



September 24, 2014

Letter from Washington

Here we go again.

As of this writing the United States has just conducted a second wave of air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria, with the assumption that there will be more to come over the next days and weeks. The President has taken this action without consultation or authorization from the Congress, as required by the War Powers Act, but he can hardly be faulted for that. The Congress left town in a hurry at the end of last week, keeping to their original legislative schedule in spite of unfolding events. The urge to get out on the campaign trail was stronger than the need to protect their constitutional prerogatives, especially when difficult votes might be required.

The President's job approval rating has suffered over the past several months, especially over his handling of foreign affairs. There is a persistent belief that he is bored and frustrated, just barely pulling on his oar. This military engagement with the Islamic State has been partly forced upon him by events and partly by his own Cabinet.

In a display of uncoordinated policy-making in public, his Secretaries of Defense and State, Attorney General and Joint Chiefs Chairman all made alarmist public statements on the need to confront, contain and destroy ISIS. Whether they were all free-lancing or it was a coordinated effort to force the President to get involved is an interesting question but immaterial at this point.

More so than the public statements of his key officials, the You Tuber decapitations of two Americans and a Brit have aroused the American public and demand action in response. The President, reluctant and foot-dragging, has committed American power and prestige to an uncertain mission. His first public formulation was that the US needed to "manage" ISIS, but the public outcry to that less than robust construct forced him to up the rhetoric to "degrade and destroy" the Islamic State.

While committing the United States to destroying ISIS, he simultaneously pledged that no US troops would be employed in ground combat. His plan appears to be that while the US will supply the air component of the destruction of ISIS, the real work will have to be done by someone else, as

yet unidentified. Besides the fact that Mr. Obama has (again) unilaterally disarmed himself by removing US ground troops from the mix, he has committed to a mission that clearly requires troops in contact, not just overhead. General Dempsey in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee wandered off the reservation by admitting that he might recommend American ground troop participation in some circumstances. That notion was promptly disowned by the President who doubled down on the "no boots on the ground" promise.

To recap US policy, we will continue to oppose Assad in Syria by supporting the "good rebels" and killing the "bad rebels", who are fighting Assad and the Iraqi government. Up to now, we have not been able to tell good rebels from bad rebels, but we will arm and train the ones that we think are good and hope they don't turn into bad rebels in the future. We will then convince good Sunni and Shia Muslims to fight the bad Muslims, who are fighting Assad, the Kurds and each other. Oh yes, and we will do this all from 25,000 feet.

The American public is not stupid, contrary to recent outlier elections, and most people can see pretty clearly that sooner rather than later the President will have to either violate his boots on the ground promise or walk away from the problem.

Polls aside, most people also understand that ISIS is a phenomenon that will not go away, and that the ISIS militants are not capable of being reformed or reeducated. Nor is the US capable of rounding them all up and sending them to Guantanamo forever. Having taken on the mission of "destroying" ISIS, the President has committed to killing them in such large numbers that they can no longer pose an organized threat.

The irony is that in the Presidential campaign of 2008, Mr. Obama ran against the Bush policies in the Middle East that were creating more terrorists than they were eliminating. Where you stand really does depend on where you sit. It is also interesting that the "blood for oil" groups have been completely silent as a liberal Democrat President commits the United States to an open-ended unwinnable proposition through military action in the Middle East.

Keen observers have two major concerns:

- The Russians and/or Chinese, patrons of Syria, will take advantage of American preoccupation with ISIS to further their territorial aims in the Ukraine and South China Sea, partly as mischief of opportunity and partly as payback.
- Of greater concern, since the President has painted himself into a corner regarding the use of American ground forces, Iran is the one major player in the region that would love to get involved militarily

and could fulfill the combat role. If Obama ends up in a stalemate or worse, he might be tempted to strike a deal with Iran that allows them to roll up ISIS in return for the US dropping objections to their nuclear program.

While the Congress may have scurried out of town to avoid the debate on military action, they did at least pass a Continuing Resolution that will fund the government until after the November elections. The good news is that here will be no government shutdown. The bad news is that from a defense program management standpoint a CR is almost as bad as a shutdown. Assuming that the outgoing lame duck Congress passes the necessary spending bills shortly after returning in December, it will again be at least four or five months into FY-2015 until the programs actually receive their funds, and have to spend the whole year's appropriation in half the normal time.

The Obama administration's request for additional funding for the anti-ISIS operations is not yet complete, but will apparently include \$500M for a base that does not presently exist in Saudi Arabia to train the good rebels. Funding for what will likely be a prolonged air campaign with heavy expenditures of Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) will be requested as a supplemental to the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) fund in 2016. Until then the funding is coming largely out of hide, mainly from the Afghanistan OCO account.

Since this bombing campaign will be taking place in largely civilian populated areas and the ISIS strategists will undoubtedly use civilians as cover and shields, expensive PGMs are going to be required to minimize the collateral casualties. All of this is unlikely to change the decreasing trend of defense spending or change the planned personnel reductions currently in train.

The political gridlock that resulted in sequestration has not fundamentally changed. The sequestration doomsday mechanism was put in place because the Congress could not agree on spending priorities, and then couldn't figure out a way to turn it off again.

What happens in December when the Congress returns will depend entirely on what happens in the elections on November 4th. The Republicans are sure to maintain control of the House, and may even pick up a few seats there. The key battle is in the Senate, where the Republicans need to gain six seats to reach the majority of 51.

The Republicans' prospects look good for actually exceeding that by one or two seats. They are in the happy position of not having to defend as many incumbents as the Democrats, and have the added advantage that three Democrat senators that represent Republican-leaning states are retiring. At this point there are five states still in play and the Republicans only need to pick up three to gain the majority.

The real secret weapon that the Republicans have is Barack Obama himself. The President is so personally unpopular with large segments of the population that the association alone is crippling to many Democrats. Normally a ride on Air Force One and a photo-op with the President is campaign gold for an incumbent or a challenger. This year, however, the President is even more toxic than ever and House and Senate hopefuls seem to have sudden schedule conflicts when he comes to their state.

Also helpful to the Republicans is that the mid-term electorate tends to be older, whiter and more conservative. The Republican base was outraged earlier in the summer by the potential of the President granting de facto legal status to upwards of five million undocumented aliens. The President had flirted with that idea but evidently was warned off by those Senators in close races, fearful of the wrath that would befall them. As a result, instead of throwing a big election year bone to the Democrats' Hispanic constituency, he has managed to alienate them by not following through with a promise while simultaneously energizing the other side. Mr. Obama seems to have a continuing knack for finding that sour spot where he manages to make everyone unhappy.

If the Republicans do hold the House and retake the Senate, the likelihood is that they would only agree to an extended CR that would take the government through to the next Congress where the Republican majority could impose its will on the appropriations process.

So far during this cycle the Republicans have played things much smarter than they did in 2012. They have fielded viable candidates to challenge incumbent Democrats, and managed the nominating process so that there are no whack jobs that make easy caricatures. In the several instances where an incumbent Senator was challenged in a primary by a more conservative Tea Party candidate, the establishment incumbent won fairly easily. This is not to say that the Tea Party has not had a profound influence on the Republican Party and has gained many concessions in policy and platform.

Looking ahead to the Presidential election in 2016, the Republican establishment also seems determined not to repeat the mistakes of 2012 by not permitting a weak field of Presidential hopefuls to crowd the talent out of the process. In 2016 the Republicans will have a number of successful Republican governors to choose from, probably running against Hillary Clinton in what would be seen as the third Obama term.

To be successful, between now and then the Republicans need to articulate a clear and positive message of why they deserve the opportunity to govern, and not just run against the ghost of Barack Obama. So far that doesn't appear to be happening.