

Mitt Romney's 'Perry Mason' Moment

Exclusive: Mitt Romney thought he had President Obama set up for the fall, like TV lawyer Perry Mason boring in on a suspect. He called out Obama on his claim to have termed the Benghazi attack “an act of terror.” But the Republican presidential nominee again showed a reckless disregard of the facts, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It was to be Mitt Romney's “Perry Mason” moment, pouncing on President Barack Obama's insistence that he had denounced the attack on the Benghazi consulate as a “terrorist” attack on the day after the lethal assault. Romney told the audience to take note of Obama's supposedly false statement, proof that Obama was the real liar.

It was also the moment when the “reality-based community,” which a senior George W. Bush aide once famously mocked, collided with “right-wing world,” where every formulation denigrating Obama is accepted as true, no matter how baseless and loony.

In “right-wing world,” where Romney apparently has bought yet one more residence, Obama endlessly “apologizes for America,” including as Romney claimed on the night of the Benghazi attack last Sept. 11. According to Romney, it then took Obama 14 days to decry the assault in eastern Libya as a terrorist attack.

In Tuesday night's debate, when Obama countered by saying he had gone to the Rose Garden the day after the attack to say “this was an act of terror,” Romney went in for the proverbial kill, highlighting to the national jury of voters that the President's remark was a lie. It was as if the TV defense lawyer “Perry Mason” was about to unmask a murderous villain.

“You said in the Rose Garden the day after the attack, it was an act of terror?” Romney asked incredulously, as Obama nodded in the background. “I want to make sure we get that for the record, because it took the President 14 days before he called the attack in Benghazi an act of terror.”

“Get the transcript,” responded Obama.

At that point, moderator Candy Crowley of CNN interceded, telling Romney, under her breath, “He did in fact, sir.” Romney then began to blubber, as Obama added, “Can you say that a little louder, Candy?”

Indeed, Obama had said in the Rose Garden, the next day referring to the

consulate attack, “No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation, alter that character or eclipse the light of the values that we stand for.”

Romney may have thought he was Perry Mason but he ended up looking more like Mason’s inept adversary, the haplessly wrong prosecutor Hamilton Burger.

Doubling Down

And besides getting his big accusation wrong, Romney reminded people about his unseemly attempt to make political hay out of the deaths of the four American diplomatic personnel on the night of the tragedy.

On Sept. 11, as events were still unfolding, Romney rushed out a statement that got the chronology of events wrong. Romney chastised the U.S. Embassy in Cairo for issuing a statement that had sought to head off protests by condemning an American anti-Islamic video that was circulating on YouTube.

But Romney reversed the order of events. Romney’s statement transformed the embassy’s preemptive criticism of the video into an expression of sympathy by the Obama administration for the people who attacked U.S. diplomatic outposts in Egypt and, fatally, in Libya.

In Benghazi, the assault involved an extremist militia and led to the deaths of U.S. Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens and three of his aides. Shortly after 10 p.m. EDT on that night, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, “I condemn in the strongest terms the attack on our mission in Benghazi.”

However, Romney saw an opening to hammer home his beloved theme that President Obama “apologizes for America.” Disregarding the actual chronology, i.e. that the message by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo *preceded* the mob attacks, Romney put out a statement at 10:24 p.m., which declared: “It’s disgraceful that the Obama administration’s first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks.”

Romney’s statement ignored Secretary Clinton’s stern words, which represented the first official response from a senior member of the Obama administration. However, rather than correct his mistake the next day, Romney expanded on his criticism of the embassy officials in Cairo. Romney said, “The Embassy of the United States issued what appeared to be an apology for American principles. That was a mistake.”

Romney’s impetuous rhetoric both then and again in Tuesday night’s debate reflects a politician who doesn’t care about truth or fairness. After all, this was a guy who framed his nominating convention in Tampa around an

Obama quote wrenched out of context “You didn’t built that” with the “that” applied to the wrong antecedent, individual businesses when Obama was clearly referring to roads, bridges and infrastructure.

It didn’t seem to matter to Romney or his Republican supporters that they were railing against a misplaced antecedent. Similarly, it hasn’t mattered to the Right that Obama was born in Hawaii, not in Kenya, a fact established by Hawaii’s birth records.

Besides feeding the racist passions of neo-Confederates who can’t countenance an African-American as a legitimate President of the United States, the “birther” conspiracy theory guarantees you admittance into “right-wing world” through a defiant repudiation of the “reality-based community.”

Referencing Obama’s purported Kenyan birth is like a passport that lets through the gates of “right-wing world.” That is perhaps the best way to understand Romney’s allusion to the crypto-racist smear when, in Michigan on Aug. 24, he pointed out the hospital where he was born, declaring “no one’s ever asked to see my birth certificate.”

Romney’s insistence that Obama lied about the terror attack in Benghazi is another part of Romney establishing his *bona fides* with “right-wing world” where the assumption is that Obama must be a liar and a fraud, how else to explain the fact that he is in the White House. In the first debate, the Right loved Romney’s demeaning comparison of Obama to his five sons who repeat the same lie until they think it passes as true.

The Freak-Out

And perhaps the best way to understand the freak-out among Obama’s supporters that followed the President’s lackluster performance in the first debate is to realize that the “reality-based community” still suffers from flashbacks to the years of George W. Bush.

These folks have post-traumatic-stress nightmares about that era when right-wing propaganda trumped all and those who protested Bush’s actions, such as his invasion of Iraq, were marginalized and demeaned as unpatriotic or as enemies of the state.

For better or worse, Obama with his rhetorical skills is seen as the champion of the “reality-based community” against the return of “right-wing world” to dominance. Obama’s reelection is the last barrier against the restoration of the arrogant neocons to control of U.S. foreign policy and the victory of the Tea Party’s anti-government extremists.

In the first debate, Obama's supporters bewailed his tepid reaction to Romney's lies, such as Romney's claim that his \$5 trillion tax cut wasn't a tax cut at all, that it magically would be revenue-neutral, and Romney's bald-faced assertion that his health-care plan covered pre-existing conditions when even his advisers acknowledged that the plan only applied to those already with insurance.

Though Obama did point out Romney's inconsistencies, the President didn't do it with the verve that his supporters wanted. They wanted Obama to rub Romney's face in his lies. When that didn't happen, the fragile psyches of liberals and progressives almost visibly cracked. Their panic may have done more to guarantee Romney's post-debate bounce than Obama's weak debate showing.

Seeing the "reality-based community" in frantic disarray, "right-wing world" realized it had found a new hero in the unlikely person of Mitt Romney. Indeed, much of the Republican primary scramble had centered on who could best humiliate the biracial President so intensely hated by "right-wing world." Romney earned plenty of credit for having done so in the first debate.

Stunned by the out-sized reaction to his politeness in the first debate, Obama and Vice President Joe Biden were not about to make that miscalculation again. Biden and then Obama took the fight to Paul Ryan and Romney, respectively.

Even on relatively minor points, such as Romney's claim that he wanted to expand the Pell Grant program for needy students, Obama challenged Romney's honesty and noted how the Obama administration had cut out the banks' middleman role, freeing up billions of dollars for students.

The New York Times' fact-checkers concurred with Obama regarding Romney's claimed support for more Pell Grants, though they politely referred to it as "a new position for him." The Times noted that Romney had earlier vowed to "refocus Pell Grants dollars on the students who need them most," which was interpreted as a plan to cut back and narrow the program. Romney also has favored restoring the banks' middleman role.

Romney led with his chin again during closing remarks when he rhapsodized about how he cared about 100 percent of the American people. That gave Obama the opening in the last minute of the debate to contrast that claim with Romney's videotaped comments from last May when Romney disparaged "the 47 percent" of Americans who don't pay federal income taxes as moochers who won't take personal responsibility.

Obama noted that the group includes retirees who worked all their lives, hard-working people who simply don't earn a lot of money, and soldiers fighting

America's wars. Because Romney had sought to preempt Obama's attack by mentioning "the 100 percent," he unwittingly let down his guard for a devastating final punch on "the 47 percent."

While it's unclear if the second debate will slow or reverse Romney's surge in many polls, Obama's performance at least steadied his supporters and left them little to complain about. For at least one night, the most prominent defender of the "reality-based community" stood at the gates and fought back against the incursion of "right-wing world."

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

The Arms Dilemma in Syria

Much of Official Washington is clamoring for President Obama to arm the Syrian rebels, but the civil war in Syria is reminiscent of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in which the Reagan administration ended up helping hard-line Islamists who then turned against the U.S., notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Reports that most arms being sent to Syria in the name of toppling Bashar Assad's regime are winding up in the hands of "hard-line Islamic jihadists" recall a similar earlier experience in Afghanistan.

The United States, Saudi Arabia and other outsiders wished to use material support to Afghan rebels to help defeat the Soviets and to topple the Soviet-installed Najibullah regime in Kabul. Working through Pakistan as a conduit and middleman, the outside patrons had to bestow their largesse on several different Afghan militias, which collectively constituted the armed resistance in Afghanistan.

About half of the militias could be called hard-line Islamic jihadists. These also were the most effective fighters against the Soviets. If one wanted to use assistance in the form of arms shipments to defeat the Soviets and to do so sooner rather than later, these were the principal groups one needed to aid.

When Najibullah finally fell in 1992 (three years after the Soviet Union withdrew its own troops from Afghanistan), there was hardly a pause before the militias that had been allies in the war began fighting among themselves. The Afghan civil war simply moved into a new phase.

In addition to the resulting chaos setting the stage for the Taliban sweeping to power over most of Afghanistan a couple of years later, we are seeing today other legacies of this pattern of outside assistance more than 20 years ago. One of the most potent of the hard-line Islamist elements that was in the middle of the fight against the Soviets was the militia led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who would come to be seen as an enemy of the United States alongside the Taliban itself and the Haqqani group.

In Syria today as in Afghanistan three decades ago, it is illusory to think that the United States or anyone else on the outside of the fight can fine-tune where the arms go so that we deal only with groups to our liking while still getting a return on our investment in terms of hastening the fall of the regime that the fight is directed against. The opposition in Syria is if anything even more disorganized and disaggregated than was the opposition in Afghanistan.

It is not feasible to expect aid to hasten the defeat of Assad if the aid is limited to groups "who share our values," as Mitt Romney has put it. Resistance groups in Syria are operating in an environment in which they would hardly have an opportunity to demonstrate adherence to any such values.

And even if the leaders of some groups seem to express allegiance to particular values, we can have no confidence that the same concepts or terms mean the same thing to them as they do to us. Many people in that part of the world, for example, believe that democracy means nothing more than majority rule, with "majority" defined in terms of something like a religious sect.

There is no opportunity for the United States to do anything approaching precise management of a flow of arms. It is not as if the Defense Logistics Agency is on scene to parcel out the materiel. Other outside actors are needed to facilitate the flow. With the war in Afghanistan the key outside actor in that regard was Pakistan. In Syria today the Saudis and Qataris seem to be particularly important. They are likely to be less disturbed than we are by anything that smacks of hard-line Islamic jihadism.

We should not be surprised if in Syria, as in Afghanistan, the more extreme groups also tend to be the more effective ones in carrying the fight. What is going on in Syria is not some peaceful process of political change in which our "values" would mean much. It is instead a brutal civil war. Brutally extreme groups tend to be in their element in brutally extreme conflicts.

In light of all of the foregoing, we also should not be surprised that despite incessant hand-wringing about what is going on in Syria and expressed wishes that somehow this conflict could be pushed speedily to a successful conclusion, no one has offered any good ideas for how to do that.

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Iran and West Inch toward Nuke Deal

The outline for a resolution of the Iranian nuclear dispute is coming into focus, perhaps only waiting for the U.S. presidential election to be decided. But suspicions between Iran and the West continue to beset the slow progress toward a resolution, as Gareth Porter noted for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

Although the place and time of the next round of talks on Iran's nuclear program have not yet been announced, the maneuvering by Iran and the United States to influence the outcome has already begun.

Iran sought support for a revised proposal to the talks during the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) last month, according to a New York Times report Oct. 4. Then, only a few days later, the Barack Obama administration launched a preemptive attack on the proposal through New York Times reporter David Sanger.

The officials suggested the Iranian proposal would give Iran an easier route to a "breakout" to weapons-grade uranium enrichment. But that claim flies in the face of some obvious realities.

An Oct. 4 story by Sanger reported that Iran had begun describing a "9-step plan" to diplomats at the UNGA and quoted administration officials as charging that the proposal would not "guarantee that Iran cannot produce a weapon." Instead, the officials argued, it would allow Iran to keep the option of resuming 20-percent enriched uranium, thus being able to enrich to weapons-grade levels much more quickly.

Iran's nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili issued a denial that Iran had "delivered

any new proposal other than what had been put forward in talks with the P5+1.³ But that statement did not constitute a denial that Iran was discussing such a proposal, because the Times story had said the proposal had been initially made to European officials during the P5+1 meeting in Istanbul in July.

Obama administration officials complained that, under the Iranian plan, Iran would carry out a “suspension” of 20-percent enrichment only after oil sanctions have been lifted and oil revenues are flowing again.

That description of the proposal is consistent with an Iranian “five-step plan”, presented during the talks with P5+1, the text of which was published by Arms Control Today last summer. In that proposal, the P5+1 would have ended all sanctions against Iran in steps one and two, but Iran would have ended its 20-percent enrichment only in the fifth step.

In that same final step, however, Iran also would have closed down the Fordow enrichment plant and transferred its entire stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium to “a third country under IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) custody.” Iran has made clear that it intends to use the 20-percent enrichment as bargaining leverage to achieve an end to the most damaging economic sanctions.

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, the spokesperson for Iran’s nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005 and now a visiting scholar at Princeton University, told IPS, “Iran is prepared to stop 20-percent enrichment and go below five percent. The question is what will the P5+1 provide in return. As long as the end state of a comprehensive agreement is not clear for Iran, it will not consider halting enrichment at 20 percent.”

But the administration’s portrayal of the Iranian proposal as offering a sanctions-free path to continued 20-percent enrichment is highly misleading, according to close observers of the Iran nuclear issue. It also ignores elements of the proposal that would minimize the risk of a “breakout” to enrichment of uranium to weapons-grade levels.

The Obama administration criticism of the proposal, as reported by Sanger, was couched in such a way as to justify the U.S. refusal to discuss lifting the sanctions on Iranian oil exports during the four rounds of talks with Iran. A senior administration official was quoted as saying that Iran “could restart the program in a nanosecond,” whereas “it would take years” to re-impose the sanctions.

Paul Pillar, national intelligence officer for Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, noted in a commentary in *The National Interest* that it is “far

easier to impose sanctions on Iran than to lift them” and that if Iran reneged on a nuclear agreement, “it would be easier still.”

Peter Jenkins, British permanent representative to the IAEA from 2001 to 2006, noted in an e-mail to IPS that it took the EU only two months to agree to impose oil sanctions, and that “political resistance among the 27 (EU member states) to imposing oil sanctions would probably be less if re-imposition were required by an Iranian breach of a deal with the P5+1.”

Jenkins pointed out that EU oil purchases from Iran now have experience in getting supplies from other countries which could make re-imposing sanctions even easier.

One U.S. official was quoted by Sanger as complaining that the Iranian proposal would allow Iran to “move the fuel around, and it stays in the country.” That description appeared to hint that the purpose is to give Tehran the option of a breakout to weapons grade enrichment.

But the biggest difference between the proposal now being discussed by Iranian diplomats and the one offered last summer is that the new proposal reflects the reality that Iran began last spring to convert 20-percent enriched uranium into U308 in powdered form for fuel plates for its Tehran Research Reactor. The conversion of 20 percent enriched uranium to U308, which was documented but not highlighted in the Aug. 30 IAEA report, makes it more difficult to use that same uranium for enrichment to weapons-grade levels.

The new Iranian proposal evidently envisions U308 uranium remaining in the country for use by the Tehran Research Reactor rather than the entire stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium being shipped to another country as in its previous proposal.

Former State Department official Mark Fitzpatrick of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, who has argued in the past that the only purpose Iran could have in enriching to 20 percent is a nuclear weapon, told the Times that the conversion “tends to confirm that there is civilian purpose in enriching to this level.”

But Fitzpatrick told the Times that the Iranians know how to reconvert the U308 powder back to a gaseous form that can then be used for weapons grade enrichment. “It would not take long to set it up,” Fitzpatrick said.

In an interview with IPS, Dr. Harold A. Feiveson, a senior research scientist at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson’s school and a specialist on nuclear weapons, said “it would not be super hard” to carry out such a reconversion. But Feiveson admitted that he is not aware of anyone ever having done it. The reconversion to

20 percent enrichment “would be pretty visible” and “would take some time,” said Feiveson. “You would have to kick the (IAEA) inspectors out.”

Even Israeli policymakers have acknowledged that Iran’s diversion of 20-percent enriched uranium represents a step away from a breakout capability, as Haaretz reported Oct. 9. Defense Ministry sources told the Israeli daily that the Iran’s reduction of its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium had added “eight months at least” to what the Israeli government has cited as its “deadline” on Iran. The same sources said it was the justification for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s dropping the threat of attack on Iran in his U.N. speech.

The deep reduction in Iranian oil revenues from sanctions and the recent plunge in the value of Iran’s currency may well have made Iran more interested in compromise than when the talks with the P5+1 started in April.

Mousavian told IPS, “I am convinced that Iran is ready for a package deal based on recognition of two principles.” The first principle, he said, is that “Iran recognizes the P5+1 concerns and will remove all such concerns”; the second is that the P5+1 “recognizes the rights of Iran and gradually lifts sanctions”.

But Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has expressed serious doubts about whether the Obama administration is willing to end the sanctions on Iran under any circumstances. In an Oct. 10 speech, Khamenei said the Americans “lie” in suggesting sanctions would be lifted in return for Iran giving up its nuclear program.

U.S. officials “make decisions out of grudge and aversion (toward Iran)”, Khamenei said.

Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy, received the UK-based Gellhorn Prize for journalism for 2011 for articles on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.
