

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Barack Obama: The New Woodrow Wilson?

Obama apparently hopes to make U.S. participation in Iraq inevitable through a time-honored bootstrap: keep Americans at risk and then intervene to save them. Wilson would be proud.

By Doug Bandow
August 13, 2014

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson stood before Congress and called for a Declaration of War against Germany. His eloquence carried an audience already decided for war, but his unreasonable policies regarding submarine warfare long before made America's entry well nigh inevitable.

When President Barack Obama first spoke to the nation about Iraq, he sounded reluctant to be the fourth straight president to intervene militarily. He suggested a very narrow mission, saving trapped civilians and acting "to protect our American personnel." However, the conditions he set on Washington's participation guarantee a much broader and longer campaign.

President Wilson was a modern liberal in the Obama mold, a foreign-policy activist who took the nation into war after promising to keep the peace and sacrificed domestic liberties for the national-security state. Wilson's partiality to the Entente powers was obvious, but he offered a juridically narrow justification for entering the conflict—Berlin's submarine warfare. He told Congress: "I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States."

That Wilson never criticized Great Britain's illegal starvation blockade demonstrated he was more interested in results than principles. More important, he implemented a policy that ensured war would result if Germany used the only maritime weapon it possessed capable of contesting London's overwhelming naval advantage.

Britain used passenger liners for war. They carried munitions and were ordered to ram submarines that surfaced to inspect their cargoes. Some were reserve cruisers and armed, and those were ordered to fire on U-boats. It didn't take the Germans very long to start sinking passenger ships without notice. A great cause celebre was the Lusitania, which was listed as an auxiliary cruiser, had been fitted for guns, and carried bullets along with babies, some of whom died when it was sunk by a sub near the British coast in 1915.

Wilson's position was that Americans had an absolute right, enforceable by the U.S. government (in the name of "strict accountability"), to book passage on belligerent vessels carrying munitions through a war zone. The position was ludicrous, but Berlin reluctantly respected Washington's position until January 1917, when it decided to unleash unlimited submarine warfare in an attempt to starve Britain into submission. The U-Boats turned out to be less effective than hoped and America's entry doomed Germany and its alliance partners. Wilson got the *casus belli* he desired, but his plan to reorder the world failed even more disastrously than did Berlin's war plans.

President Barack Obama appears to be heading down the same path. In his first televised speech, the president indicated that the airstrikes would be limited to protecting U.S. personnel and vulnerable refugees. This reasonable-sounding rationale offered an obvious bootstrap strategy to war. Put Americans in the path of the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant and voila! Washington would have to bomb.

Lest that seem too cynical, the first air strike occurred on artillery (U.S. equipment captured by ISIL from the Iraqi military) that threatened not Americans, but Kurds. Explained Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. John Kirby, "ISIL was using this artillery to shell Kurdish forces defending Erbil, where U.S. personnel are located." Islamic radicals were not attacking Americans, American operations or even Erbil. Rather, ISIL was threatening those protecting the city in which Americans and American facilities were located. Washington's policy makes all of these equivalent.

Indeed, President Obama made this clear: "To stop the advance on Erbil, I've directed our military to take targeted strikes against ISIL terrorist convoys should they move toward the city." He explained: "American forces have conducted targeted airstrikes against terrorist forces outside the city of Erbil to prevent them from advancing on the city and to protect our American diplomats and military personnel."

But Erbil is not the only *de facto* sanctuary protected by U.S. arms. The president explained in a *New York Times* interview: "We have an embassy in Baghdad, we have a consulate in Erbil, and we have to make sure that they are not threatened." He broadened his approach before going on vacation: "Wherever and whenever U.S. personnel or facilities are threatened, it's my obligation, my responsibility as Commander-in-Chief, to make sure that they are protected." In case there was any question, he added: "We intend to stay vigilant, and take action if these terrorist forces threaten our personnel or facilities anywhere in Iraq, including our consulate in Erbil and our embassy in Baghdad." *Anywhere in Iraq.*

Of course, no law of nature requires the United States to keep its people in harm's way. On Sunday, State said it had shifted some employees from Erbil and Baghdad to Basra, Iraq and Amman, Jordan. With Erbil under immediate threat, the administration obviously could bring out the rest of American personnel stationed there. However, said the president: "we're not moving our embassy anytime soon. We're not moving our consulate anytime soon."

Contrast this with administration policy in Libya. At the end of July, factional violence escalated in Tripoli and combat neared the U.S. embassy. The administration closed the embassy and removed the staff. The State Department issued a travel advisory and urged U.S. citizens to leave “immediately.” Although the closure was termed “temporary,” it was complete. Diplomatic functions were shifted to America’s embassy in Tunisia. And it was done because “securing our facilities and ensuring the safety of our personnel are top Department priorities,” explained State spokeswoman Marie Harf. There were no airstrikes unleashed or even threatened.

No doubt, the administration is reluctant to close diplomatic and military facilities. However, entering the Iraqi conflict obviously is not necessary to protect U.S. personnel. In this case, the administration appears to be choosing war, with “safeguarding Americans” as the excuse therefor.

Imagine if, in October 1941, the Roosevelt administration had announced that it planned to launch airstrikes against German forces if they advanced closer to the Soviet Union’s capital of Moscow, in which the U.S. embassy and staff were located. No one would mistake that as a measure to protect American personnel, who obviously could be evacuated. It would be entering the war against Berlin.

President Obama should level with the American people. If he wants to protect Kurdistan, he should say so. If he plans to initiate aggressive military action against ISIL (or “engage in some offense,” as he put it), he should be forthright.

Instead, he apparently hopes to make U.S. participation inevitable through a time-honored bootstrap: keep Americans at risk and then intervene to save them. Woodrow Wilson would be proud.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire (Xulon). Follow him on Twitter: @Doug_Bandow.