

How War Weary Are We?

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, SEP 15 2013

One of the constants in the attempts by President Obama to mobilize support for a strike against the Assad administration in Syria for its use of chemical weapons is the acknowledgement that the American public is war weary, having had a dozen years of chasing al Qaeda and fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. This unnamed war against terrorism and instability is indeed one of America's longest. If you are a member of the American military, you have likely spent one or more tours in the fight. The casualties are still mounting despite the end of our involvement in Iraq and the pledge to withdraw combat forces from Afghanistan. But that said, how war weary are we?

The polls show Americans about two to one against a Syrian strike. These results and the difficulty of gaining a majority in either the House of Representatives or the Senate to endorse the President's use of force have lead many observers to see a growing isolationism in America. It is true that majority of the Republicans in both houses are not automatically Hawks, pro the use of American power as Republicans have been since the Vietnam War. It is also true that significant numbers of Democrats remain the anti-war Doves that became the majority in their party during the Vietnam War. Clouding the issue though is a near rabid dislike of Obama among Republicans which causes opposition towards anything he does, and a hidden detachment from Obama among Democrats, especially office holders, stemming from his aloofness towards them that some see as bordering on contempt. Despite being the most powerful man in town, few in Washington even pretend to like him.

But if there had been a vote in Congress, there are important advantages President Obama would have had. Many Republicans would have been reluctant to reject the use of force request of the Commander-in-Chief. It would have set a precedent for requiring such approval likely unwelcomed by future Republican presidents, and it would undermine the threat of the use of force in the effort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, a fast approaching crisis and one that involves Israeli as well US security red lines. For Democrats a rejection would weaken President Obama at home as well as abroad. His second term agenda, barely underway, would be endangered by their abandonment of the President. When the President's party starts deserting him, power vanishes. Given that the President is weakened anyway in a second term because of term limits, his loss of the use of force vote could have been disastrous, and because of that, would have likely rallied Democrats to his cause when faced with an actual vote.

Obviously some uses of force are not rejected by Americans. US drones still fly and attack targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere. Few Americans want the hunt for al Qaeda to stop even though Osama is dead and attacks against the US, either at home or abroad, by al Qaeda and affiliates are neither numerous nor especially successful. Americans still fights in Afghanistan and we seem certain to station forces there after combat operations end in 2014. American troops will likely be tracking and killing Taliban for years to come.

What seems different about Syria is that we have no side to favor in the civil war which involves the Assad regime and its closest allies Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia trying to suppress a rebellion dominated by al Qaeda elements. Without the terrible toll on civilians, we would be cheering them on. A long, inconclusive fight that drains both sides is strategically desirable. The humanitarian tragedy requires our sincere assistance, but not our military intervention. The neighbors seem similarly unwilling to join the conflict though they clearly are bearing some of the costs imposed by the fighting inside Syria.

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The vote against intervention by the British Parliament also hurt. Although Americans are used to doing most of the fighting, we judge the rightness of our causes by the allies who stand behind if not beside us. Not having the UK in the “coalition” makes it a suspect operation. No one cares much about the UN given the makeup of the Security Council and how often our friends have abandoned us there. Support from France is not considered as either expected or meaningful. Parliament’s rejection forced the approach to Congress, as the President could not be easily seen as refusing to seek Congressional consent when Prime Minister Cameron had sought approval from his public’s representatives.

And perhaps most importantly, the strike proposed by President Obama seems likely to be ineffectual. Secretary of State Kerry promised that it would be “unbelievably small.” The President himself kept saying it would be very limited and not designed to affect the war, but only deter Assad from using chemical weapons. Because of the potential for lethal releases, it seems unlikely that the chemical weapons production or storage facilities will be hit. Also given the President’s slow motion effort to strike Syria, it appears likely that anything of value to Assad will be buried deep, placed next to a school or hospital or so dispersed as not to be at much risk from an American attack. Although the President insists that the American military does not do pinprick attacks, the great strike seems certain to be anything but persuasive to Assad.

What the strike does promise is involvement. What will be the Syrian, Hezbollah or Iranian response? What will happen if Assad continued to use chemical weapons? What about retaliation against Israel? And will a small strike really do anything beyond giving us more trouble? There will be no boots on the ground we are told, but the possibility of miscalculation seems great. Drawing a line on chemical weapons use may help reinforce an international norm, but at what cost?

Americans have not given up on the use of force. We really aren’t that tired of war. But this proposed use of force has limited appeal. It has almost no international support and no chance for success. It would provoke but not hurt; likely involve us in a war that we care little about, but not have impact; put some of us at risk, but to no obvious advantage. It is not good to have the President so much in a corner, so trapped by his own words, but it isn’t surprising that many Americans would be reluctant to follow his lead in this instance. Americans aren’t so war weary that we would not happily punch Assad and friends really hard. It’s just that many Americans are unconvinced that the punch Obama suggests would have any useful outcome.

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About the author:

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