

Nothing to fear but fear

Michael Fullilove, Australian Financial Review
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[Syria](#) President Barack Obama is right to rely on the lessons of history for justification to intervene, writes Michael Fullilove.

At the G20 meeting in St Petersburg in September, Barack Obama drew an analogy between his desire to punish the Syrian government for its use of chemical weapons and Franklin D Roosevelt's push in 1940-41, prior to Pearl Harbour, to aid the British government in its fight against the Axis powers.

"These kinds of actions are always unpopular, because they seem distant and removed," said Barack Obama. "When London was getting bombed, it was profoundly unpopular, both in Congress and around the country, to help the British. It doesn't mean it wasn't the right thing to do."

As Obama acknowledged, the two situations are very different. For all his brutality, Bashar al-Assad is no Adolf Hitler. And Roosevelt's modus operandi for dealing with the Congress was practically the opposite of Obama's. Roosevelt applied a broad definition of his power to act, rather than a narrow definition. He employed every trick in his conjuror's bag to get around an obstructive Congress and deliver aid to the democracies. In 1940, for instance, he did a deal with London for the exchange of US destroyers for access to British bases, without recourse to Congress.

Nevertheless, Obama's comparison is instructive. There is a palpable war-weariness in America, verging on a new isolationism. And as was the case 70 years ago, congressional Republicans seem at least as opposed to muscular US action abroad as are Democrats. When Obama was pressing for congressional support for a strike against the Syrian regime, he found many Republicans were unenthusiastic.

"It's a terrible thing," as FDR once observed to an aide, "to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead – and to find no one there."

The Syria case is in line with an emerging trend within the GOP. Tea Party congressmen recently pushed for cuts to the defence budget. A few months ago, a Republican lawmaker from Oklahoma organised an antiwar protest at the state capitol. Senator Rand Paul mounted a filibuster against drone attacks and became a conservative hero. When he advocated a reluctant foreign policy for the United States, he shot to the top of the 2016 GOP presidential stakes.

Hawks who criticise Obama for the current state of affairs would do well to think on the biblical injunction: "Physician, heal thyself."

The new inward-looking tendency is a reaction against George W Bush's first-term foreign policy profligacy, especially the strategic detour he took by invading Iraq.

That decision was taken at a great cost to America, measured in blood, treasure, and missed opportunities. Future historians will not argue over the merits of the Iraq war, they will puzzle over how the world's most powerful country could make such an obvious mistake.

Of course, American isolationism is as old as the Republic itself.

Flanked by vast oceans and unthreatening neighbours, the country has a historical predisposition toward isolating itself from conflict and strife abroad. This tendency was reinforced in the 1930s by the devastating effects of the Great Depression and a persistent belief that America had been tricked into entering the First World War.

In the 1930s, accordingly, Congress limited expenditure on the military and passed a series of Neutrality Acts that banned most commercial dealings with warring nations, including financial aid and arms sales.

There were progressives from America's western states who were just as isolationist as the extreme conservatives. But the shrillest opponents of Roosevelt's attempts to aid the allies were Republicans.

Some Republicans labelled his Lend Lease aid program (1941-1945) a fascist initiative that "would bring an end to free government in the US."

Roosevelt was not cowed. In the period between the outbreak of the European war in September 1939 and US entry into the war in December 1941, he prodded public opinion, rearmed the country and put the economy on a war footing. Through a deluge of speeches, broadcasts and messages, he pushed isolationism to the margins of American thought and tilted the national mood toward supporting aid to Hitler's opponents even at the risk of war.

In this fight, FDR had an unlikely ally – his GOP opponent in the 1940 presidential election, Wendell Willkie. Broad-shouldered and broad-minded, Willkie was one of the most appealing figures of 20th-century American public life.

The other leading candidates for the Republican nomination in 1940 were isolationists in principle or in practice. Only Willkie had clearly identified Hitler as a threat to American security and urged the dispatch of military aid to the Allies.

In November 1940, Willkie received more popular votes than any previous Republican candidate for president, but 5 million fewer than Roosevelt. In alarming times, with bombs falling on British cities, Americans stick with what they knew.

Now came Willkie's great contribution to the war effort.

In January 1941, (as a private citizen) he announced he would visit Britain to witness the situation first-hand, “while democracy is under attack.”

Roosevelt invited Willkie to visit the White House en route to London. In the Oval Office, the president gave his recent opponent a letter for delivery to Winston Churchill, which contained lines from the Longfellow poem *The Building of the Ship*. The letter read as follows:

Dear Churchill,
Wendell Willkie will give you this – He is truly helping to keep politics out over here.
I think this verse applies to your people as it does to us:
Sail on, Oh Ship of State!
Sail on, Oh Union strong and great.
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate.
As ever yours
Franklin D Roosevelt

While he was in Britain, Willkie met with the King and the Queen as well as the prime minister. He inspected blitzed buildings and air raid shelters. He toured England’s battered industrial heartlands in the Midlands and the north. Everywhere, he was feted.

On his return to the US, Willkie supported the Lend Lease bill in dramatic testimony before the Foreign Relations Committee and an audience of 1000 people. His travels and his testimony deflated the bill’s opponents and prevented them from making Lend Lease a completely partisan issue or imposing unacceptable amendments.

All this did enormous violence to Willkie’s relationship with Republicans. But it also boosted British morale, won over wary Americans to the cause, and strengthened the internationalist cause in the GOP.

Contemporary Republican leaders casting about for a foreign policy avatar should look to Wendell Willkie. His foreign policies were forward-leaning without being fool-hardy. His approach was pragmatic, not ideological. But he realised the essential point: that America is strongest when it is advancing, not retreating.

In May 1941, Willkie made the argument for American isolationism in a widely read article in *Collier’s* magazine.

“The capital of the world of tomorrow will be either Berlin or Washington,” he wrote. “I prefer Washington.” Willkie concluded in a phrase that has resonance today: “Americans, stop being afraid!”

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