

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



May 05, 2013

SYRIA . . . OY

All too frequently, I receive email from people who, when it comes to politics and world affairs, know one thing and one thing only: that whatever President Obama does is wrong. Ever since he moved into the White House, these highly-enlightened citizens have been informing me that President Obama is:

- "Not too bright,"
- "An out-and-out Socialist,"
- "A man who despises America and all she stands for,"
- "Without question the worst president America has ever had,"
- "A serial liar," and most recently,
- "A flat-out coward."

This last one -- about the president being a coward -- is in response to his not having launched a military attack against Bashar al-Assad and the bully-boys of Damascus. (Come to think of it, these same people are furious that our "Coward-in-Chief," as several have called him, has yet to "bomb Iran back to the Stone Age.") According to these folks, an out-and-out American attack against Syria would be the best -- indeed the only -- response to both the murderous, poison-gas deploying al-Assad and his Alawite henchmen, and Achmadinajad and the Ayatollahs of Qom. And when on occasion I respond to their emails with a question about the future of Syria (or Iran), they tell me that once the veil of despotism is lifted, the people will vote in a democratic government. Seems to me that the crystal balls they're looking into must be manufactured by either "Black-and-White Ltd." or "Infallible Inc."

Unlike those who love bombarding me with email, I honestly don't know what



America's response to the ongoing Syrian Civil War should be. For every action, there is a reaction. And for every reaction there is a consequence. What I *do* know is that this Syrian conflict is one of the few lasting legacies of the so-called "Arab Spring." I know that both the Iranians and -- to a somewhat lesser extent -- the Russians have been supporting the Alawites and al-

Assad. I also know that the Saudis and some of the Gulf States have been lending assistance to the Sunni insurgents and that the Americans, Europeans and Israelis have, for the most part, avoided involvement.

(Please note that I began writing this essay prior to the two [Israeli airstrikes](#) targeting a shipment of advanced surface-to-surface missiles from Iran that Israel believed were intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon. The targeted shipment consisted of Iranian-made Fateh-110s -- a mobile, accurate, solid-fueled missile that has the range to strike Tel Aviv and much of Israel from southern Lebanon. These missiles represent a considerable improvement over the liquid-fueled Scud missile. Two prominent Israeli defense analysts said the shipment included Scud Ds, a missile that Syrians have developed from Russian weapons with a range of up to 422 miles -- long enough to reach Eilat, in southernmost Israel, from Lebanon.)

OK, that's about all I know. Except . . .

It is relatively easy for an overwhelming military force to topple a despotic regime. Think Iraq and Saddam Hussein. By the same token, it is much harder -- if not impossible -- to use that same overwhelming military force to impose a new type of government. That new government might, in some moral sense, be better than what preceded it -- "*Anything* would be better than Saddam" -- but the regime that replaces it will be utterly chaotic, followed by another regime that survives to the extent that it holds the United States at arm's length. This is the story of Iraq. And unless we learn the lesson of that fiasco, we are liable to repeat it all over again with Syria.

Syria, like Iraq, is ruled by a bloody corrupt regime that thinks nothing of murdering tens of thousands of its people in order to keep itself in power. For years, the al-Assad family remained in power -- and largely immune from the world's disgust -- because it was a client state of the Soviet Union. To take on Syria -- either from within or without -- was to take on Moscow. Today that is

changed. Today, Syria's major patron is, of course, Iran. From the point of view of many American neoconservatives, a confrontation with Syria is also a confrontation with Iran; the forces of light attacking the forces of darkness. And despite what we should have learned from Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, there are many who continue to believe that the United States and Europe have the power not only to depose regimes but also to pacify the affected countries and create Western-style democracies.

We couldn't do it in Iraq. We couldn't do it in Afghanistan. We certainly have not been able to do it in Libya. In the latter, we helped arm many of the militias who sought to topple the reviled Muammar al-Gaddafi, only to learn -- to our chagrin -- that these rebels hated America and the West with the same passion reserved for the late Libyan strongman. One of the reasons why Libyans despised Gaddafi and Iraqis hated Hussein (and many Syrians hate al-Assad) was/is that they ran secular regimes, not guided by either liberal democracy or Islam but with withering roots in secular Arab Socialism. According to those who push for intervention, once you take out the chief despot (Hussein, Gaddafi, as-Assad) the people will gladly create a constitutional democracy. Wrong! What's beneath the surface in Syria (as in Iraq, Libya and most of the countries participating in the Arab Spring) are the underlying Muslim forces that had been suppressed but never truly eradicated. Simply stated, there is no secular alternative in Syria. Topple al-Assad and the most fervent (and best organized) Islamists will take over.

This is one of the reasons why President Obama is so hesitant about offering military aide to the rebels. It's not that, as some claim "We don't know who they are." Rather, it's the precise opposite: we DO know who they are and what they believe. And it scares the daylights out of us.

Many things are beyond the military power of the United States. Creating constitutional democracies by invasion is one of those things. There are those who say intervention is to stop the bloodshed, not to impose Western values. Others say intervention that does not impose Western values is pointless. It seems to me that both miss the point. You cannot stop a civil war by adding another faction to the war unless that faction brings overwhelming power to bear. The United States has a great deal of power, but not overwhelming power, and overwhelming power's use means overwhelming casualties. And you cannot transform the political culture of a country from the outside unless you are prepared to devastate it as was done with Germany and Japan.

The United States, with its European allies, does not have the force needed to end Syria's bloodshed. If it tried, it would merely be held responsible for the

bloodshed without achieving any strategic goal. There are places to go to war, but they should be few and of supreme importance.

What should we do? I really don't know; every approach is fraught with uncertainty. We do not live in a black-and-white world where what is good is always good and what is bad is always evil. Syria -- which of course entails Iran -- represents an extraordinarily complex challenge for the United States and our Western allies; one which is well beyond the scope of simplistic bluster.

So who's got the answer?

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CLACKITY CLACK, CLACKITY CLACK

Back in the days when the Internet was little more than a glimmer in [Leonard Kleinrock's](#) fertile imagination, journalists received and retrieved information via teletype. These steely behemoths -- one for A.P., one for U.P.I. and if lucky, one for Reuters -- droned the steady, comforting *clackity clack* without which no newsroom was complete -- or real. The wire's omnipresent *clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack* provided a muted cadence; it was, in a sense, muzak for newshounds. About the only time that *clackity clack* became aurally manifest was when it was replaced by the harsh clanging of an adrenalizing bell. This meant that a story of great urgency was about to come over the wire . . . all hands on deck! (The first time I heard that "urgent bell" it was to give a heads-up that singer Jim Croce had died in a plane crash; the second, to announce the



kidnapping of Patty Hearst - both major stories.) In those days, a story of developing urgency was a bit of a rarity. When the bell sounded, everyone was on high journalistic alert.

Fast forward to a time when there is no more *clackity clack*. Although certainly neither voiceless nor mute, the Internet and other purveyors of information have made it virtually impossible to distinguish between the mundane and the momentous. If the Internet -- or cable -- had an urgent bell, it would be clanging twenty-four/seven. The rarely-used adrenalizing klaxon of yesteryear has been replaced by a never-ending "headline crawler," which

turns every cough into a catastrophe, every misstatement into a moment of truth. Simply stated, in a world where *everything* screams "urgent," people become both cynical and desensitized to that which may truly be important; the line between chimerical and critical has become blurred beyond reason.

Case in point: the ongoing Congressional hearings into "getting at the truth about Benghazi." True to form, House Oversight Committee Chair Darrell Issa is doing everything in his power to suggest that the Obama administration -- which of course includes former Secretary of State (and potential 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton) -- has been less than forthcoming about last September's terrorist attack on the Benghazi consulate. (Many will recall an essay I published back in early January of 2011 entitled [*The Issa Man Cometh*](#), in which I predicted that left to his own devices, Issa would investigate the dickens out of the Obama Administration.) Arkansas Governor -- and current FOX commentator -- Mike Huckabee has publicly stated that the Benghazi situation is so heinous, so critical -- so urgent -- that the president "will not fill out his full term." Kentucky Senator Rand Paul told an audience in Iowa that he thinks the Benghazi attack "precludes Hillary Clinton from ever holding office."

Clackity clack, clackity clack.

Retired Ambassador Thomas Pickering (who received diplomatic appointments by Presidents Carter, Reagan, H.W. Bush and Clinton) who, along with retired Admiral Mike Mullen chaired the Accountability and Review Board which looked into Benghazi, says that Issa's hearings have [failed to uncover any new facts](#) or failings. His testimony has basically been ignored. Also, he has been denied the opportunity to appear as a rebuttal witness. Despite this, Issa and Senators Paul, McCain and Ayotte persist in talking up a Watergate-like cover-up.

And you had better believe at least a half-dozen other committee chairs are going to institute hearings over recent news that some mid-level IRS people in the Cincinnati office targeted some Tea Party groups for scrutiny. Apparently, people in that office were investigating whether any of the new tax-exempt organizations created by the *Citizens United* case were, in fact, thinly-veiled partisan political groups. To be certain, the IRS isn't anyone's favorite federal agency; especially if you're a member of the Tea Party. But now, even before all the facts are in and any high-level investigation has even begun, people are referring to "Obama's IRS" -- as if he knows everything every auditor in every office is doing, and actually gave the order to harass Tea Party groups.

The clackity clack of normal news has morphed into the urgent claxon if screaming headlines:

IMPEACH THE PRESIDENT!

WORSE THAN WATERGATE!

OBAMA'S WATERLOO!

Mind you, this is by no means meant to minimize either the horror of Benghazi or the inherent boneheadedness of the IRS screw-up. I agree with [*The Daily Beast's*](#) Michael Tomasky: *"Benghazi at the end of the day was a terrible tragedy in which mistakes, bad mistakes, were certainly made, and in which confusion and the CYA reflex led to some bad information going out to the public initially, but none of this remotely rises to the level of high crime. The IRS cock-up was just that, a mistake by a regional office."*

What Issa and a majority of the Republican caucus are after is "proof" that President Obama is guilty of what the Constitution calls "high crimes and misdemeanors," and therefore susceptible to impeachment. But what precisely *are* "high crimes and misdemeanors?" Whatever Congress says they are . . . which makes the current of events all the more frightening.

Has the president actually committed a crime or impeachable offense? Of course not. But hauntingly, in today's political environment, that little fact makes not a wit of difference. Despite the various hearings, the ink and headlines, the urgent bells and angry posturing, public opinion has not turned against President Obama. According to a poll released by Pew just a couple of hours ago, less than 45% of those polled say they have "paid close attention" to Congressional hearings on Benghazi. To be certain, the GOP could care less about polling figures; they are content to do their base's bidding, not America's. They are far more interested in politics than policy -- in hamstringing the president, putting a hex on Hillary Clinton and making damn sure that nothing gets done between now and 2016.

How many times are we going to hear ". . . what did he/she know and when did he/she know it?" with regards to President Obama and Secretary Clinton? How many times are we going to be subjected to the opinion that "Benghazi is far, far worse than Watergate?" I daresay more times than we care to count. A witch hunt is a witch hunt no matter which side carries it out.

Clackity clack, clackity clack . . .

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HEALTH INSURANCE IN AMERICA: LEGALIZED EXTORTION

Included in yesterday's mail were two ominous envelopes, one addressed to me, the other to my wife. They were from our health insurance company. Being that this is mid-May, I knew what the contents of the envelopes would be: one-page letters informing us what our insurance premiums are going to run in the coming year. With sweaty palms and racing heart, I began operating on the envelopes, terrified by the news that would be contained therein. Last year at this



time our premiums rose 14.6%; the year before that slightly under 13%; the year before that 15.8%.

Envelopes open, I gingerly removed the one-page form letters addressed to "Dear Member." Reading the twin missives of doom took less than 30 seconds. My worst fears had actually been bested by the reality of it all; beginning July 1st, our premiums would be going up an additional 25% . . . 25% . . . **25%!**

Yes indeed; as of July 1st, we will be paying the princely sum of \$34,934.88 for a year's worth of "coverage" that includes neither dental nor vision nor podiatry, carries a \$10,000 deductible, and is regularly refused by many doctors because the company doles out payment with a costive eyedropper. And, to add mortal insult to lethal injury, this outrage comes fast on the heels of my wife being denied -- once again -- coverage for a crucial pain-reducing procedure because, in the opinion of some company stooge she ". . . does not present sufficient pain to

warrant said procedure." And just last month, they denied *my* doctor's order for an MRI because, once again, they deemed it "unnecessary."

Now mind you, my wife and I are both reasonably health-conscious people. We don't smoke or drink, stick to healthy diets (keeping kosher in a largely non-kosher world forces one to eat lot of salad, fruit and fish) and get a reasonable amount of exercise. (I for one am a long-time inveterate gym rat.) We are healthy people who live active lives despite having conditions that might lay others low. In other words, we do everything in our power to be as healthy as is humanly possible. And yet, we are about to begin paying nearly \$35,000.00 for a year's worth of what is truly substandard health insurance coverage.



To put the rate of increase into perspective, two years ago, my wife's monthly take home pay from her part time position as an instructor at a local community college covered our monthly premium. With this newest spike (and a concomitant cutback in her teaching hours), it now will take nearly 3 month's take home pay to cover but a single month's premium. Our annual insurance premium will be about 50% more than what we pay for the mortgage on our home and a rental property.

So why not just change carriers? Because the last time we tried, we were turned down flat because of pre-existing conditions. (Starting *next* year, under terms of the Affordable Care Act, this will be illegal.) Moreover, we had to report the insurance agents (who all but guaranteed us "better coverage for less") to the state attorney general's Office of Investigations; they had signed us up (and were already billing us) for a couple of "savers' club" groups without our knowledge or consent.

Now mind you, I am *not* in any way *kvetching* about the *quality* of medical care we receive. Our doctors at Cleveland Clinic Florida are first-rate; indeed, some are galaxy-class. The problem is, that in order for these first-rate and galaxy-class physicians to provide us care, it costs an arm, a leg and a pancreas gland . . . and starting in July a clavicle and a hyoid bone.

So what can be done? Next to nothing, I am afraid to say. Oh sure, we could simply drop our healthy insurance and pray that we remain healthy until age 65 and can begin being covered by Medicare . . . provided that Paul Ryan and the GOP don't have their way and voucherize it before then. Then too, perhaps we

could sit down with a supervisor or representative of the company that so willingly takes in our dollars and try to work something out. No dice. From prior painful experience, when given the choice between compromising and simply losing us as paying customers, they simply respond "Well, that would have to be *your* choice . . . to drop coverage." Even waiting for the rest of the Affordable Care Act to take effect won't do any good; while carriers may be debarred from denying coverage due to pre-existing conditions, there is nothing that says they have to make it affordable. You see, the affordable care act isn't about health care; it's about health insurance. Far from being "socialized medicine" as so many argue, it is a gigantic beribboned gift to the health insurance industry which, if properly and rigorously monitored, could eventually slow down the unconscionable increases in all aspects of health care. Don't get me wrong. I have no problem with corporations making a profit; that's why they're in business. What I do have a huge problem with -- and here I know I'm not alone -- is facing the prospect of going broke just to be covered by a company that loves saying "REFUSED!"

According to [a recent poll](#) from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 42% of the American public don't know or aren't sure whether the Affordable Care Act is the Law of the Land. It is. How do I know? Well, just yesterday, the House of Representatives tried to kill it . . . for the 37th time in two years. Even the House wouldn't be so dense as to try destroying something that does not exist. And yet, because they are forever railing against Obamacare, forever trying to scare people with talk of "death squads," loss of liberty and the looming communist/socialist/fascist takeover of America, lots of Americans are against it . . . or are they? When queried, people who say they wanted Obamacare repealed, still say they like aspects of it . . . like keeping children on their parents' policies until age 26; like not being denied coverage due to pre-existing conditions; like no lifetime caps on coverage. And yet, they are against it.

Despite the fact that the Affordable Care Act likely won't affect our personal situation, I am all for it -- until we get smart and one day enact universal coverage. Likely the only way that will ever be accomplished is if enough people find themselves in our position -- of being priced out of health insurance coverage because it costs more than two mortgages and two car payments combined -- and demanding change; real, tangible, intelligent change.

Anybody out there know of a company that can provide us coverage without resorting to extortion? Any suggestions?

Please?

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SANFORD & SIN

I may be wrong, but I believe it was the famously polysyllabic William F. Buckley who, satiric tongue implanted firmly in ironic cheek wrote, "It seems to me the only two sins that should disqualify a man from holding public office are pederasty and virginity." Buckley's point (if indeed, it *was* the polymathic founder of the modern conservative movement who said it) was *not* that murderers, adulterers, arsonists, extortionists and other miscreants and sinners should get a free pass when it comes to running for or holding office, but rather,



that we spend far too much time obsessing over the private lives of public people. And mind you, Buckley (1925-2008) spent the lion's share of his career writing, publishing and opining *prior* to the invention of the Internet and the twenty-four-hour-a-day news cycle.

It makes one wonder what Buckley's take would be on the sins and assorted failings of Mark Sanford, Anthony Weiner, John Edwards, David Vitter, Larry Craig, John Ensign, Bill Clinton *et al.* Would he -- a man many considered more rigorously

Catholic than the Pope -- have condemned them out of hand for their sexual indiscretions, obfuscations and downright lies? Or would he have given them a pass, believing that "public policies trump private predilections." Would Buckley -- like the citizens of South Carolina's 1st Congressional District -- have voted to return Mark Sanford to public life even though Sanford:

- Cheated on his wife and family;
- Left the country to be with his Argentine mistress;
- Upon resurfacing lied to the world, claiming that he was "hiking the Appalachian Trail";
- Was sued by his ex-wife (and former campaign manager) for violating terms of their divorce agreement; and
- Had his candidacy disavowed by the National Republican Congressional Campaign Committee.

It would seem that in South Carolina's First District -- as indeed, in other parts of the country -- the sin of adultery is far less egregious than the sin of having the letter "D" after your name. Just ask Louisiana Senator David Vitter who, in 2007 was linked to a prostitution ring, publicly apologized, only to be overwhelmingly reelected (57%-38%) to another six-year term in 2010. Forgiveness is a great thing -- for Democrats as well. Consider New York Representative Charles Rangel, who in 2010 was found by members of the House Ethics Committee to have committed numerous ethics violations, and then, two years later, captured 91% of his district's vote to win reelection to a 13th term. And then there is President Bill Clinton who, despite having suffered through an embarrassing nationally-television impeachment proceeding, emerged largely unscathed and today, nearly 15 years later, is easily our most widely-admired former chief executive.

This is certainly *not* to say or imply that politicians are immune to public judgment. Indeed, many are not. Consider the following half-dozen who, once their sins, crimes or transgressions became known, either resigned, were defeated for reelection, or were tried, convicted and sentenced to prison:

- **Former Louisiana Rep. William Jefferson (D):** In 2009, Jefferson was sentenced to 13 years in prison for "using his office to corruptly solicit bribes." This is the chap who hid \$90,000 in his freezer. Today he is an inmate at a low-security prison in Texas.
- **Former Nevada Senator John Ensign (R):** In 2011, he resigned his office in the midst of an ethics investigation probing an affair he had with a top former staffer's wife. Today, he is once again a practicing veterinarian in Las Vegas.
- **Former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer (D):** In 2008, Spitzer resigned his office, having been caught in a scandal linking him to a prostitution ring. His successor, **David Paterson (D)** also left political life under a cloud -- witness tampering and perjury.

- **Former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R):** In 2011, DeLay was sentenced to 3 years in prison for helping Texas GOP candidates gain access to corporate funds -- a clear violation of Texas law. Although not yet incarcerated (he is still appealing the verdict), DeLay remains widely popular in conservative circles.
- **Former Speaker Newt Gingrich (R):** Need one say more?

Which brings us to former New York Representative **Anthony Weiner (D)** who, like the aforementioned Mark Sanford, is attempting a political comeback.

Weiner, of course, is the man who just about two years ago, resigned from Congress, having humiliated himself and his new wife in the midst of a scandal concerning sexually provocative pictures sent from his Twitter account. Despite the scandal, despite the humiliation and despite the acid-tipped arrows of a thousand pundits (who can resist when the target's last name is "Weiner?") just last week, Weiner announced that he would run for Mayor of New York, a post he has coveted for nearly a decade. Although there are certainly some similarities between Weiner, Sanford and Vitter vis-à-vis the traversing of a path which leads from resignation to redemption and (in the case of both Vitter and Sanford) resurrection, there are some obvious dissimilarities. In the case of Vitter and Sanford, their sin involved covering up extra-marital relations -- in one case with prostitutes, in the other with a single mistress. The Sanford scandal also involved dramatic lies and the use of some taxpayer money. Nonetheless, Vitter's and Sanford's transgressions were essentially no different than a hundred politicians before them. (Almost every president from George Washington on has kept a mistress; more than one has fathered an illegitimate child.) In Weiner's case, despite the fact that his sin -- one pundit called it "The groin shot seen 'round the world" -- was sexless, it has a "creep factor" that Sanford's was lacking. When caught, both men responded with lies, and then edged their way into something resembling the truth, which eventually wound up in pleas for forgiveness. Whether one finds in their pleas the force of true atonement or the veneer of expediency is a judgment that everyone must make for themselves.



I am reminded of a long-ago scandal involving then-Cincinnati City Councilman Jerry Springer. Back in 1974, Springer resigned from the council after it was revealed that he had employed the services of a prostitute at a Fort Wright (KY) massage parlor. (Ironically, the check -- the CHECK! -- with which he paid the woman, eventually bounced.) Turns out that Springer was smarter than people

thought. He parlayed his heightened name recognition -- and a tearful apology - - into a successful return to the City Council and eventually to the office of Mayor. This is the political strategy known as "Talk about me good, talk about me bad . . . just talk about me!"

To some extent, this is where Anthony Weiner is today. Due to his widely-publicized scandal, he possesses the most basic thing all competitive politicians need -- name recognition. He also starts out with more than \$5 million in his war chest, left over from a failed mayor's race back in 2005 -- money that most candidates would be using just to get their name before the public. Weiner's overwhelming name recognition is both a plus and a minus. The minus is that when everyone knows who you are -- and what you've done -- it's next to impossible to reinvent yourself. Whether Weiner succeeds -- and I for one would likely *not* support his candidacy -- should be based on his ability to articulate a coherent, doable future for NYC -- and not the fact that he acted like an idiotic, childish jerk. Likewise, had I been a voter in South Carolina, there is no way I could have supported Mark Sanford . . . and not because he acted like a two-faced cad, but rather because his are the politics of mindless retrogression. You see, ideally, it should hinge on politics and policy.

When it comes to Weiner, Sanford and sin, we would do well to remember that politicians run for nomination, not beatification . . . for election, not for perfection.

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