

Clown Show: Three Inept Foreign Policy Initiatives

Taking a look at a few less known blunders by the American foreign policy blob.

Ted Galen Carpenter

May 7, 2021

Washington has made an abundance of major, well-known foreign policy blunders over the decades, most notably the disastrous wars in Vietnam and Iraq. However, there have been numerous less prominent initiatives that seemed to defy basic logic and common sense. Although the negative consequences of those follies were less severe than the Vietnam and Iraq debacles (or the policies that have provoked a needless cold war with post-communist Russia), they still illustrate the arrogance and ineptitude of America's foreign policy mandarins. Three especially ill-advised schemes stand out—two with respect to Mexico and one involving Syria.

In 2009, Barack Obama's administration initiated a sting operation that entailed a flow of firearms to Mexican drug cartels. That initiative, Operation Fast and Furious, was similar to a more limited measure, Operation Wide Receiver, which George W. Bush's administration had approved in 2006 and 2007 to track suspicious weapons moving from Arizona gun stores into Mexico. Instead of intercepting such firearms, U.S. authorities allowed the shipments to proceed, with the expectation that they could be traced to their final destinations. With Fast and Furious, the Obama administration adopted the same "gun walking" approach on a larger scale and supplied some of the guns directly. Both programs were run out of the Phoenix office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF).

The goal was to infiltrate and undermine the drug cartels by following the trail of traceable guns to identify and neutralize those organizations and the kingpins who ran them. But Operation Fast and Furious backfired badly. ATF personnel assigned to maintain the traces lost track of where the weapons ultimately ended up. The cartels received more than 1,700 additional weapons, many at the expense of U.S. taxpayers. Not surprisingly, the Obama administration stonewalled and sought to conceal both the nature and the extent of the fiasco. Invoking "executive privilege," Attorney General Eric Holder even defied a congressional subpoena and refused to testify before a House committee investigating the Fast and Furious debacle. Indeed, the administration's principal response was to harass journalists, especially CBS News reporter Sharyl Attkisson, who had dared to expose the scheme and its failures.

Administration officials pursued an equally harebrained program in Syria, with equally dismal results. In its efforts to undermine Bashar al-Assad's government, the Obama administration

found itself supporting rather unsavory, Islamist factions in the anti-Assad insurgency. Although Washington proceeded with that strategy, some policymakers were uncomfortable with it and sought to create a new rebel formation that would be firmly committed to democracy and other Western values.

In June 2014, the administration asked Congress to authorize \$500 million to vet, train, and equip a new force of “moderate” fighters. Officials spent all of those funds over the next 14 months, but the results were decidedly underwhelming. The program managed to graduate only a few dozen fighters, not the many hundreds that proponents had predicted. Worse, most of the graduates quickly defected or surrendered to more radical Islamist forces. In its report to the Senate in September 2015, the administration conceded that only “four or five” fighters remained in the field. Jonah Goldberg observed caustically: “The news that the Obama administration has spent \$500 million to put ‘four or five’ fighters on the ground in Syria adds an almost comic irony to what is ultimately a tragic farce.”

Mexico, though, appears to be the favorite arena for bizarre U.S. policy ventures. During the final months of Donald Trump’s administration, U.S. Special Forces units reportedly were assigned to train enforcers for certain drug cartels. The apparent underlying logic for the program was that recipients of such training could be vetted to weed out the worst elements. U.S. training and support would then create cooperative, de facto allies to challenge and weaken rival cartels that posed a more lethal threat to the authority of the Mexican government and overall public order.

Indulging in such a fantasy was especially inexcusable since the United States already had been burned by a more rational program. During the late 1990s, Washington spent millions of dollars to train a new elite unit within the Mexican army to combat the increasingly powerful drug cartels. That unit soon defected en masse to the Gulf cartel and became that organization’s infamous enforcers, Los Zetas. When the ex-soldiers realized just how much potential profit existed in the illegal drug trade, though, they broke with their new employer a few years later and formed their own drug-running operation. For nearly a decade, Los Zetas became one of Mexico’s two most powerful cartels and gained a reputation for being the most violent operation.

Given that track record, it would be astonishing if U.S. officials even considered a new program that cut out the middleman and intended to train and equip cartel enforcers directly. Yet that appears to be exactly what has happened.

A common theme in all of these episodes is how U.S. officials initially seemed so impressed with their own cleverness and creativity. They exhibited breathtaking hubris that they could execute complex (and not terribly logical) ventures without a glitch. In addition to a cavalier attitude about the expenditure of taxpayer dollars, there was an inattentiveness to possible adverse consequences. Supplying Mexican drug cartels with additional weaponry did not serve the best interests of the United States, nor did training more recruits for Islamist insurgent organizations in Syria. Yet there is little evidence that bungling policymakers suffered adverse consequences for their misjudgments. Given that outcome, it is likely we’ll see more ill-advised schemes in the future.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the American Conservative, is the author of 12 books and more than 900 articles on international affairs.

