

Exceptionalism, with humility

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

September 11, 2013

President Obama's [speech last night](#) was a strange one. The administration's strategy of speaking out of both sides of its mouth on Syria continues. (*This is a narrow, punitive mission...motivated by broad, humanitarian concerns such a mission won't really address.*)

Stranger still was the fact that Obama gave the speech at all. He spent most of it trying to sell the war in Syria, then pivoted to saying essentially *not yet*: first we're going to try this new diplomatic path that, [somewhat bizarrely](#), presented itself this week. So why not cancel/delay the speech? As [Ross Douthat points out](#), "there is no rule saying that a president must speak when he's announced that he will speak if significant events intervene."

Then there was the moment when Obama explained the Kerry/Russia diplomacy plan and then said this: "I have, therefore, asked the leaders of Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force while we pursue this diplomatic path." Translation: this new development gave Obama an excuse to stop whipping a vote he was likely going to lose, anyway. After all, if he believes what he said about the military needing to "maintain their current posture to keep the pressure on Assad," why not go ahead with the vote to make them look that much more intimidating? If he could win it, he would.

But it looks like he can't, because [the public doesn't want to fire missiles at Syria](#). No doubt some of this is motivated by pure, not-our-problem isolationism. But that's not why I oppose military action in Syria. I oppose it because I think Obama's wrong about this:

When, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional.

With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth.

*With humility, let's remember that our power makes us special and destines our actions to turn out well.* But the risks aren't modest; they're tremendous. And the effort is only modest relative to the astonishing size of our singular military might—our use of which has not always worked out well for the life and health of the world. The suggestion that America is exceptional (Obama's loaded choice of words) because we're the only ones who do the moral thing is not an "essential truth." It's the same old American sales pitch for faith in the absolute goodness of military might.

American leaders continue to take as given that, when push comes to shove, our military can and should fix anything. But what if it can't? What if Obama's plan just spends a heap of money killing a few more civilians and getting us nowhere? If we end up making things worse, "at least we did something" is not a good defense. (Besides, [there are other things we could be doing](#) for Assad's victims instead of firing missiles.)

It's relieving to see this diplomatic window open and the administration take it seriously. But if it closes, they've made it clear they'll press on. We need to stop doing this. Not because we should be indifferent to the world's problems, but because our military solutions so often do more harm than good.