



## Unwise and Undeterred

by Richard W. Rahn

DOUBLING DOWN ON MISTAKES IS A FOOL'S GAMBLE

Leaders who cannot see beyond Stage One often cause great harm. Unfortunately for the United States and the world, President Obama continues to exhibit a strange naivete and a lack of wisdom about domestic and foreign problems — Syria just being the latest example. The famous Russian “reset” was one of the first policies that later turned into an embarrassment.

The president was naive when he supported the election of Mohammed Morsi as president of Egypt. He assumed that having a democratically elected leader would result in greater freedom for the Egyptian people, while ignoring the fact that many democratically elected leaders have turned into oppressors — such as Adolf Hitler in Germany and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Mr. Obama often and unwisely confuses democracy with liberty, seemingly not realizing that the goal is liberty.

Before Mr. Obama was first elected in 2008, he made a very telling statement that too few picked up on, but it showed that he does not carefully think about the consequences of his proposals, as we now see with his Syrian policies. He said he would support an increase in the capital-gains tax rate — in the name of fairness — even if doing so cost the government revenue. His implicit assumption seemed to be that raising the tax rate on people who had capital gains would make incomes more equal. If he had not been so naive and thought through the consequences or examined the economic literature, he would have realized that if capital is taxed more heavily, there will be less investment and less job creation; hence, the low-skilled and more inexperienced worker will suffer most from the lack of job opportunities.

The president shows compassion when he talks about those who were gassed in Syria, and he shows compassion when he speaks about minorities, the young and those who have the fewest opportunities. Yet by placing additional burdens on job creation, many of his tax and regulatory policies have led to the biggest increases in unemployment among those he says he cares most about. A compassionate speech is no substitute for sound action. A wiser president would realize his policies are not working and reverse course. Wise people learn from their mistakes, while the unwise double down.

While we can all agree that Syrian President Bashar Assad is a despicable fellow, is he any more despicable than the folks who run North Korea, who are far more oppressive and are apparently responsible for many times more deaths than those of Mr. Assad's military? It is hypocritical to argue that we need to attack Mr. Assad for humanitarian reasons, but not Kim Jong-un. One might argue that Syria is strategically more important and of a greater threat to us than North Korea, but that is highly debatable.

There are ways of punishing Mr. Assad without using military force that will almost certainly kill innocent civilians. Officials of the Syrian government and their

families still travel to other countries. If Syrian government officials — other than diplomats — were notified they were liable for arrest by the non-allies of Mr. Assad anytime they left Syria, it would exert pressure for a change in behavior. Financial and trade restrictions could be successful if much more comprehensively applied. Non-military alternatives are likely to be more effective and far less risky.

It should be no surprise that it is French President Francois Hollande who is Mr. Obama's only major ally in the proposed Syrian adventure. Mr. Hollande, who proposed a 75 percent income-tax rate, has shown the same naivete and lack of wisdom when it comes to economic and foreign-policy matters as has Mr. Obama. Great leaders like Ronald Reagan think beyond Stage One, whether they are dealing with the domestic economy or foreign policy. They all make mistakes, but the wise leaders do not repeat the same mistake.

A number of Democrats argue that Congress should vote to support the Obama Syrian adventure because the president and the United States will lose face if they don't. Mr. Obama put himself and the nation in a box because of a series of naive and unwise statements. Has the president given any indication that he has learned from his past mistakes? If not, why should Congress trust him to be able to oversee a military action that could easily do far more harm than good? Would you give the car keys for your new BMW to your teenage son, who has smashed up your previous two cars?

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