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Meet Washington's Foreign-Policy Fools

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The Obama administration wants Yemen to replace its dictator but supports the dictator who rules next-door Saudi Arabia. And Washington no longer thinks Syria needs to keep its dictator—though the administration's isn't exactly saying he should go. Do U.S. officials really believe that anyone pays the slightest attention to their ever-changing opinions about who should rule where?

One of the least appealing aspects of U.S. foreign policy is the belief that everyone, everywhere

should listen to Washington on everything. In the view of American officials, no foreign nation should be denied Washington's counsel. No foreign economic system is too prosperous or political system too complex for American officials to judge. No foreign controversy is too complicated for the U.S. government to solve.

Washington's policy pirouettes during the Arab Spring have been breathtaking. As protests rose in Egypt, vice president Joe Biden cited Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak's value as an ally. As the regime tottered the administration endorsed a phased transition. As Mubarak's end neared, U.S. officials endorsed his ouster. None of these pious pronouncements had the slightest effect in Cairo. Popular demonstrations reached a roaring crescendo because most people had tired of dictatorship, not because Washington reluctantly warmed to democracy. Rather, the administration looked pathetic, desperately trying to get ahead of the latest crowd.

The administration continues to play much the same game in Yemen. When protests first sprouted in Yemen, the White House was backing president Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was a standard issue Third-World thug, but he won favor in Washington for being willing to battle jihadists, including the local al-Qaeda organization.

As opposition expanded, blood flowed in the streets and Saleh's hold on power loosened, the Obama administration had a change of heart. Earlier this month Washington sent foreign-policy aide John Brennan to meet with Saleh in Saudi Arabia, where he is receiving medical treatment. Brennan announced: "The United States believes that a transition in Yemen should begin immediately so that the Yemeni people can realize their aspirations."

Brennan's message to Saleh? Resign. However, the Yemeni leader paid Brennan no mind. Brennan continued on to Yemen, where he attempted to arrange a "swift transition" by convincing vice president Abed Rabo Mansour Hadi to seize power—but only in the name of democracy, of course. Hadi said no.

Saleh's question for Washington obviously is not, "what have you done for me?" but "what have you done for me lately?" The fact that the U.S. government lavished aid on his regime in the past doesn't matter. His first, and these days only, objective is to hold onto power.

A similar soap opera is occurring in America's relations with Syria. As protests began against the long-lived Assad family dictatorship, secretary of state Hillary Clinton called Syrian president Bashar al-Assad a "reformer." She apparently lives in a time warp. When Assad succeeded his father a decade ago, some observers hoped that the English-trained ophthalmologist would, in fact, modernize and liberalize. But those dreams proved stillborn. The best one can say about Assad is that so far he has killed fewer people than did his father. Nevertheless, as the Syrian people rose in revolt the Obama administration was cautious, encouraging the Assad dictatorship to respond with dialogue instead of force. Washington refused to even suggest that Assad step down.

One anonymous American official told the *Washington Post* that Secretary Clinton "thought at first that if we gave him some space, he would do the right thing. Instead, we see him using increasing brutality against his own people."

Duh. Brutal dictator who continued the ruthless rule of his father refuses to reform even now. This surprised the Obama administration?

One is tempted to suggest that American foreign policy is being directed by fools.

Although it took several months, President Obama and Secretary Clinton finally recognized that President Assad isn't a very nice guy. So now they want President Assad to quit. Maybe.

President Obama explained: "Increasingly you're seeing President Assad lose legitimacy in the eyes of his people. Similarly, said Secretary Clinton: "From our perspective, he has lost legitimacy." She added that "President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power."

Does that mean he should go? Or does he have one last chance before he should go?

Actually, he's apparently just moved onto the administration's naughty list for Christmas. After proclaiming Assad's "lost legitimacy," Secretary Clinton backed up and said she still hoped that he would adopt political reforms. An unnamed State Department official told the Washington Post: "Whether we take it farther will depend on events on the ground." After all, "We need to think through carefully what we say."

Alas, President Assad hasn't seemed to notice, no matter how hard the administration has thought before it said. He is still president, his brother still controls the security forces, and his minions still run the government. President Assad appears to believe that his legitimacy depends on his military's willingness to shoot rather than on what Washington thinks.

At least Secretary Clinton was firm when she opined: "We have said that Syria can't go back to the way it was before." But what if the Assad regime retains control? Is Secretary Clinton prepared to do anything in response? If not, she has issued the emptiest of threats.

Some analysts advocate that the U.S. government back up its public opinions. Reuel Marc Gerecht of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies argued: "The administration's policy toward Syria is shaping up to be the greatest missed opportunity of Barack Obama's presidency." However, Washington's options remain quite limited, at least so long as the Obama administration doesn't desire to start yet another unnecessary war in yet another Muslim nation.

At the margin Washington could push for regime change, but only at the margin. Syria's fate likely will be determined on its own streets, and not by anything done by the U.S.

Nor would overthrowing the Syrian dictatorship be a simple solution. It's one thing to blow up an authoritarian system. It's quite another matter to build a genuinely liberal, democratic society. Egypt risks going from a military dictatorship run by Hosni Mubarak to a military dictatorship run by anonymous military officers. Fear of rising Islamic extremism in Syria may be overblown, but ethnic and religious minorities have reason to worry about their future in a "democratic" Syria. The experience in both Egypt and Iraq gives much cause for concern.

Instead of constantly filling the atmosphere with more hot air—or worse, attempting to back the hot air with force—U.S. officials should shut up. They should say little or nothing as crises inevitably develop in other nations.

Washington's principle objective should be to stay out of foreign conflicts. The U.S. government should reaffirm its general commitment to democracy and human rights. But American officials should drop their pretense of micromanaging events. Unlike God, who cares for the smallest sparrow that falls to earth, they need not worry about every event that happens on the earth, issuing uninformed opinions hither and yon. Washington might usefully offer private advice, including to opposition groups and figures. In rare cases, promises of support and aid might help advance reform, so long as U.S. officials remember the poor record of past foreign

assistance and their consistent inability to predict, let alone control, foreign events. Such a nuanced approach would be a far cry from policy today.

U.S. officials must fight the very American desire to Do Something. We want people the world over enjoy political liberty and economic prosperity. We want to help them succeed. But social engineering is hard enough in the United States. Transcending differences in culture, tradition, history, religion, ethnicity politics and more makes the international task even more daunting. Moreover, people want to rule themselves. They will always be skeptical of outsiders who show up seeking to direct events. Taking public positions proves even more painful when hypocrisy becomes obvious. There's a perfectly understandable realpolitik reason for Washington to prefer Saudi tyranny to Iranian tyranny, but if U.S. officials are preaching democracy around the globe, bombing some regimes and criticizing others, it's not easy to explain why Washington doesn't care if the Saudi (and now Bahraini) people suffer under tyranny. A more modest—and quiet—approach would allow American officials to adapt to practical reality without so obviously compromising fundamental principles.

When the next crisis erupts somewhere around the globe, the president might helpfully respond: "Who cares?" The point is not that Americans shouldn't care about tragedy elsewhere as human beings. But Americans shouldn't automatically care as a matter of government policy.

This truly would be an unnatural reaction in Washington. But it would be a far better strategy than what passes for foreign policy in the Obama administration.

Image by Chalumeau

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