

Obama Taunts Putin over Syria

President Obama mocked Russian President Putin for not fixing Syria during the past month and chided him about Moscow's Afghan quagmire in the 1980s, proving that Obama has either no self-awareness or no sense of irony given the U.S. misadventures in both countries, as Sam Hussein describes.

By Sam Hussein

President Barack Obama's remarks about Russian President Vladimir Putin's intervention in the Syria conflict were remarkably ironic: "The Russians now have been there for several weeks, over a month, and I think fair-minded reporters who have looked at the situation would say that the situation hasn't changed significantly.

"In the interim, Russia has lost a commercial passenger jet. You've seen another jet shot down. There have been losses in terms of Russian personnel. And I think Mr. Putin understands that with Afghanistan fresh in the memory, for him to simply get bogged down in an inconclusive and paralyzing civil conflict is not the outcome that he's looking for."

In those remarks on Tuesday in Paris, Obama scrutinized the hard effects of Russian foreign policy, but not his own. "With Afghanistan fresh in the memory," said the U.S. President, presumably referring to the Russian intervention there that ended in 1989 – and not the 14-year U.S. intervention in the same country which is ongoing.

Obama can see the speck in Putin's eye, but not the log in his own. To say nothing of the fact that the U.S. started the modern movement of Islamic jihadists in the 1980s by organizing, funding and arming the Afghan mujahedeen to make the Russians bleed.

Gore Vidal called the USA the "United States of Amnesia" – but it's more like the USSA: The United States of Selective Amnesia.

The U.S. has been bombing the Mideast for decades now – not a month – and has yet to make a serious accounting of all the people killed, cities destroyed and hatred engendered. Would some "fair-minded" reporter look at the U.S. experience from Afghanistan since the 1980s to Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s to Libya and Syria this decade and judge that Washington has solved the problems or made them markedly worse?

A few hours after Obama made his remarks, Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced the U.S. was again expanding its military actions in Iraq.

Why Terrorism?

While it rarely occurs to anyone to question that the stated goals of the U.S. government might not be the actual goals, it's rarely thought to examine the stated goals of the 9/11 or Paris attackers. Many have rightly noted that the "terrorism" label is applied selectively, most recently regarding the shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado, but beyond the use of the word "terrorism," the notion of explicitly articulating an attacker's motive is selective.

When talking about events like the Nov. 13 Paris attacks, "motive" doesn't enter into it; indeed, talk of "terrorism" or "war" is partly a substitute for thinking through a motive. In the case of the Planned Parenthood attack, it's seemingly taken for granted that someone can be opposed to abortion rights and be opposed to violent attacks on abortion clinics. But it's not a point taken to heart when examining U.S. – or French, or British – foreign policy.

One nation seems to have come to grips with this contradiction, at least to an extent: On March 11, 2004, a series of nearly simultaneous bombs exploded on four commuter trains in Madrid. The blasts killed 191 people and wounded nearly 2,000.

That same day, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1530 that condemned in "the strongest terms the bomb attacks in Madrid, Spain, perpetrated by the terrorist group ETA." Of course, it quickly became evident ETA – a Basque separatist group – had nothing to do with it.

This was a rare instance of officialdom not immediately trying to "blame the Muslims" after a bombing. And for good reason. The then right-wing ruling party in Spain, the inaptly named Peoples Party, had dragged the country into the Iraq War a year before and, with elections looming just three days later, there was fear that if the attack was shown to be Mideast-related, the public would be furious. In fact, the day of the election, Al Qaeda claimed responsibility.

Before the Madrid bombing, the Peoples Party led the polls by 5 percentage points, but the Socialist Party ended up winning by 5 percent. The victorious Socialist Party had called for the removal of Spanish troops from Iraq during the campaign.

Part of what was pivotal and crucial was that there were substantial protests in the immediate aftermath of the bombings. This included protests under the banner "No to Terrorism – No to War." [See picture.]

The Socialist Party had promised to remove Spanish troops by June 30, 2004, and, after winning the election, the troops were withdrawn a month earlier than

expected. I can't find a record of any Mideast-related attacks in Spain since.

The story has been different with Great Britain and France, which took more prominent roles in interventions in their former colonies, Iraq and Syria, respectively. British Prime Minister Tony Blair was President George W. Bush's principal sidekick during the invasion and occupation of Iraq, while French President Francois Hollande has joined Obama as leading voices in demanding "regime change" in Syria and in escalating war talk about the Islamic State.

There's been much made in some circles about the French, who were derided in the U.S. for not supporting the 2003 Iraq invasion, now leading the fight in Syria and Hollande's pro-war rhetoric. But Syria was a former French colony.

Yet, the fact that the interventionist dynamics line up with the imperial histories is damning to the Western powers by playing into the anti-Western narrative that today's interventions are just modern versions of the Christian world's war on and exploitation of the Muslim world dating back to the Crusades.

This Western imperial mindset toward the Mideast is evident, including the case of Israel's active settler colonial project against the Palestinians. It's also evident in the alliance between the U.S. establishment and the Western-installed monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other regimes.

And the mindset is even evident in the case of Iran, as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated after the nuclear agreement with Iran earlier this year at the Brookings Institution: "I don't see Iran as the partner in this agreement, I see Iran as the subject of this agreement."

The imperial legacy is shown in restrictions to domestic freedoms as well. There's the rhetoric of "liberté" in France, but the state of emergency in France and prohibition of protests has its roots in laws enacted from France's colonial war with Algeria. (Many in France also seem to be letting "the terrorists win" by abrogating their own freedoms.)

A Pressing Need

The proclaimed motives of those claiming responsibility for attacks like 9/11 were never meaningfully discussed. They should be now, especially given the widespread sense that ISIS is now adopting Al Qaeda's tactic of striking at the West, rather than simply focusing on constructing its own Mideast caliphate.

Al Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden addressed the U.S. public just before the 2004 election thus: "Contrary to Bush's claim that we hate freedom – if so, then let him explain to us why we don't strike for example – Sweden? ... But I am amazed at you. Even though we are in the fourth year after the events of September 11th,

Bush is still engaged in distortion, deception and hiding from you the real causes. And thus, the reasons are still there for a repeat of what occurred.”

Around the same time, said bin Laden: “When I saw those destroyed towers in Lebanon it sparked in my mind that the oppressors should be punished in the same way and that we should destroy towers in America so that they can taste what we tasted and so they will stop killing our women and children.” (See my piece “U.S. Policy: ‘Putting out the fire with gasoline?’ based on interviews with Lee Hamilton and Thomas Kean.)

This passage is almost never cited, and its context was outright falsified by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in his book, where he claims Bin Laden was “referring to the destruction of the Marine barracks and the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut.” Robin Wright correctly notes in her book the context was that bin Laden was referring to “Israeli’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon with American arms.”

Paris and London should be looking toward Madrid’s example in taking steps toward shedding their imperial mindsets in stopping their war-obsessed elites. You can either be an emissary of empire or a decent democracy, but not both.

Hollande is clearly escalating the bombing that France has been conducting in Syria for over a year – now calling for “merciless” bombing. British Prime Minister David Cameron is pushing for Britain to join the bombing in Syria – in effect adopting a U.S. style of ecumenical imperialism – and not just in Britain’s traditional domains like Iraq.

It doesn’t have to be this way. History can change. And the fact is that there is a great legacy of anti-imperialism in the U.S. that’s continually overlooked. Mark Twain the pen name of author Samuel Clemens is revered now, but what’s typically ignored is Twain’s opposition to the U.S. becoming a global imperial power.

In 1898, he helped found the Anti-Imperialist League and wrote in 1900: “I have read carefully the Treaty of Paris [between the United States and Spain], and I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem. ... And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.”

Of course, U.S. colonialism actually goes back to its own roots as a settler colonial state against the native peoples of North America.

Though Spain is still a NATO member and gave NATO support during the 2011 bombing of Libya (which has led to a massive disaster there), Madrid at least

took a step away from the abyss with some positive results. This is in contrast to “leaders” in Paris, London, Washington and elsewhere who are plunging headlong into it.

In 2013, a British soldier was killed in the English town of Woolwich, a southeast part of London. Michael Adebolajo, one of the killers, explained his aim in vivid terms – literally with blood and knives in hand:

“Remove your governments, they don’t care about you. You think David Cameron is going to get caught in the street when we start busting our guns? You think politicians are going to die? No, it’s going to be the average guy, like you and your children. So get rid of them. Tell them to bring our troops back so can all live in peace. So leave our lands and we can all live in peace. That’s all I have to say.” [[transcript and video](#)]

People should listen closely for motive to better understand the choices before us.

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