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Syria and the danger of elite consensus

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There was near consensus in Washington, D.C. in support of the U.S. strike on Syria. Voices from the left supporting President Donald Trump's action include Hillary Clinton, most of America's European allies, Tom Friedman and a large number of former Obama officials.

On the right, the usual suspects like Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham supported the attack, as did most Republican members of Congress, including some like Majority Leader Sen. Mitch McConnell, who opposed exactly such an action when President Barack Obama was considering in back in 2013.

Even the mainstream media appear to have decided it was time to strike Assad, at least to judge from much of the breathless "journalism" we've seen so far.

On first blush one might imagine that this consensus is a good thing, coming as it does during what has otherwise been an incredibly polarized first few months of Trump's presidency.

Finally, you might say, we agree on something. And all this agreement among the people we elect and pay to run U.S. foreign policy might also give you confidence that Trump did the right thing.

That confidence, sadly, would be misplaced. The truth is that the elite consensus on Syria, like Trump's missile strike, is premature and ultimately dangerous to American national security.

The fundamental danger of elite consensus is that it undermines the marketplace of ideas. A democracy's primary strength in foreign policy making is the ability to weigh competing policy proposals in the news media. Debate and deliberation reveal the evidence and logic behind competing claims and helps the public and political leaders assess the implications of different courses of action. This process, in theory, helps the United States avoid poor decisions.

Consensus, however, undermines this process by substituting doctrine for debate. Almost by definition, consensus requires little, if any, debate or deliberation. When was the last time elite consensus resulted from a free-flowing and vigorous debate in the United States? The natural outcome of debate is division and disagreement.

Consensus emerges only when people already agree so completely on the key assumptions and value judgments involved that the conclusions are preordained and debate is unnecessary.

In the case of Syria, Republican and Democratic elites supported Trump's missile strike not because they had an extended debate over its wisdom—in fact, there was zero debate before the surprise attack was announced—but because they all relied on the same basic doctrine that strongly endorses the value of military intervention, what Obama recently called the “Washington playbook.”

Reliance on doctrine may be sufficient when the topic is how to handle routine issues, but it is clearly not the right approach when it comes to complex policy problems, about which both citizens and political leaders have incomplete information. Though beliefs are useful as general guidelines, they must be married to a careful consideration of the facts of the case at hand in order to produce sound policies. And the best way to assess the connection between beliefs and actions is to debate policy options in the marketplace of ideas.

Elite consensus can also lead to poor policy through overconfidence and precipitous action. Policies forged through debate are shaped by compromise and tempered by exposure to wide-ranging ideas and information. Consensus policies, on the other hand, require neither self-reflection nor compromise. Buoyed by widespread agreement in Washington, political leaders may feel freer to take action without subjecting their strategies to serious cross-examination. Unburdened by challenges to their views from the opposing party and confident that they are taking the consensus approach, political leaders are likely to move more quickly to take action than they would otherwise.

Consider how quickly, for example, Trump acted in the wake of the chemical attack. Further, the lack of pushback from opposing elites makes it very possible that Trump's next move will be more aggressive than it would have been if there had been more vigorous debate.

In the longer run, elite consensus is dangerously self-perpetuating and can prevent course correction. Elite consensus creates powerful social forces that tend to strangle debate and stifle criticism.

As research has shown, journalists for mainstream news outlets closely index their coverage to the debate in Washington. When elites are in consensus, journalists rarely seek out alternative views, thereby presenting the public with a uniform message and making it difficult to identify weaknesses in existing policies. This, in turn, props up public support for that policy and makes it riskier for political leaders to criticize the policy or the president.

In the long run, these dynamics can make it more difficult for U.S. leaders to engage in serious self-appraisal when circumstances warrant.

Those who doubt how difficult course correction can be need only look at the quagmires of Afghanistan and Iraq for evidence.

Now that the initial adrenaline rush of the crisis has passed the nation needs a more robust debate on Syria. Despite near unanimous support for the missile strike among Republican and Democratic elites, public support for the strikes is decidedly mixed. Just 51 percent of the public

supports the strikes, only a third believe the strikes will be even somewhat likely to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, and just 20 percent support further military action.

Elites calling on Trump to take more aggressive steps need to do more than wave horrible images and invoke the need for America to provide leadership. Indeed, given the dangers of consensus and complexities of the situation in Syria, now would be a good time for Trump to reconsider the wisdom of the Washington playbook.

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