

Obama: Don't Blame Me

At the 18th Communist Party Congress on March 10, 1939 Josef Stalin warned that the Soviet Union would be cautious and “not allow our country to be drawn into conflicts of warmongers who are accustomed to have others pull chestnuts out of the fire for them.” The unidentified warmongers were implicitly Britain and France, not Nazi Germany with which the Soviet Union was to sign a non-aggression pact on August 23, 1939.

Now the blame game is being played in the United States. President Barack Obama has accused Britain and France, and unnamed others countries, of being “free riders,” unwilling to put “skin in the game.”

It was startling to read the article by Jeffrey Goldberg and his candid interview and portrait of President Barak Obama in the issue of *Atlantic Magazine* of March 10, 2016 an unusual criticism, if in less brutal language than that of the Soviet dictator, but nevertheless an unprecedented attack on two supposed allies, Britain and France. The two countries, Obama implied, were trying to involve the U.S. into conflicts in which U.S. interests were not at stake.

The revealing unfolding of thoughts, not always expressed in consistent fashion, by the president was an unbecoming exhibition of settling of scores with the European countries who Obama had expected to do the heavy lifting in international problems in the Middle East.

As a candidate in the presidential elections, Obama pledged to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Throughout his presidency Obama has sought to avoid committing U.S. forces in foreign conflicts if possible, though he recognized the danger of al-Qaeda and threats to the State of Israel. As Jeffrey Goldberg reports it, Obama argues that the first task in international affairs of a U.S. president is “Don't do stupid shit.” Others

might more appropriately see this as the rationalization for the refusal to exercise leadership by the U.S. as it has done since 1945.

Obama's international priorities are unusual. For him, ISIS is not an existential threat. But he views climate change as a potential threat to the entire world, and one that affects all the other problems we face. Seemingly less important, and almost an afterthought, is the long term problem of "terrorism when combined with the problem of failed states."

Obama has taken unilateral positive, if controversial, action in Cuba, the TPP trade agreement, and the nuclear agreement with Iran. He claims to be setting the agenda in meetings of international leaders, and in efforts to strengthen international organizations. His policy is to act in multilateral fashion.

Once upon a time, in fact in his Nobel Prize speech in 2009, President Obama said, "Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later," The remark is pertinent to his thoughts and his policies and the criticism of them concerning Libya and Syria.

In 2011 the US reluctantly intervened in order to halt Gaddafi's persecution of people in Benghazi, though it was a case where U.S. national interest was said not to be directly at stake. In view of Obama's criticism of British Prime Minister David Cameron it is well to remember the chain of events. In February 2011 Cameron was working on plans for a military "no fly zone" over Libya. On behalf of the president, Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense, dismissed this as "loose talk." Then on March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council voted to impose the no fly zone in Libya. In October Gaddafi was captured and killed. Obama explained his policy by saying it was not important to US interests to have made a unilateral US strike against Gaddafi.

Obama is right that Libya is still a “shit show.” It is a failed state with no real working government, and a large part of the country controlled by a variety of competing militias and terrorist groups. Obama blamed the failure on the degree of tribal division in Libya that was greater than his analysts had expected. Parenthetically, one wonders who were these “analysts” since the tribal rivalries in Libya have been discussed in all serious commentary on the country.

More important, Obama blamed France and Britain for the present mess. The president said he had urged Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy to lead the campaign to settle Libya after Gaddafi 's fall. He accused Sarkozy of wanting to take credit and to be in the spotlight for French action, to blow the trumpet for the French flights.

Obama verged on impertinence in speaking of Cameron for leaving Libya after Gaddafi had fallen, and therefore implicitly for the consequence is that Libya is now what Obama inelegantly called a “shit show.” Instead of stabilizing Libya in spring 2011, Cameron, he argued, had been “distracted by other things,” though the distractions were not mentioned.

Much of the suspicion of Obama's foreign policy results from his famous non-action concerning the possible use of chemical weapons by the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria. His words were uncharacteristically strong: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime...that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my calculation.”

Whatever these mathematical terms were meant to be to be in practical terms Obama changed his mind on August 30, 2013 the day before the planned strike on Syria. He took no action by air strikes or anything else, though action was favored by, among others, Secretary of State John Kerry, Susan Rice, Leon Panetta, Republicans in the Senate, France, Britain, and the

US military were prepared to act.

Surprisingly, Obama's chestnuts were pulled out of the fire by the decision of President Vladimir Putin to work together for the successful removal of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

Obama called on Assad to go, but did not use force. Obama still thinks his refusal to act when Assad violated the "red line" was the right decision. He explains that the UK was a major factor in the decision not to enforce the "red line" after Syria's use of chemical weapons.

Obama has given various explanations for his failure to take action, but two are particularly interesting. One is the failure of Prime Minister Cameron to get consent of the British Parliament. Indeed Cameron did not get the consent of the House of Commons but this was in part due to the campaign of Labour leader Ed Miliband in August for Labour MPS to vote against UK air strikes.

The other is his rationale that the scope of executive power in national security issues is very broad, but not limitless. This is a surprising argument from the president who has had no hesitation in issuing executive orders, so far 226, in domestic policy.

But Obama's slight of Cameron is more meaningful. During World War II, Winston Churchill first spoke of the "special relationship" between Britain and the U.S. However, Obama said that the UK could not claim a "special relationship" if the UK did not commit itself to spend on its defense the 2 per cent of its GDP required by NATO agreement. In fact, Britain has pledged to meet the NATO target of spending the 2 per cent of GDP every year up to 2020, and has maintained the size of its army.

It is clear that for President Obama the Middle East is not an area for U.S. priority. Equally, he does not advocate a leadership role in international affairs, even if it is

sometimes expressed though also sometimes denied, as “leading from behind.” But none of this excuses his blaming of other countries and politicians for problems or deficiencies in the international arena. They are not pulling anyone’s chestnuts out of the fire.