

Obama's Isolationism

Almost everyone except the shrinking hallelujah chorus for the Obama administration acknowledges that there are serious problems in U.S. foreign policy, and that the antagonists to the West and to stability in the world are gaining strength every week. The administration's response to all of it is that none of it is America's problem – the 21 Coptic Christians beheaded on film in Libya by ISIS, the incineration of a Jordanian pilot in a cage by ISIS, the increasing aggressions and massacres of Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamic extremists, or the continuing Russian-sponsored aggression in Ukraine.

What has muddied the waters is that the administration periodically claims it is doing something about these outrages. Last summer, when the force of public opinion would not allow President Obama to pretend any longer that none of it was happening, or that if it was, it was virtually on another planet, he dusted off the Truman, Eisenhower, and Nixon doctrines and said that the United States would help indigenous elements resist terrorism and aggression in selected places (and helpfully added that "this is American leadership at its best"). But he never goes beyond a hesitant and arm's-length definition of assistance, building down from the Clinton administration's conduct of the Bosnian War at 30,000 feet as a war worth killing for but not worth dying for. (And that was after Bob Dole's lift-and-strike vote in the Senate, in which he required American dissent from the European Union policy of allowing the Serbians to cleanse the former Yugoslavia along ethnic and sectarian lines.) Now we have wars in which blankets and medicine and even limited ordnance may be supplied, and air attacks on enemies of civilization take place, but no weapons of self-defense are provided to Ukraine, and little direct assistance to *any* of these victims of aggression.

Instead of action, the White House organized the most

platitudinous conference in modern history, except for the 2009 global-warming conference in Copenhagen, which Obama attended but at which he was unable even to gain an interview with the premier of China. (It all ended in shambles, taking the asinine Kyoto Accord – under which the West and Japan would have given Russia scores of billions of dollars as a reward for a reduced carbon footprint because of the disintegration of the USSR – down with it.) Yet in the *Wall Street Journal* of February 19, Secretary of State Kerry effectively wrote that this redundant anti-terrorism conference was the core of the American response to all these outrages.

Various subterfuges and feints have been presented, including the spurious claim that a “pivot to Asia” was in progress. A rearguard action has been conducted by the White House media operation, claiming that a clever and discriminating focus was underway on the realistically attainable and the avoidance of “stupid stuff.”

The president’s critics mistakenly accuse him of irresolution. He is very resolute: He has renounced any serious American involvement in international-security matters. He said in his national-security statement on February 6 that “hard choices” impended, and that it was imperative to avoid “the overreach that comes when we make decisions based upon fear.” This was just a matrix for an attitude, or policy (to put it grandiloquently), of complete acquiescence. This theme was elaborated on by national-security adviser Susan Rice the following week at the Brookings Institution, when she gave the Obama line, “We insist upon investing in the foundations of American power: education, health care, clean energy, and basic research,” as if any of that has anything to do with countering terrorism or international aggression. After the crushing rejection of the last mid-term elections, Obama has gone into a crouch, threatens preemptively to veto anything in the path of his retreat from the world, has presented an

insane program of increased borrowing and spending that was dead on arrival in the air as he delivered it in the State of the Union message, and has strapped himself into a fuel-efficient time machine and fluttered back to the piping isolationist days of Herbert Hoover, when Hitler came to power and Japan invaded China. He couldn't even send Attorney General Holder, who was in Paris anyway, to the January 11 anti-terrorist march in that city.

He told his prayer breakfast, the same week as the Rice speech, that ISIS's atrocities were extenuated by the Crusades, Jim Crow, and other crimes of the Christian West. I have no standing to say how fervently the president believes that these past outrages are properly comparable to today's Muslim extremism. Still, it is pretty clear by now that Obama will bestir himself even to the most pallid replication of traditional alliance solidarity and national-security alertness only if public opinion threatens to generate such wholesale desertions from among the congressional Democrats that his vetoes could be overridden. He has thrown down the mask: Obviously this slant on security matters did not suddenly come upon him. Despite his escalation of the American effort in Afghanistan, he has been surreptitiously winding down American overseas involvements and redefining the national-security perimeter as, essentially, the United States itself, for six years. Now that he has fought his last election, he is revealing the proportions of his isolationism.

In 1937 in Chicago, Franklin D. Roosevelt startled the world by calling for a "quarantine" of aggressor-states. Three years later, he warned that if the democracies (Britain, France, Canada, and Australia) were defeated, this hemisphere would be like a prison, where we would be "hand-cuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars . . . by the contemptuous, unpitying masters of other continents." His conviction, and that of his eleven successors, has been that the United States must consider its first line of defense to be Western Europe and the Far East,

and not New England and California (or Pearl Harbor). There is room for legitimate debate about the extent to which the U.S. should be involved in the world, but there is general agreement that the steps President Truman took to keep the Communist powers from strangling West Berlin, overrunning South Korea, and exploiting post-war devastation in Western Europe were correct and vitally served the legitimate strategic interests of the country. Few would now dispute that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger skillfully exited Vietnam, wisely brought China into the world equation, negotiated an excellent arms-limitation agreement with the USSR, and usefully started the peace process in the Middle East; and that Ronald Reagan's combination of a defense build-up, the SDI program that frightened Russia with the prospect of removing its first-strike capability, and the stoking up of a mighty economic boom was a strategic grand slam. George H. W. Bush expelled Saddam Hussein from Kuwait with great skill, and Bill Clinton handled NATO expansion well. The national-security consensus did not vanish, though Vietnam and the disappointing results of the Iraq War weakened it. But this abdication by Obama has had no consensus of support, and no serious public discussion; and it has been executed behind a smokescreen of false purposefulness.

It is little wonder that the American people wearied of armed foreign expeditions and became skeptical of them, or that the Obama administration wanted to concentrate more resources at home building the foundations of American life and union (and not, presumably, for exclusively opportunistic political reasons). But this complete indifference to the world, in its open-ended lassitude and in its suddenness, is problematical in many ways. It has been presaged by fierce talk of "crippling sanctions" on Iran, and of various things and people being intolerable and then being tolerated (most notoriously in the case of the "red line" in Syria). It has incited increasingly provoking acts of aggression by those anxious to show the United States as a decadent and morally

feeble paper tiger. It has reminded those who are historically knowledgeable of America's inconstancy in pre-Roosevelt times: Foreign-policy specialists remember that President Wilson inspired the world, shattered by World War I, with notions of world government and durable peace and that the U.S bolted from its leader's high-minded course and flopped back into isolation. The world had become accustomed to American leadership and to an American definition of U.S. security interests that included the absence of threats to the United States from all theaters. Any departure from that status had to be responsibly discussed and introduced gradually and after consultation with allies, and as a handing over of the torch to reliable hands in each region – something like the British handing over influence in many parts of the world to the U.S. when the British could no longer afford to carry that burden after World War II.

And finally, the extreme confusion caused by this retreat, which a majority of Americans and most foreigners except terrorists and mountebanks like Putin hope will be reversed with a new administration, is being effected at a time when Western leadership is almost as weak in the other major countries as it is in Washington. If de Gaulle, Adenauer, Thatcher, or even Pompidou, Mitterrand, Kohl, or Blair were in office in France, Germany, and Britain, some degree of continuity would be possible. But it is the misfortune of the West, and of those hundreds of millions of people elsewhere who depend on the West, that all of the traditionally leading Western countries are, for different reasons, having crises of leadership and policy coherence. This encourages the enemies of the West and makes essentially very vulnerable countries such as Russia and Iran appear strong. The leaders of Canada, Australia, Israel, India, and to some extent Japan are more robust, but the vacuum in America and Western Europe is profound and dangerous. The world is fragmenting so quickly that Obama will not make it to the finish line with his policy of unilateral passivity, and neither will at least one or two

of the other main Western governments. The provocations will inflame opinion, and even this administration will have to respond, and not just with more tokenistic gestures and tired pieties. The West is fatigued but not degenerate and defeatist. It will turn suddenly, and the people will assert themselves. This torpor will end, but, unfortunately, probably only after another violent provocation.

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