

# Well Done on Syria, Mr. President. Now Do It Again.

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Jun 10, 2014

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## The White House could achieve significant gains in Syria if it once again threatened missile strikes against regime military facilities.

**S**yrria is a rare example where America's strategic interests and humanitarian concerns intersect. We would be both smart and right to act decisively. Reasonable people have different priorities -- to stop the atrocities perpetrated by the Assad regime, prevent an Iranian-Hezbollah victory, blunt the rising tide of jihadists, stem the flood of refugees threatening Jordan and Lebanon -- but each begins with changing the military equation inside Syria. The question is how.

The answer is not, as former Ambassador Robert Ford wrote in Tuesday's *New York Times*, to "ramp up sharply" U.S. aid to so-called moderate Syrian rebels. After years of hearing broken promises, they understandably have no confidence in this solution. And arming the rebels will do little to stop a conflict that has killed more than 160,000 Syrians thus far, many of them by indiscriminate aerial attacks. Instead, President Barack Obama should take a page from his own playbook.

Many will scratch their heads at the idea of looking to the president as the source for an assertive policy on Syria. After all, he has fought against the slippery slope of direct U.S. involvement for three long and bloody years, ever since he declared that Bashar Assad should step aside way back in August 2011.

But by the president's own account, there was one brief moment when -- without firing a shot -- the United States achieved enormous strategic gains with real implications for the humanitarian situation. And if it worked once, there is no reason why it can't work again. This is the September 2013 chemical weapons episode.

To much of the world, the chemical weapons story line is about Assad and Obama coming eyeball to eyeball, and our guy blinks. This narrative begins with the president laying out a "red line" about Syrian chemical weapons use that he came to regret. Then he was shamed into ordering preparations for what his secretary of state termed "an unbelievably small" missile attack against Syrian military targets. At the last moment, rather than press the fire

button, he turned to Congress for its opinion. Just as Congress was poised to vote against any military action, the Syrians and their Russian backers saved the day with a bargain: Assad would gradually give up his stock of chemical weapons if Obama promised to call off any military strike.

Since, by this telling, the president never wanted to use force anyway, the Syrian-Russian offer was an elegant solution. The fact that Assad made himself an indispensable partner to the implementation of this deal, effectively ensuring no serious U.S. effort to unseat him until the last drop of chemical weapons was safely out of the country -- a process that he has shrewdly controlled -- was a reasonable price for the administration to pay. The result has been a brilliant victory for Assad; he has not only survived, holding on to some of his precious sarin in the process, but he has even gotten away with using chlorine gas, another deadly chemical weapon, without repercussion.

The president, of course, sees this episode very differently. Those who believe America should do much more to stop "the growing danger of genocide" in Syria -- to use a phrase from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's powerful March 2014 statement on the ongoing tragedy -- should draw on how he himself views the chemical weapons story.

In the president's narrative, it's about keeping his eye on the prize -- a Syria free of these dangerous weapons of mass destruction. This means not being goaded into an unnecessary and possibly ineffectual use of American power when diplomacy, supported by the credible threat of force, would achieve better results. In this telling, Assad was faced with the potential shock and awe of massive American power; what we thought was "unbelievably small" was, to him, potentially catastrophic. Avoiding that attack was worth giving up the crown jewels of his strategic arsenal. As the president said last September, "In part because of the credible threat of U.S. military force, we now have the opportunity to achieve our objectives through diplomacy."

Few in the Syria policy debate have suggested a reprise of this strategy. This is largely because advocates of deeper involvement dismiss the chemical weapons episode as an example of the president refusing to act, rather than an example of judicious use of American power. Maybe, just maybe, we would fare better in the only court of opinion that matters -- inside the Oval Office -- if we interventionists embraced the chemical weapons episode as the success the president claims it to be.

So, here is my proposal to President Obama:

"Mr. President, thanks to your steely, focused use of American power, millions of Syrians no longer fear chemical weapons in the hands of the brutal Assad regime. The fact that this important goal was achieved without firing a shot or dispatching even one boot on the ground is a signal accomplishment.

"But there's more to do in Syria, and you have shown how it can be done. Without sending a single American soldier to fight on Syrian soil, you have shown how to compel Assad to make major concessions. Now is the time to apply this model to force him to end the barrel-bombing of his citizens and stop starving innocent civilians.

"Specifically, order Assad to end all aerial attacks on his people and to open corridors for the passage of food, medicine and humanitarian relief, Mr. President, and as consequences for failure to comply, threaten that America and its allies will send missiles to destroy Syria's air bases and military headquarters.

"This approach will not require us to put U.S. pilots in harm's way to shoot down every airplane and helicopter in Assad's air force; rather, it will mean using the long arm of U.S. power to deny those aircraft the safety of bases and a source of command and control. In so doing, you will save the lives of millions of Syrians, slow the flood of refugees and give our local partners a chance to fight for the dignity and freedom you say is their right.

"If you did it once, Mr. President, you can do it again."

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