

# The Washington Post

## Obama's loss for words on Syria

By: Richard Cohen – May 6, 2013

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It turns out that President Obama did not mean to say "red line" after all. The New York Times tells us the president misspoke. Maybe like a lot of people new to Washington, he got confused by the Metro system. Maybe he meant to warn Syria not to cross the Green Line. It goes from Suitland, Md., through Washington and ends in Greenbelt, Md. Chemical weapons are forbidden throughout the length of the line -- a zoning infraction, I believe.

My explanation makes as much sense as the one provided by the White House. That one starts with an account of the usual high-level meetings on how to respond to reports last summer that Bashar al-Assad's regime might be preparing to use chemical weapons. With an approach decided, Obama in August then talked to his warm friends in the press corps. There, he went further than some advisers expected and said that if Syria used chemical weapons, that would constitute the crossing of a "red line." Appended were the usual phrases about "consequences" and changed "calculus." So there!

Still, let us wonder: Why is the use of poison gas a red line but the slaughter of civilians by conventional means -- guns, knives, artillery, bombs, mines -- is not? Dead is dead, and while gas may be a particularly gruesome way to die, I can heartily recommend no good way. I can state, however, that it ain't easy to use gas -- the wind is a variable -- and it is not really such an effective weapon. John Mueller, an Ohio State University political scientist, writes in Foreign Affairs that gas was given its bad rep by the British in World War I in an effort to portray the Germans as particularly beastly -- and get the United States into the war. As we saw in Iraq and now in Syria, this scare talk continues to be the most effective use of chemical weapons.

Whatever the case, Obama has blown past other red lines with impressive equanimity. He has tolerated the shelling of residential areas, the slaughter of civilians, the use of the air force to bomb and strafe, missiles fired into population centers, the attacks on journalists and, just last week, the reported massacre by government forces of about 70 people in the village of al-Bayda. This line was red for good reasons.

The administration has trouble speaking because, truly, it has nothing to say. In Syria as elsewhere, it has no policy. It wants only to avoid trouble abroad to produce serenity at home. In Iraq, for example, it capitalized on the long war there by just bugging out. Now Iraq is hurtling toward civil war and the Israelis say that Iraqi airspace is being used by Iran to send weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iraq War was always a mistake. Now, though, insult is being added to injury.

Afghanistan, too, is a muddle. American forces are staying until 2014, but only because Obama chose the political expedient of a compromise between those who wanted more troops and more time and those who wanted less of both. His foreign policy goal was to

jolly his domestic critics. If there is an Obama doctrine, it is to give a good speech, split the difference -- and take an early dinner.

Instead of dealing with red lines, Obama ought to deal with red herrings. The one I have in mind is the warning about how Syria could become another Iraq for the U.S. This need not happen. The administration is perfectly able to limit intervention to arming the moderate rebels and to using air power -- as was done in Libya. As for the use of air power, the Israelis seem to hit targets within Syria with impunity with no reports or even Syrian claims of downed planes. Why the Pentagon insists the U.S. cannot just as easily do the same is a trillion-dollar question.

The Syrian situation is spinning out of control. The longer Obama waits to intervene, the harder it becomes to do so. More than 70,000 people have been killed. Over a million Syrians have become refugees. The suffering is vast and the consequences of inaction are catastrophic. The White House is coldly wrong. Obama didn't misspeak when he said red line. He misspoke when he later suggested he didn't mean it.