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Obama's "Stupid Shit"

Now He's Bombing Syria

by ANDREW LEVINE

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Returning from his trip to Asia last April, Barack Obama told reporters aboard Air Force One that the guiding principle of his foreign policy is "don't do stupid shit."

Really? Since Day One he has been doing nothing but.

Future historians will debate how much of this Obama did on his own initiative. At the very least, he is culpable for opting for continuity, not change.

The dead weight of the past is, of course, a powerful constraint. But it is not all-powerful. An audacious leader with the political capital Obama once enjoyed could have gone up against it, and done a lot better.

Instead, Obama chose to work with, rather than clean up, the messes his predecessors had let drop –the mother lode left by Bill Clinton, and the still standing remains of earlier administrations, extending back to even before the days of Henry Kissinger.

And then there was the torrent let loose after 9/11.

This was mainly George Bush and Dick Cheney's doing, but, for the past six years, it has been Obama's too. His first and now second term might as well have been Bush and Cheney's third and fourth. Obama also added a few wrinkles of his own; new guys do that.

So far, though, his contributions have been minimal compared to theirs. Nevertheless, it will fall to Obama, not his predecessors, to reap the havoc they sowed.

So much for the principle "if you break it, you own it." Bush and Cheney no longer own their wars; Obama does.

He continued their domestic policies too, especially their assaults on basic rights and liberties. In some areas – going after investigative reporters, for example, and shielding banksters from prosecution – his administration has been even worse.

But Obama's foreign policy is in a class by itself.

That it would come to this was plain from the day he announced that Hillary Clinton, the doyenne of stupid shit, would be his Secretary of State. It didn't get any better either when we finally got to see the back of her – most likely, only temporarily.

In her place, Obama let loose the likes of John Kerry, Susan Rice and Samantha Power. They have given Clinton's inchoate but vaguely neoconservative foreign policy a "humanitarian" patina, making it, if anything, even more pernicious.

"Don't do stupid shit?" Obama's actual principle has been just the opposite.

Had he been a one term President, future generations would probably think first, when his name is mentioned, of that moment in September 2009 when Joe Wilson, an otherwise unremarkable South Carolina Tea Party Republican, shouted out "you lie," while Obama was addressing a joint session of Congress.

Although the evidence had yet to pour in, Wilson's outburst was enough on track to mark a revealing contrast with the familiar fable about George Washington and the cherry tree. Their juxtaposition says something about the moral trajectory of American politics.

But now in his second term, Obama has ratcheted up America's involvement in the Syrian civil war. He will therefore more likely be remembered for the stupid shit he did in foreign affairs – in Syria especially.

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In the months preceding Obama's declaration of principle aboard Air Force One, he actually seemed to be getting better.

Perhaps it was his chronic irresolution shining through. But at least he did back off from getting the United States more directly involved in Syria.

And though Russia and China were still in his crosshairs, Obama did cause American provocations to taper off. Perhaps he realized the likely consequences of his meddling in Ukraine, and what he saw frightened him.

An optimist might even have supposed that his intent that day in April was to signal a change of course – towards common sense.

With midterm elections just months away, and the American public sick of endless wars, that would have made sense. But it didn't happen. Change course, he did; but not in a good way.

Was Hillary Clinton's needling responsible? In a vain effort to differentiate her foreign policy from Obama's, she faulted his – i.e. her – timidity in dealing with foreign governments, implying that, when she is fully in charge, she will be even more reckless. One shudders to think what she has in mind.

As if to preempt her, Obama then took off up shit's creek, leaving the proverbial paddle at home. But why would he think it opportune to out-macho Hillary? The plain fact that there is no good answer is revealing.

In any case, while continuing his on-going wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and who knows where else, the Nobel laureate set about on a course in Iraq and Syria that the words “stupid shit” hardly begin to describe.

Ratcheting up the war in Iraq that he had taken credit for winding down is the least of it.

The bigger problem is that he brought Syria into the fold, after all. He should have known better – not long ago, he did know better — and yet he did it anyway.

There was no “shock and awe” this time, and very little fanfare. No doubt, his team concluded that it is too close to the November elections for that. They decided instead to proceed by small increments, Vietnam-style.

That shock and awe is a stupid way to start a Middle Eastern war was conclusively demonstrated in Iraq eleven years ago. But the way Kennedy and Johnson deployed in Vietnam, death by a thousand escalations, is stupidity on stilts.

There is probably no one in the Pentagon – probably no minimally informed observer anywhere – who thinks that Obama's bombs will do the Islamic State (IS) in. Everybody agrees that even to make a start on that, those “boots on the ground” that we have lately been hearing so much about are indispensable.

The boots will come from somewhere where labor is cheap, but where will the soldiers who wear them come from?

This is a complicated question inasmuch as the several constituents of “the coalition of the willing” that Team Obama has cobbled together have different, sometimes incompatible, objectives.

Turkey, for example, is wary of empowering Kurdish militias. But then who else can Obama get to do the dirty work for him – not that Syrian Kurds, joined by Iraqi Kurds, could do it all in any case.

The plain fact is that there are no proxy armies, adequate to the task, at hand.

Therefore, expect American troops to be on their way again soon. No matter how often he denies it, Obama knows that this will happen.

He ought to know too that events will then spin out of control, compounding the mess already there many times over.

The state system established by the British and the French after World War I has few virtues, but at least it helped secure regional stability. It will probably be a casualty of this latest American adventure.

And as regional instability increases, it will be harder to keep the Middle East’s only nuclear power out of the fray, especially inasmuch as Israel is also the Middle East’s most bellicose state and the conflict now goes right up to its borders.

The widespread view there — that the whole world is against them and that they have nothing to lose by throwing their American-sustained and American-enabled weight around — is fast becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Israeli intransigence and brutality are only part of the problem. Western public opinion is also, finally, taking notice of the injustices Palestinians suffer at Israel’s hands. In just the past few weeks, Sweden recognized the state of Palestine, and the British parliament passed a (non-binding) resolution to that effect!

Does Obama really want to introduce Israel into his wars in Syria and Iraq? That would be like throwing a super-flammable liquid into an already raging fire.

And, for that matter, does he really want to encourage the recruitment of yet more “terrorists” — more young men and women willing, even eager, to die as martyrs – by intensifying the murder and mayhem in Syria and Iraq?

It sure looks like he does. Or is he just not thinking?

* * *

It is natural to assume that people do what they do for a reason; typically, a compelling reason.

And for as long as economics has been a recognized discipline, economists have found it useful – and explanatory – to suppose that economic agents adapt means to ends in the most efficient way possible, given the constraints they face; in other words, that they are rational and therefore that their reasons are rationally compelling.

On some philosophically important accounts, rationality involves more than this, but, on all accounts, it involves at least this much.

Nowadays, means-ends rationality figures in explanations of a wide array of non-economic human activities. In academic political science, the idea is almost axiomatic.

Needless to say, even the most ardent defenders of rational choice explanations know that people are not always rational. Rationality often fails; in the extreme, it can fail completely — people sometimes go berserk.

But not, we like to think, in politics; when we reflect on that sphere of human life, the berserk hypothesis is ruled out. Instead, rationality is imputed to the people whose behavior one is trying to make sense of, even when it is hard to imagine what they could possibly be thinking.

The working assumption is that there are always reasons, putative justifications, for what people do. The reasons may be, and often are, defective; people in politics, as elsewhere, can be just plain nuts. But, even when they are, their actions make sense in light of what their reasons are.

The more powerful a political figure is, the harder this assumption is to dislodge. It is as if people suppose that the incumbents of political offices must be clever to have gotten where they are, and that the people who land at the top must be very clever indeed.

Of course, everyone knows that there are many ways to come out on top. Nearly all of them involve brute luck; many of them involve being to the manor born. People seldom make it on their wits alone.

But there is a will to believe that political leaders know what they are doing, even when an abundance of evidence suggests that they do not. It is a comforting assumption. No one wants clueless dullards running the show, especially when means of violence capable of destroying the world a thousand times over are involved.

And so, the belief persists — no matter how stupid or inept or both the people calling the shots actually are.

This is why there is now a frantic search on for explanations for Obama's latest move into Syria. No one wants to think that he and his advisors aren't acting for reasons that they, at least, somehow find compelling.

* * *

Proposed explanations fall into three categories: those that take what Obama and his people say at face value, those that blame forces trying to undo his presidency or otherwise to lead the country astray for political or commercial gain, and those that discern a geopolitical objective behind Obama's flagrant lapse of common sense.

The word the administration has put out, and that corporate media have bought into, is that the United States had to revive the Iraq War and then to extend it into Syria because there was no other way to fight "terrorism."

In their view, the IS is the problem; or rather ISIS or ISIL is. The Obama administration and Hillary Clinton call it by one or another of its older, discarded names because, they say, it is neither Islamic nor a state.

No doubt, Muslims around the world await the judgments of these learned scholars with rapt anticipation. If only for the sake of consistency, they ought also to declare that Torquemada wasn't really a Catholic, and that, whatever else Netanyahu may be, he is certainly not a Jew.

However it is called, the IS is currently ensconced in Syria as well as Iraq, and is scoring impressive military victories in both countries. Because it is zealous, barbaric, and militarily adept, it poses an unprecedented danger. It must therefore be attacked, degraded and, as far as possible, obliterated. QED.

George W. Bush would have had America do the job all by itself, if need be. Obama took pains, like Bush the father, to cobble together a coalition of the willing – though, in this case, it is far from clear how helpful any of the partners he has brought in will be.

On the other hand, Obama didn't bother even to ask for authorization from any competent international body, or from the United States Congress. Evidently, with allies in name only signing on for their own reasons, he thinks that he can do without it. Bombs away!

That this bombing campaign of his is therefore manifestly illegal under international law is of no consequence. Just as only the little people need obey the law in the Age of Obama – banksters, for example, are exempt and so are most polluters — international law only applies when and where the United States wants it to apply.

This may be reprehensible, but, in view of how awful the IS is, the administration's there-is-no-alternative rationale for bombing Syria does make sense; or rather it would, but for the plain fact, confirmed countless times, that, in the real world, fighting terrorism militarily, the way America does, makes for more terrorists and terrorism, not less.

Wiser leaders than ours would have realized this even before the evidence began to accumulate. When the United States, or any foreign power, invades another country and occupies it, there is bound to be resistance.

In most cases, this will not involve army-to-army combat.

Typically, the resistance has no army at all. Its only resort, therefore, is to launch a protracted and “asymmetrical” war of attrition, a guerilla war – waged not with a view to doing the impossible, defeating the occupier’s forces outright, but to inflicting costs on the occupying power.

This can go on for as long as need be — until war weariness in the aggressors’ home country forces the hostilities to end. In Afghanistan, it has been going on for nearly fourteen years.

When an occupation is also an intervention into an on-going civil war, it is inevitable that civilian populations and infrastructure will suffer even more egregiously than otherwise, and that terror will become a more than usually commonplace instrument of war.

Add religious zealotry to the mix and the situation becomes more harrowing by orders of magnitude. Martyrs to a transcendent cause are far more willing than ordinary soldiers – especially, the economic conscripts America puts in harm’s way — to take casualties and to inflict them.

The United States has been fostering militant Islamism ever since Jimmy Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski decided that it would be a good idea to get the Soviet Union bogged down in Afghanistan. And at least since the first Bush’s Iraq War in 1991, American military interventions in historically Muslim regions have been stirring the pot.

The process continued on from there; it has finally come to a head with the IS’s conquests of large swathes of Syria and Iraq.

In this sense, the IS was made in the USA. It is a product of the never-ending violence the United States unleashed in Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East, especially in Iraq and now in Syria as well.

The IS is inspired by and effectively funded by reactionary forces in the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states are longstanding American allies. Their ruling elites owe their wealth and their very survival to Uncle Sam. In this sense, indirectly too, the US made the IS what it is today.

American support for those reactionary Gulf regimes has only grown in the post-9/11 period. No matter that it was mainly Saudis, not Afghans and certainly not Iraqis or Syrians, who were involved in 9/11. The attacks that day unleashed the spirit of revenge – somebody had to pay, even if the actual perpetrators were too important to the empire to be the ones.

Obama knows this. He may have continued the policies of his predecessors but, unlike them, he inhabits the real world, not the world neoconservatives imagine.

What, then, could he be thinking?

In explaining political behavior, it is always hazardous to make inferences to the best explanation. Down that road “conspiracy theories” lie. Of course, some conspiracy theories are true, or partly true. Most often, though, they are not.

In this case, the best explanation that can be inferred from the available evidence is that Obama *et. al.* do not want what they call “terrorism” to end; more likely, they want it to continue.

They are certainly doing their level best to augment the supply of ready and willing terrorists. This is about the only thing, other than death and destruction, that bombing Syria will achieve.

A conspiracy theorist could even identify a motive: that, consistent with his dedication to serving corporate America, Obama wants to keep America’s perpetual war regime flourishing.

It is wise, though, to resist this way of thinking. It gives Obama and his underlings too much credit; they are not that clever. And there is a more likely explanation available: that Team Obama is in over its head, and is mindlessly flailing about. Obama and the others may not have gone berserk, but they are hovering close to the line.

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Another possibility is that there are political reasons that Obama and his advisors find compelling, even if they risk disaster by doing so.

There are other examples of this phenomenon: for instance, the administration is courting, indeed inviting, ecological catastrophes by refusing to challenge defenders of the status quo. Corporate America is the main culprit. But workers concerned about jobs also keep the government from doing the right thing.

The Obama administration’s lackadaisical attitude towards providing retraining and jobs for workers made worse off because of urgently needed environmental regulations speaks volumes about how willing Obama and his fellow Democrats are to take the line of least resistance – no matter how damaging the consequences.

This penchant of theirs explains Obama’s ceaseless quest for “bipartisanship.” It almost always fails because Republicans won’t play along.

Apologists for Obama have made a fetish out of this state of affairs. Their standard excuse is that, no matter how awful this or that Obama misdeed is, Republicans made him do it.

This excuse is so widely invoked that even Obama’s critics, trying desperately to discern a method to his madness, have taken it on board. Their idea is that but for Republican pressure, the bombers would still be in their hangars, and America would still be less engaged in Syria than it now is.

A less flattering variant of this search for a rationale has it that Obama opportunistically follows public opinion, and is therefore overly susceptible to being influenced by corporate public relations operatives and corporate media. In other words, the media made him do it.

These views are exaggerated at best. Obama does let Republicans shape the political agenda; all Democrats do. But even the GOP's most militaristic stalwarts didn't force Obama to embark on this latest phase of the so-called war on terror.

Obama won two elections by rejecting – or rather appearing to reject – Republican warmongering.

And although the case for the media's untrammelled venality is beyond dispute, the idea that their hyping the IS threat caused Obama to let loose with his bombers strains credulity. Even if they had the power, which they don't, they don't have a plausible incentive.

The claim that media jump at the opportunity to stir up war fever because wars sell papers – or, these days, ads on websites — has been strained at least since the William Randolph Hearst – *Citizen Kane* era.

Corporate media outlets don't need to incite overseas wars, especially not unwinnable ones, to peddle their wares. For that, they have Clooney weddings and Kardashians.

And even if there were money to be made by selling a new bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria, the media are too mindless to think of it, much less to pull it off. They just go with whatever the political figures they report on say and do. They are shamefully complicit, but they don't instigate; they follow.

On the other hand, the IS is able to shape events, not just reflect them. It knows how to push America's buttons.

It knows, for example, that beheadings spark fear, loathing and outrage, and that drones, bombs, depleted uranium, and liquid phosphorus do not. Why? Because Americans are crazy? Because they have no sense of proportion? Maybe. But, whatever the reason, politicians pick up on this, and the media dutifully follow along.

We are bombing Syria now not because media tycoons want us to or because it somehow benefits their bottom line. We are doing it because this is what the IS wants us to do. The IS wants America back in the quagmire; and it knows how to get America's Commander-in-Chief to bend to its will.

The evidence might even suggest to a conspiracy theorist who cannot imagine that religious fanatics could be smart enough to figure it out on their own, that they have been consulting with Brzezinski or someone similarly devious.

It is certain, in any case, that there is no political advantage, even in the short run, in going down the route Obama has taken.

He wrested the nomination away from Hillary Clinton in 2008 because he could present himself as an opponent of the war in Iraq while she could not. Unlike her, he had never voted to authorize it, and, ironically, he had once called it “dumb.”

Moreover, at least part of the reason why Obama beat Mitt Romney in 2012 is that he seemed, finally, to be ending that dumb war. Why would he think that a complete about face would be politically beneficial now?

Obama surely knows that the American public is war weary; and if he forgets, he has plenty of handlers around to remind him.

So what, then, if John McCain and Lindsey Graham do their saber rattling routine, and if a few pundits echo their rants? In the very recent past, Obama resisted similar pressures; he could easily do so again.

The impending midterm elections can hardly be the cause. Now that Obama has crossed the line, McCain and Graham are saying that his moves against the IS are too timid to accomplish much of anything. They may be right. People who actually know a thing or two about military matters seem, without exception, to agree.

Why then is Obama pulling his punches? The only plausible explanation is that he fears the political consequences of punching even as much as he already has; he fears that voters will punish Democrats on this account.

If that is not his reason, the only alternative is to concede that he has no reason at all.

It looks increasingly like this is the case.

* * *

The idea that Republicans or media moguls are making him do it is, if anything, even more of a non-starter than the idea that terror can be fought by visiting death and destruction upon Syria and Iraq. A plausible geopolitical explanation is similarly unlikely.

To be sure, the United States has a history of turning on formerly friendly dictators in the region – Saddam Hussein is the most conspicuous example, Hosni Mubarak is another. Now that Bashar al-Assad is damaged goods, American planners would no doubt like to replace him too with a more biddable strongman.

Among other things, this would tighten America’s control over world oil supplies by making the semi-feudal rulers of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States more secure – more invulnerable to popular insurgencies and to pressure from regional powers like Turkey and Iran.

And because America is currently on the lookout for ways to stick it to Russia, Obama has yet another reason to opt now for “regime change” in Syria. Since Assad is more or less an ally of Vladimir Putin’s, going after him makes sense on that account.

Replacing Assad with someone more compliant would also harm two of America's – and Israel's — longstanding enemies in the region, Iran and Hezbollah.

Therefore, one might think that Obama decided to bomb Syria in order to overthrow its government. This is plausible; for several years now, replacing Assad has been one of America's stated goals.

But for Obama to justify his bombing campaign against IS targets in Syria and Iraq on these grounds, he would have to abandon either his opposition to the Syrian government or the light of reason itself.

No matter how one tries to square the circle, the facts remain: the IS is by far the greatest threat to Assad's rule today, and his government, along with Iran and Hezbollah, are America's best, indeed only, hope for defeating the IS militarily.

Therefore, to degrade the IS's military capabilities is to strengthen Assad's hold over Syria, and vice versa.

Attacking the IS to undo Assad therefore makes no sense. The irrationality is blatant, the policy incoherent. The Turks know this; it is why, despite their membership in the coalition of the willing and despite Obama's entreaties, they are still holding back. Why can't the Obama administration figure it out?

Obama has to face up to this problem soon, because he cannot remain in denial about the efficacy of his bombs and drones for long.

Over the next few weeks, Obama could well find it impossible to hold off sending in American troops without Assad's help – and Hezbollah's and Iran's too. With midterm elections just a few weeks off, this is not a happy place for him to be.

And so, we are left with only one conclusion: that unless Obama's aim really is to keep the war on terror going indefinitely, there is no way to account for what he has lately been doing. There are no reasons that can justify it. It doesn't make sense.

“Don't do stupid shit” is good advice. Too bad Obama doesn't follow it, and worse still that, in defying his own dictum, he goes to such irrational extremes.