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High explosives do not constitute a Syria policy

By MICHAEL GERSON

"Mission Accomplished" may be the most famous presidential words never actually uttered by a president. I know because, as head of presidential speechwriting at the time, I didn't write them. They were found on a banner, but never in a single draft of President George W. Bush's 2003 remarks aboard the USS Lincoln.

But now that this phrase has been tweeted and defended by President Trump, it is worth examining what he has accomplished by his missile strikes in Syria.

High explosives do not constitute a Syria policy, which has been lacking across two administrations. So it might be more useful to ask a narrower question: What principle is America trying to enforce?

Trump seems committed to the norm that chemical weapons attacks against civilians should bring kinetic consequences. That is superior to President Obama's version, in which chemical attacks brought only un-enforced threats. Trump's carefully calibrated application of Tomahawks easily clears his predecessor's bar, which was barely off the floor.

Trump's position, however, has its own share of inconsistencies. It prioritizes the lives of children killed by a nerve agent above the lives of children killed by a barrel bomb. Targeting civilians -- through terror bombing, forced starvation, torture and the repeated use of chemical weapons -- has been an essential element of Bashar Assad's strategy in the Syrian civil war. His aim has not merely been to reclaim territory from the rebels; it has been to terrify the Syrian people into submission or flight. And, with the help of Russia and Iran, he has largely succeeded.

There is a further inconsistency. The images of children after a chemical weapons attack seem to move the president. The images of 5 million refugee children -- many out of school, many traumatized by violence and loss -- seem to lack that power. So far this year, America has taken 11 -- yes, 11 -- Syrian refugees. The Trump administration, apparently, will avenge the deaths of Syrian children, but not welcome them.

In spite of all this, it can be argued that the norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons is a special one. In a world where war often involves criminal barbarity, it is useful to place at least one act beyond the pale.

But this should not be mistaken for the deterrence of future chemi-

cal attacks. Hitting a few sites with perhaps 100 missiles may reduce Assad's capability to make more sophisticated chemical weapons. But the chemical attack on Douma was fairly primitive. The coalition strike probably did not deprive Assad of the ability to repeat this kind of tactic. And Assad still has a powerful incentive to do so, since press reports indicate that it was the chemical attack that finally broke the spirit of resisters in Douma.

Trump's standard -- that a dictator can indiscriminately kill his people as long as he doesn't use chemical weapons -- is nearly lost in the overarching lesson of the Syrian conflict. Assad has established his own international norm: If you make war on your own people -- if you kill enough of them, brutalize enough of them and displace enough of them -- the world will let you stay in power.

Here is the norm that America might have defended: Mass atrocities against civilians as a method of warfare won't be allowed to succeed. This would involve not only punishing the use of chemical weapons as a tactic, but also making sure that the use of chemical weapons and other violence directed at civilians fails as a strategy.

The last two administrations have placed their main emphasis on two goals -- defeating the Islamic State and opposing the use of chemical weapons -- for a reason. In the chaos that once was Syria, Obama and Trump have wanted to define America's mission in ways that are discrete, limited and achievable. Both men can claim credit in the campaign against the Islamic State -- not a trivial matter. One of them has, at least, maintained the pretense of an international norm on chemical weapons.

In the real world, however, battles are not won by limiting your objectives. The outcome in Syria that would have best served American values and interests? A well-armed coalition of moderate rebels forcing the regime to the negotiating table, resulting in a coalition government that includes some regime elements but not Assad. After several wasted years of indecision and indifference, this is a distant, perhaps impossible, dream. But it is the only result that would have re-established the norm that murdering innocents as part of a military strategy won't be allowed to prevail. This mission was never even attempted.

(Washington Post Writers Group)

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Trump's turnover is huge

By DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

Kathryn Dunn Tenpas has been keeping track of White House staff turnover since the late 1990s, but until President Donald Trump took the oath of office, the Brookings Institution senior fellow told the Las Vegas Review-Journal, "no one's ever cared about it."

Turnover in the Trump White House is, well, huge. The president loves to compare himself to his predecessor, and in this department, Trump exceeds President Barack Obama exponentially. In the first year of the Trump White House, turnover was more than triple that of Obama's freshman year.

Already Trump has burned through four communications directors—five if you count Sean Spicer twice for his stunts doing double duty as press secretary/comms director—as well as hired three national security directors —Mike Flynn, H.R. McMaster and John Bolton—and two chiefs of staff.

As a reality TV show host, Trump famously told contestants, "You're fired." Tenpas uses a different phrase to capture what it's like to be canned from the Oval Office—RUP for "resigned under pressure."

"It's rarely one thing," Tenpas explained.

Indeed, it's a standard question when a cabinet member of staffer leaves as to whether the individual quit or was fired.

For one thing, the process of being shown the door can take weeks, months even. It starts with a leak about the president's dissatisfaction

with an individual. Then come the denials, and even presidential tweets damning said speculation as #fake-news. A week or so later, the gallops drop.

The spectacle makes so much noise that it drowns out the damage done by staff churn. Generally, a president's first staff represents the A-team—the best hires of a new executive—while their replacement picks—the B-team —usually lack their predecessors' star power.

"Either he doesn't realize or he doesn't care," Tenpas said of Trump, but "it's really undermining his agenda."

The confirmation process eats up a lot of political capital in the Senate.

Consider CIA Chief Mike Pompeo, Trump's pick to succeed unceremoniously dumped Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Pompeo is the exception to the replacement-as-B-lister scenario. To Washington, Tillerson always will be the remote corporate big shot who hollowed out Foggy Bottom.

With his sterling credentials that include West Point and Harvard Law School, his background of military service, as a member of Congress and successful leader at Langley, Pompeo seems the perfect pick to bring talent back into the State Department while working with Trump to craft smart foreign policy.

In January 2017, the Senate confirmed Pompeo's nomination as CIA director by a vote of 66-32, with 14 Democrats crossing the aisle to support him and one Republican, Rand Paul of Kentucky, voting

against him.

And yet Pompeo's confirmation as secretary of state is not in the bag—as it should be given his qualifications, acceptability to Democrats just a year ago, and the nation's need to have a powerhouse at State's helm as Syria and Pyongyang threaten American national security.

After he fired Tillerson, Trump told reporters he felt "close to having the Cabinet and the other things I want." Now it's not completely clear he'll get the top diplomat he wants.

And if Pompeo does make it, the road to confirm his successor as CIA chief, Gina Haspel, will be that much rockier. "You shouldn't have to be going to well over and over again," Tenpas noted.

As of mid-March, according to the Brookings tracker, 49 percent of Trump's top 65 people had left their positions due to an RUP, firing, resignation or promotion.

Trump has flirted with firing a number of Cabinet officials, including Chief of Staff John F. Kelly. Worse, he's let it be known he is thinking of not hiring a replacement.

Trump has not hired a replacement for his last communications director, Hope Hicks. He seems to think he can be president and dabble in other jobs that used to be prestigious.

"Who are the people who want these jobs now?" Tenpas asked. "How many people have walked out of there with their reputations intact?"

(Creators Syndicate)



Oh, for the days of bipartisanship

Many Americans remember a more constructive engagement between members of Congress and may wish for similar relationships considering the great number of problems facing our nation's present and future. Cooperation and unity once characterized deliberations in Washington, D.C., but has now become one of the most destroyed hopes in modern American times. Meanwhile, what are the background trends in America now preventing such an accord?

One trend reminds of a time when Republican lawmakers included left-of-center members while Democrats had its share of right-of-center members. However, at present, each of our major parties couldn't be further apart. Interestingly, during the 50 years between 1930 and 1980, both parties were generally balanced by centrist views. In the last 40 years, the parties have steadily drifted from each other to become more and more ideologically pure. Not only have conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans almost disappeared but few if any centrists remain; hence, with each passing congressional session, the GOP has gone ever more right, the Democrats more left.

Before 1980, it was difficult to predict from party affiliation whether this and that American held liberal or conservative views. The relationship between party and voter, however, has become close to totally predictable. It's argued that the differences have become more observable and the dislikes more apparent.

Meanwhile, the Democrats, formerly more often from agrarian settings with its power base in the South, have in more recent times become the urban party with attention focused

mainly on concerns to city dwellers with cosmopolitan and secular values. Rural areas have shifted toward the Republican Party whose members tend toward religious, patriotic and family-oriented interests and values. These changes can arguably be attributed to in large measure from federal legislation in the 1960s, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The United States is diverse by way of its multi-racial, religious and social makeup. Many a social scientist has noted that ethnic uniformity makes it easier for groups of like-minded background to reach agreement. The realignment of political parties has led to increasing divisions by race, with the Republican Party increasingly white and Democrats more of color.

When the trends are studied, one finds that the major parties have come to represent diverging material interests with different moral values and ways of living. As the divisions have become more intense, oftentimes Americans hold attitudes characterized by hostility and distaste that's focused on the other political party and its members. Again, using 1980 as a benchmark year, the feelings toward the opposite party have been trending down with what's been more noticeable since 2000. Democrats more often nowadays dislike the GOP and the people who support it with duplicate feelings for Democrats by Republicans. Consequence: lawmakers are influenced accordingly and thereby typically won't compromise.

When Newt Gingrich became House Speaker in 1995, he eagerly sought many changes to the institution that had been dominated by Democrats for 40 years. One big change was to discourage new House

members from locating in Washington, D.C. That proximity of location, in the past, resulted in more Republicans and their families getting to know Democrats and their families while the House leader altered the calendar so that most work got done midweek, allowing members to fly conveniently in and out from their respective districts. The U.S. Senate now resembles the House.

Other trends include politicians working the phones for dollars rather than developing social relationships while they think and worry about not being partisan or ideological enough to satisfy constituents, adhering thereby to their party's purest story line. World War II united Americans but the Cold War, and now dove versus hawk, further divides the electorate and office-holders. Then, too, but not necessarily a complete list of trends, is the fact that the generations now in charge had their political instincts shaped by the internal American culture war that got underway in the 1960s.

A resolution to work better together does not appear likely in the immediate future as we Americans seem more inclined to metaphorically race from one side of the Titanic to the other with few willing to reflect on a middle of "ship" passage. Some among us have concluded that democracy in a nation as large and diverse as America's is simply impossible and thereby we drift more and more into "strong man" leadership to embrace an autocracy. It will be possible to preserve our Constitution, our freedoms, our way of life, and our institutions and norms only if the people of the U.S. demand it. An autocracy should be better known here as it means an end to our way of life and, with high predictability, one most citizens will regret.

(Gene H. McIntyre lives in Keizer.)

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Wheatland Publishing Corp.
142 Chemawa Road N. • Keizer, Oregon 97303
Phone: 503.390.1051 • www.keizertimes.com



MANAGING EDITOR
Eric A. Howard
editor@keizertimes.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Derek Wiley
news@keizertimes.com

ADVERTISING
Paula Moseley
advertising@keizertimes.com

PRODUCTION MANAGER & GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Andrew Jackson
graphics@keizertimes.com

LEGAL NOTICES
legals@keizertimes.com

BUSINESS MANAGER
Leah Stevens
billing@keizertimes.com

RECEPTION
Lori Beyeler

INTERN
Random Pendragon

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