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Policy Experts: A Cautious Speech From ‘Reluctant Warrior’

By Dion Nissenbaum and Julian E. Barnes – September 10, 2013

WASHINGTON—Foreign-policy experts saw little in President **Barack Obama**’s [speech on Syria Tuesday night](#) that is likely to dramatically alter the contours of the debate.

Aaron David Miller, a retired Middle East negotiator at the State Department, said the speech came across more as a “progress report” than a rallying cry to the nation.

“It was not a speech that conveyed a sense of urgency,” said Mr. Miller, who is now a vice president at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholar. The president’s embrace of a Russian proposal to force Syria to relinquish control of its chemical arsenal and Mr. Obama’s decision to ask lawmakers to postpone a vote to authorize a military strike against Syria undercut his ability to deliver a compelling speech that could sway Americans, said Mr. Miller.

“The circumstances in which this speech was made didn’t afford an opportunity for greatness, clarity or decisiveness,” he said

Christopher Preble, a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Mr. Obama failed to make a case that the national security of the U.S. was at stake in Syria.

“What is U.S. involvement going to do to change the situation on the ground in Syria, to improve the situation for the Syrian people and more important in what ways is it going to advance U.S. security,” he said. “He didn’t engage that argument at all.”

Mr. Preble said an equally compelling case can be made that intervening would harm U.S. national security, weakening the Assad regime and causing chemical weapons to fall in the hands of extremist groups.

Some defense experts coupled their criticism with praise for Mr. Obama’s delivery and candor with the public.

Shawn Brimley, a former national security staff member in the Obama administration, said he thought the speech was well done, and came away with a feeling Mr. Obama intended to act.

“This is a president who doesn’t bluff, he doesn’t have a track record of bluffing,” said Mr. Brimley, now the director of studies at the Center for a New American Security, a think tank supportive of Mr. Obama. “He basically said the U.S. is going to prepare to act. ... If we see Syria start to prevaricate and it becomes clear they are playing a game, he will let the Tomahawks fly.”

Christopher Hill, the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, said that the president presented himself as a “reluctant warrior” who is cautiously pushing to attack Syria. The address was initially intended to convince skeptical Americans that U.S. national security could be jeopardized by failing to attack Syria. But the unexpected Russian proposal and evolving international diplomatic effort changed his calculus, said Mr. Hill.

“He may have moved the needle in convincing people that something must be done, but I’m not sure if he moved the needle in convincing people that we must use force,” said Mr. Hill, who is now dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. “He clearly was trying to make a forceful case for the need to do something, but I think he wants to be a very reasonable person who is willing to pursue all avenues.”