part of Obama's job, and it's the part at which he excels.

