

## LATE TO THE CHALLENGE: DIMINISHING AMERICAN LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF TERROR

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### INTRODUCTION:

A year ago, in trying to make the case for a much diminished role in foreign affairs for the United States, a well known conservative institute in Washington argued our current policies were still linked to our perception of the then Soviet Cold War threat, not the new realities of today.

They even argued: "Soviet war plans for Europe that are now public were primarily defensive; they assumed Soviet forces would be responding to a NATO attack."

Their claim was two-fold: Not only were they claiming our policy today was based on a threat that no longer existed, but the threat we thought existed during the Cold War was in their view equally bogus.

### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The conventional wisdom is that Americans are "war weary". Many on both the right and left want to eliminate what has been described as America's "hegemonic pretensions", what is sometimes referred to as putting an end to our "seeking dragons to slay" or as President John Adams put it "America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy". More colloquially, Americans do not want to be the "world's policeman". Fair enough.

It is one thing to analyze the extent of our security challenges of the past and differ with conventional wisdom. It is quite again another matter to invent a history to use such a distortion to justify a new policy for today that minimizes threats, promotes isolationism, and to put it bluntly, is blind to reality.

As such, we may be entering the most dangerous and momentous time since the end of World War II at the same time when we are very much unprepared.

Just as we were late after 1945 in understanding the nature of the challenge of what would become known as the Cold War, so we today have not been willing to honestly face the serious security challenges of our time, especially the poisonous coalition of rogue state sponsors of terror and their jihadi affiliates.

Just at the time this threat is getting more serious, the United States and its allies have been content to push for declining defense budgets and meeting fewer security obligations. This has and is making it increasingly difficult to find the leadership necessary to lead a coalition of nations to defeat the threats we face.

## WHERE WE STAND?

The United States is making three critical mistakes.

First, much of the deterrent effect of U.S. military power is being squandered. The US and its NATO allies have not just neglected our defense needs. The US alone has cut its defense budgets by a cumulative \$2.5 trillion from the base budget of 2009, but too many leaders have adopted a stance that views military power as the problem and not part of the solution.

In the United States, critics of both wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have conflated the use of US military power or its very presence as causing the terrorism or aggression we face around the world. They see less military presence, even a complete withdrawal from parts of the world, as the key to a more peaceful world. Thus our leaders pre-emptively apologize to our friends and enemies that such military "strikes" as we undertake will be "pin-pricks" and "unbelievably small".

But this tendency to “Always blame America first” was wrong in 1984 as Ambassador Kirkpatrick explained then and it is wrong now.

The second mistake we are making is we are often not serious about the threats we face. This is true even when we decide the threats are real and warrant action. This has been a long standing mistake.

For example, in June 2000, 14 months before 9-11 but almost eight years after the 1993 first attack on the World Trade Center, the top administration counter-terrorism expert, Richard Clarke, told a private Congressional briefing that “we [the US] could not prioritize the terrorist threats we faced because there were too many”, concluding neither could the administration "prioritize how to spend counter-terrorism funds."

The third mistake is also one of long standing. We have assumed our adversaries are adherents to international law, support “stability”, hold similar humanitarian concerns and are afraid of “being isolated”. And we believe our enemies understand, and even care, that they will eventually pay a steep price for their behavior--due to what we always describe as "tough" economic sanctions—presumably serious enough to compel the bad guys to decide not to act badly anymore.

This leads to the further assumption that our adversaries will eventually realize there is no long term benefit to committing aggression in the first place. And this in turn leads American leaders to believe a series of peaceful deals are possible given that is the only "reasonable alternative" for our enemies to pursue. We then view our adversary’s intransigence as largely a reaction to our "unfair" negotiating positions or our threatening behavior.

For example, the late Senator Specter traveled to Iraq in June 1990 and concluded Saddam Hussein was "sincere" and that he had no territorial designs on his

neighbors. He returned to Washington and led a successful effort to block sanctions against Iraq which were then under serious consideration by the Bush administration. Two months later Saddam invaded Kuwait.

So squandering our once credible military capability, lacking seriousness in facing our security dangers and failing to understand the intentions of our enemies are all serious problems. Taken together they are markedly increasing the dangers to our Republic and our allies, just at a time when as I have noted, American leadership is increasingly uncertain.

## RESPECTING AMERICAN POWER

Let's examine these issues in some detail.

The most serious mistake is the squandering of the respect once given America's combined military and diplomatic power.

We have contributed, sadly, to this state of affairs. We drew a red-line in the sand over Syria's use of chemical weapons, which many took seriously. But then the line disappeared in the first political sand storm.

ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, another murderous spawn of Islamic jihad, was dismissed as a junior affiliate of more serious terrorist threats, even as US intelligence sources for the past year warned both Congress and the administration of ISIS's armed expansion and growing danger to both Syria and Iraq.

A CRS report to Congress in June 2014 warned "Senior U.S. officials have [over the past year] stated that ISIL poses a serious threat to the United States and maintains training camps in Iraq and Syria".

Much conventional wisdom remains convinced that the American electorate has no interest in "more war". But in such a belief contains the very seeds of conflict the American public seeks to avoid. Withdrawing precipitously from the international arena—[Iraq]--avoiding "war"-- does not buy us peace. It buys us the presence of bad actors that march in where a vacuum has been created. And this creates greater threats to the US, threats which we ironically initially shied away from facing by retreating.

As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warned us: “A free standing diplomacy is an ancient American illusion. History offers few examples of it. The attempt to separate diplomacy and power results in power lacking direction and diplomacy being deprived of incentives.”

The former Prime Minister of Australia put it this way: “When confronted with similar isolationist public perceptions, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan, because of their extraordinary “complete cultural self-belief” succeeded as “...*the world shifted toward them*” as they led the US and Great Britain with a policy of “peace through strength”.

## IS AMERICA SERIOUS?

The second great mistake we have made is the lack of seriousness with which we are willing to confront even those threats we admit must be faced.

Consider the deployment of missile defenses in Europe—a sound idea. The leftists in the dominant media, most of Hollywood, and academia charged US missile defense deployments in Europe "might upset the Russians" or "fuel an arms race".

Their criticism started with the first proposed defense deployments early in the George W. Bush administration but continued long after the Polish and Czech governments had agreed to install the missiles and associated radars.

Today, we are again told the new deployments of missile defense elements—the EPAA-- will “Inflame tensions” as missile defense opponents put it recently.

But the missile defenses in Europe deployed by NATO are in response to deployed missiles or the threats of such deployments by Iran and Russia, not the other way around. It's Russian and Iranian missiles that are creating tensions as well as the aggression and terrorist acts both nations carry out under the security umbrella of these weapons.

This lack of seriousness extends to our allies as well. We are now going to deploy an admitted limited number of new THAAD--Terminal High Altitude Air Defenses-- missile defense batteries in the Republic of Korea (ROK). This is a good thing. But a spokesman for the ROK government felt compelled to reassure China and Russia the missile defenses are “only to protect American troops” and are not part of any emerging ROK-US “missile defense cooperative effort.”

On the other hand, Russia threatens to deploy Askander nuclear tipped missiles in the Crimea along with other nuclear armed bomber cruise missiles with the range to threaten all of Western Europe, (previously forbidden by the INF treaty), and our arms control aficionados blame the deployment on American and NATO missile defenses!

So too in the face of flagrant Russian aggression against Ukraine, we initially put into place only relatively weak and limited sanctions against certain Moscow entities. The sanctions would prohibit prominent Russians from banking in New

York City. But such Russians have no interest in opening up a checking account at Chase Manhattan, the free toaster notwithstanding.

Since then our sanctions have been measurably strengthened--but the first action is what was noticed and it was lacking in seriousness. Even today, it is unclear what sanctions we are prepared to put into place, a lack of resolve that is associated with a lack of seriousness.

And Moscow no doubt takes comfort when they see NY Times published essays proclaiming that Putin's "non-invasion" of Ukraine is simply out of concern for "corruption" in the Kiev government.

On top of making excuses for our enemies, we go out of our way to signal our adversaries even when we announce that military power will be used that its use will not be used to actually defeat anyone. Airstrikes are to only be "pin pricks". Military campaigns are described as "Unbelievably small".

And we unfortunately unilaterally circumscribe our military capability immediately as we pledge "No boots on the ground" or only "for limited objectives" or "to only protect American personnel".

And even later, when we change our own rules to expand the scope of our efforts, our friends do not understand why we did not do so right up front and our enemies take us less seriously as they plot and scheme in the interim.

Years ago, President Eisenhower is reported to have warned his successor about just such a tactic: "Never tell your enemies what you will not do"! In short, these tactics, while perhaps popular, denote a lack of seriousness which our adversaries see as incentives for their continued aggression while our friends doubt our resolve and strength.

It appears we are picking only those tools of war designed not to upset our adversaries rather than the tools needed to get the job done.

## THEY ARE LIKE US

The third mistake we make is assuming our enemies actually share some common objectives—such as stability, not being “isolated” and wanting the moral approval of the “international community”.

When we do this, we enter the geopolitical arena handicapped by thinking some kind of UN sponsored “deal” upholding international law is the only workable solution to the threats we face.

## IRAN BEFUDDLEMENT

Nowhere is this befuddlement more obvious than in the more than three decades of relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. During this period, we have engaged in a variety of kabuki dances with Tehran, always assuming a deal in which America is no longer the “Great Satan” and the mullahs do not seek nuclear weapons.

In the current discussions with Iran over its nuclear program, the US has said it will not address Iran's 30 plus years of sponsorship of terror nor their major ballistic missile production programs, although we officially designate Tehran as the top state sponsor of terror in the world and have assessed its missile programs as dangerous.

We also fail to understand that Iran, for example, calls the US the “great arrogance”—because we were the major country putting together the “rules of the road” internationally following World War II. And it is precisely these rules that Tehran wants to drop onto the next ash-heap of what they consider historically bad

ideas. There is a message there! But we are not listening. We assume they will abide by the very international rules they are devoted to destroying.

We also fool ourselves believing that Tehran's extraordinarily robust missile production programs costing tens of billions of dollars is not a threat to us. After all we reassure ourselves, when asked whether an East Coast third missile defense site would be highly beneficial to protect America from Iranian missiles, the administration reassures the American people that the mullahs' missiles cannot reach New York-- yet!

And even when we acknowledge the rockets can hit targets throughout the Middle East, especially US allies and key security facilities, we quietly and cleverly find a way to blame it on something other than Tehran.

For example, our intelligence reports to Congress proclaim in all seriousness that Iran's missiles and even its nuclear programs are to ensure regime survival—it's a "deterrent" we are told. Well who can argue with that?

After all, without their rockets and their nukes (which we are assured they do not have) they would be wide open to a US invasion, don't you see? And if the United States or Israel has nuclear weapons why cannot Iran?

The implicit lesson of course, and this is often repeated by many in the so-called "arms control community", is that if you "keep" your nuclear weapons, then the US won't "invade". This has then been used to justify calling for further concessions to Iran including most recently dropping the IAEA requirement that Tehran come clean on its previous nuclear warhead and weapons work.

For example, many "arms control" supporters of a nuclear deal with Iran justify Iran's reluctance to give up its nuclear program with the admonishment that once

Libya gave up its nuclear centrifuges in 2007, the US then bombed that country and helped overthrow the Ghaddafi government. The arms control enthusiasts conclude that of course the Iran government has the same fears.

## CONCLUSION

As long as we refer to Iranian missile power as a legitimate form of Iranian “deterrence” policy we will fool ourselves into believing that Iranian missiles that back up aggression and terrorism are somehow no different than missile defenses that prevent or deter aggression and terrorism in the first place. Remember what the Prime Minister of Israel said: Hamas uses its people to protect its missiles while Israel uses its missile defenses to protect its people.

**According to Glenn Greenwald of the Guardian, who helped Mr. Snowden release huge caches of American intelligence data, the true reason US fears Iranian nuclear weapons is that it would allow Iran to "deter US attacks", (26) the *implication* being Iran has every good reason to seek and build nuclear weapons.**

As long as we do not take war seriously and believe our adversaries share our assumptions about the world, we will fail to deal effectively with the threats to our security.

These two factors—the lack of seriousness in protecting ourselves and our hapless misreading of our enemies—will also continue to rapidly erode what remains of the deterrent value of the military power of the US and its allies.

Thirty years ago, Ambassador Kirkpatrick also warned America, "We cannot, therefore, be indifferent to the subversion of others' independence or to the development of new weapons by our adversaries or of new vulnerabilities by our friends." (27)

In conclusion, remember we are now doing three wrong things:

We are squandering our military might;

We are taking a casual view of threats to America; and

We are misunderstanding our enemies.

My fear is that the US will become an object of ridicule and not a power to fear.

For fear is what we must impart to these enemies of civilization, rogue states, their allies and their jihadi terrorist affiliates.

That only can be done through the serious waging of war in all its manifestations—economic, political, diplomatic and militarily. Until the troglodytes are defeated.

Only then will our enemies fear us. And only then will they cease to fight.