

Syria Is Cheating On Chemical Disarmament And America Does Nothing

By Paolo von Schirach

January 31, 2014

WASHINGTON – Imagine someone finding out that he is the victim of a hoax. In general you might expect an irate reaction, strong complaints and legal actions aimed at obtaining restitution and possibly the payment of damages. Well, imagine the same victim who, being afraid of the costs of lawyers' costs and the possible unpleasant repercussions of protracted court proceedings, declares that, in fact, there was no hoax. Well, may be the product or service he purchased is not exactly as advertised, but it is alright, really.

Syria's chemical weapons have not been handed over

Well, if you can picture this sad scenario, you can also picture the position of the United States, now confronted with the obvious bad faith of the Syrian government in the highly publicized matter of the disposal of its entire chemical weapons arsenal. The WSJ quotes a Reuters report indicating that, so far, Syria handed over 59 tons of chemical material. This amounts to 4.1% of its declared stockpiles, amounting to 1,433 tons. Yes, you got it: 59 tons out of 1,433. But, wait, it gets better. Western intelligence services estimate that Assad declared only 32 of its 50 chemical weapons sites. So, first he cheated in his disclosure, and then he drags the process with the justification that the security situation prevents his regime from handing over Syria's WMDs.

No reaction from Washington

Indeed. And, faced with this overt bad faith, what does Washington do? Nothing. In fact, worse than nothing. President Obama calls this process, supposedly leading to the elimination of all chemical weapons from Syria, a success. And so the American public is told that all is well, and working out according to plan, when the opposite is true.

And why does Washington go along with the hoax? Well, because it is unwilling to undertake any punitive action against Syria. And here is the real problem. One thing is to say that we shall do nothing regarding the Syrian mess because this crisis, however bad it may be, does not affect America's national interest. But quite another is to contemplate a crisis that **does** affect America's national interest and do nothing, because we are afraid of the consequences of taking action.

America's undeclared impotence

And this is precisely America's predicament. The US economy is doing a bit better, these days, but Washington is still broke. We are cutting defense spending in a major way as a means (unwise as it may be) to diminish the federal budget deficit. On top of that, the country does not want any new wars. Iraq went very poorly, and we are getting out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014, even if this exit may cause the reversal of some gains against the Taliban and al Qaeda affiliates. The last thing Obama wants is a brand new engagement in yet another Arab country.

Tired America

Fair enough. We are exhausted and penniless and therefore we shall not act. However, as painful as such an admission of impotence would be, it would still be better than looking at Assad's bad faith and calling it compliance.

Think for a moment.

Do you think that the rest of the world is missing this? Do you think that America's passivity in its dealings with a small tyrant is lost on other world leaders? The fact that America is willing to rename defeat and call it "victory" will be noted; and it will be correctly registered as yet another sign of American decline.

T. Boone Pickens To Obama: Let The US Buy New Trucks Powered By US Produced Natural Gas

By Paolo von Schirach

January 30, 2014

WASHINGTON – T.Boone Pickens has been and is a tireless advocate for a smart and realistic US energy policy aimed at ending, once and for all, American dependence on OPEC oil. No doubt, thanks to shale oil and gas, plus the promise of more oil imports from Canada, we are doing much better these days. But we are not out of the woods, claims Pickens. We need a "Plan", and the White House should lead.

Here are T. Boone Pickens' crisp words of advice, reproduced from an e-mail he sent to supporters and friends on January 30, 2014:

"President Barack Obama talked about energy in his State of the Union address as every President since Richard Nixon has done. In his State of the Union address, President Obama came

out strongly for the continued development of natural gas as a major American resource.

That is great news and music to my ears. I have championed a comprehensive national energy strategy – the Pickens Plan – since 2008, with natural gas as a cornerstone. The goal has been to get off OPEC oil by using natural gas for heavy-duty trucking. [bold added]

While I'm obviously heartened by the President's endorsement of that, I'm also a realist. A plan without action isn't a plan, it's a speech. The OPEC oil threat is real. Our national security is threatened by it as is our economic future. After 40 years we just take OPEC for granted, and that's a big mistake.

As far back as his first State of the Union, President Obama talked about creating and moving energy in new ways. He said "We will soon lay down thousands of miles of power lines that can carry new energy to cities and towns across the country."

Few, if any, miles of new power lines have been proposed, much less sited, engineered or installed. Great plan. No action.

In January 2009 our national energy mix was as it had been for decades: Diminishing domestic oil production, falling levels of natural gas reserves, solar and wind were interesting but difficult to bring to market. Then the Potential Gas Committee released its biennial report that, for the first time, counted what was then known as "unconventional" gas – now known as shale gas – as economically recoverable using modern drilling techniques and the nation's energy profile was turned on its head.

Credit goes to private individuals and companies taking a chance, risking their money, and using the best minds in the nation to develop new production techniques. They were not the result of a plan – not a Republican plan nor a Democratic

plan.

On Tuesday night, the President endorsed a principal element of the Pickens Plan when he called for new incentives for medium- and heavy-duty trucks to run on natural gas and other fuels. I'm for unleashing every American resource to back out OPEC oil, be it ethanol, batteries or anything American. But ethanol and batteries won't move America's 18-wheelers.

We need to be watchful that the President follows through on this by incentivizing the move from imported diesel to domestic natural gas, by working with major interstate truckers, express delivery companies, and truck manufacturers, as well as state and local governments. [bold added]

Oil is not a player in the production of electricity in America. It accounts for only about one percent of power generation. The rapid move from coal to natural gas (as well as to wind) to produce electricity has led the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) to claim that greenhouse gasses from fossil fuels were the lowest in 2012 than any time since 1994.

The real advantage these new reserves of natural gas and oil bring to us, is that we move farther and farther away from the next energy crisis. That is a mixed blessing because our national leaders – for over 40 years – have only acted when a crisis has loomed over their collective heads.

We have over eight million heavy trucks on our roads. Everything from refuse and recycling trucks that go back to “the barn” every night, to over-the-road trucks that run coast-to-coast over the same routes on a regular schedule. Simple arithmetic tells us where to put natural gas refueling stations on the most heavily traveled Interstate highways.

In last year's State of the Union speech, President Obama said, “The natural gas boom has led to cleaner power and to greater energy independence. We need to encourage that.” That

is still a good policy. With so much natural gas we should be looking for ways to utilize our vast supplies – especially where we can use it to replace imported oil.

The President's focus on natural gas in the 2014 State of the Union speech is important because it helps us keep our eye on the ball. Now, we have to work with leaders at the federal, state, and local levels as well as the companies that will build, fill, and drive the trucks across America to make certain we keep moving toward an economy that is not dependent on OPEC oil.

If the president is serious on natural gas and trucking in America, here's an idea: Lead by example. Sign an executive order mandating government vehicles use natural gas, and that those who contract with the federal government for goods and services do, too. Because natural gas is so much cheaper than diesel, you can make the case that such an order is fiscally responsible as well as environmentally beneficial. [bold added]

President Obama was right on one other point on Tuesday night: Let's make this the year of action. There is a domestic energy renaissance in America, with natural gas production leading the way. Let's act and take advantage of it."

–T. Boone Pickens

Here it is Ladies and Gentlemen. This is a real "Plan". Have the Federal Government lead the way by mandating that all new heavy trucks bought by Uncle Sam be powered by Compressed or Liquefied Natural Gas, (CNG or LNG). This now abundant (thanks to hydraulic fracturing) natural gas is produced in America by Americans. It is much cheaper and cleaner than the imported oil that US refiners have to use to make the diesel necessary to power millions of trucks. This is not complicated. Let's do this –starting now. And, soon enough, we shall be able to convert millions of heavy trucks to LNG or CNG, with huge

gains for our energy security, our balance of payments, our economic performance, our employment and our air quality.

3 D Printers Are Amazing; But They Also Tell Us That Factory Jobs Will Soon Disappear

By Paolo von Schirach

January 29, 2014

WASHINGTON – We know a lot about the dark side of globalization. Information technology, plus improved and low-cost logistics allowed a gigantic shift of most manufacturing activities from high labor cost Europe and America to low labor cost Asia, first and foremost China. And so, thanks to the new opportunities to outsource manufacturing created by globalization, Europe and America lost millions of jobs.

Old jobs are gone

Most of these jobs are gone –for good. And that’s the way it is. Some politicians try to gain points by blaming “evil” corporations that “choose” to export jobs to low-cost countries. This argument assumes that there is indeed a choice. Sure, how would you like to make T-shirts in North Carolina that would retail at \$ 10 or 15 a piece when the same T-shirt made in China or Bangladesh retails for \$ 5? Which company can stay in business with competitors selling

essentially the same product at half the price or less?

More to come

Be that as it may, we have not seen the end of this tale. In fact, today's Asian winners may be tomorrow's losers. Picture this. If you are a Chinese migrant worker who left poverty in a rural village seeking a better life as a factory worker, your luck –such as it is, as working conditions in Chinese factories are grim– may end soon. In part it may be because your Chinese employer may want to relocate the factory to another country (Cambodia, Bangladesh) where labor is even cheaper. But most likely you may soon be unemployed because technology will cause your job to simply vanish.

Amazing 3 D printers

This is no exaggeration. You may have read about 3 D printing. Well, at the moment this futuristic technology that allows you to literally “make” objects at home, without the support of a small factory or workshop, is still in its infancy. But it is getting better every year. Primitive 3 D printers could only make simple plastic parts. Now they can make metal parts. Soon enough they will be able to make fully functioning complex products.

Want a toaster?...

So, imagine this. Today here in the US, if you want to buy a toaster you go on-line and look for a good product at a good price. You find one on Amazon. In just a few minutes, you can place your order and complete your transaction. Your toaster will be delivered to your door by UPS or FedEx in just a few days. Low cost, simple, clean an efficient.

Your toaster was made in China by the migrant worker mentioned above who had left the village seeking a better life. It was shipped to America inside a container that had been loaded onto a mega container ship that landed in Los

Angeles. Then the container was moved by rail or truck to a large warehouse managed by Amazon. When you place your order on-line, the toaster you selected is placed on a plane or truck and delivered to you via UPS, FedEx or US Mail. The chain that begins in a factory in China and ends up at your door is long and complex. But it is lean and efficient.

..Make it at home

OK, fast forward to tomorrow. Tomorrow you will have at home a new generation 3 D printer that can actually “make” the toaster. You want a new toaster? You go on-line and you buy the specs for your toaster that are included in a software package. You download the specs into your 3 D printer and the printer “makes” your toaster. Sounds far-fetched? Not really. We are not there yet. But we are getting there, probably sooner than we can all think.

No more jobs

If this is indeed the future, imagine all the implications. The implications are that the factory in China that makes the toasters is redundant, and so are all the people employed there: workers, supervisors, managers, janitors, you name it. Furthermore, the complex logistics network necessary to move the toaster from the Chinese factory into a container ship and then to the Amazon warehouse is also redundant. And that means that all the people who support it are redundant: from the shipyard workers who make the container ships to the truck drivers who move the container from port to its final destination. And this is not the end. FedEx and UPS, whose business is mostly about moving all these boxes with toasters, TVs and hair dryers in them, become redundant.

You get the picture. When your home is the factory, all the factory jobs and all the services jobs necessary to move products from A to B will vanish. We are not quite there yet. But this is the future.

Is the future really great?

The techno-enthusiasts claim that all this is great. They confidently predict that, while old jobs vanish, new jobs will be created to support the new amazing technologies of the future. May be. But what happens if there is a 10 year time lag between the vanishing of traditional manufacturing jobs and the opportunity to create new ones? For 10 years former factory workers will be unemployed or under employed. And, later on, many of them, (if not most of them), will lack the skills to work on the new technologies that have replaced the old factories.

The “Luddites” fight back; but they lose

And so a gigantic economic transformation brought about by truly disruptive technologies will become a social and political problem. Long ago, the “Luddites” in England fought against the mechanization of the textile industry by destroying the new machines that were displacing manual workers. But it was a losing proposition. The machines won. They always do.

Who takes care of the losers?

When the new machines will take over, what will happen to all the displaced workers? Who will take care of them? We better have a plan, because very soon many societies will have to deal with this problem.

America's Challenge Is To

Redefine An Inspiring, Yet Realistic Political Center That People Can Believe In

By Paolo von Schirach

January 19, 2014

WASHINGTON – America is broken, and there is no easy fix. I am talking about America's institutions, now essentially unworkable. And I do not believe that the remedy will come with the next elections. I do not believe that the next president will have the authority and therefore the prestige and the latitude to forge a new consensus. As I said, the system is broken. Actually, a better way to say it is that the political and cultural premises that made it possible for an extremely complicated constitutional arrangement to work have vanished.

A weak government

Let me explain what I mean. The system created by the American Constitution is so complex that it may appear designed for failure. The Founding Fathers were mostly concerned with the preservation of liberty, rather than with the creation of a strong government that *"would get things done"*. Hence the *"separation of powers"*. The president does not govern on the basis of a parliamentary majority, as it is the case in other republican constitutions adopted later on by other democracies. The president needs the voluntary concurrence of Congress in order to get anything done. By the same token, the Congress cannot enact any legislation without a nod from the White House.

Without getting into too many details, the long and the short of a system in which it is a lot easier to block legislation

rather than passing it, is that it can succeed only if we assume the will and the ability to reach compromise. When you have independent powers that can easily veto what the other side wants to do, the only way to get anything done, assuming diverse and in many instances opposing views, is compromise.

Compromise

However, compromise assumes that among elected leaders and policy makers who very often retain a veto power on what the other side wants there will always be a significant core group who, regardless of party, can and will identify a shared national interest and agree on decisions that are congruent with its advancement.

The almost banal conclusion is that America can be governed successfully only if there is a "Center" that can work as the interpreter of values and priorities shared by most Americans. The compromisers and the deal makers occupy this ideological and political center. As the interpreters of widely shared beliefs, they can work across party lines and they can forge broad enough coalitions so that policies deemed to be "good" by most are advanced through the necessary legislation.

No centrists in charge means gridlock

Lacking this ideological and political center, the US Constitution is an ideal instrument to prevent almost anything from happening, except for the rare cases in which one faction will hold all key levers of power.

Look at the present situation. The Democratic party successfully reconquered the White House in 2012, while controlling the Senate. But the Republicans control the House, while the Democrats in the Senate lack the 60 member plus "super majority" that is necessary in most cases to prevent successful obstruction by a determined minority. Lacking the will to compromise, the outcome of this political "balance" is

gridlock. Without the concurrence of the House, nothing gets passed. However, the House alone cannot pass anything either.

And so we are stuck. And I do not believe that the next elections will solve this. The solution has to be in an honest attempt to revisit our values and beliefs with the goal of recreating a broad enough common ground that in turn would provide the basis for political compromise. As banal as this may sound, compromise is almost impossible between mutually exclusive world views.

Belief in the ability to agree on facts

The Founding Fathers recognized the dangers of ideologically based factionalism. But they were the children of the "Age of Light". They instinctively believed in the liberating and that the same time unifying power of knowledge-based reason acquired through unbiased learning. Indeed, fact based, empirically tested political pragmatism is the not so secret ingredient of America's survival and indeed of its remarkable success as a modern, inclusive, forward-looking and altogether optimistic society. *"Whatever the issue of the day, we can and will find common ground to tackle it through realistic and effective measures"*.

The center is gone

Well, this is not true anymore. The "Center" is gone. Ideology, bias and prejudice have become dominant. We no longer have a shared political culture. We have several political cultures that are reinforced by the proliferation of tools created for the sole purpose to reassure the believers that whatever they already believe in is the right idea, and the only right idea. Long ago the media ceased to see their mission as information. No, now media outlets are mostly about prepackaged and openly flaunted ideological bias. And the believers drink only from the fountain that on a daily basis will reconfirm all their prejudices.

In all this, a complex US Constitution that could work as the instrument to deliver the common good only provided the existence of a vibrant center has become instead the ideal weapon for guerrilla warfare. Today, lacking the ability to carry the day, the name of the game is to prevent the other side from winning. And the US Constitution provides many tools to those who are determined to block anything they dislike.

Redefine the center

What can be done about all this? The only solution is for people of good will to come together and rethink the fundamentals that should inspire a modern, complex society. We need to redefine and agree on what the new "*Center*" is. I do not believe that most Americans are unable to see it, once it is presented to them without animus or prejudice.

However, if I am wrong, if it is indeed the case that we have lost the ability to identify and then work together for identifiable and believable centrist goals, then this noble experiment in self-government, an experiment that created a forward-looking society that became in many ways a model for the world, may be over.

BBC Biased About Fracking In

the UK

By Paolo von Schirach

January 13, 2014

NAIROBI – The BBC is a great institution. And you get the BBC in many hotels around the world, including the one I am staying in here in Nairobi. And yet, watch out for very biased reporting. Case in point: the beginning of shale gas exploration in the UK.

Fracking in the UK

A major BBC TV news items dealt with the fact that Total, the French energy company, will invest up to US \$ 50 million in exploring for and hopefully later on exploiting what seem to be very large “shale gas” reserves (this is gas trapped in rock formations) in the UK. The report went at some length to indicate that the UK Government is very much in favor of such efforts aimed at exploiting domestic energy resources, while Great Britain’s other known reserves have practically disappeared.

But the report also pointed out how British environmentalists are totally opposed to any drilling relying on the technology now known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. They are opposed because of real concerns –the report continued– of serious environmental damage caused by fracking. To stress this point about the negative impact of fracking, the report added an interview with an environmentalist who talked about the destruction that this type of energy exploration would inevitably bring about into the UK. Hence the need for sane people to stop it before it really begins.

Biased reporting, no mention of the US experience

So, fair reporting? “The Government and energy companies say

this, but concerned citizens object?" Not at all. The report never mentioned that for well over a decade fracking has been used on a massive scale to exploit vast shale gas resources in the United States. In fact the technology has been invented and refined in the US. Because of fracking the US has increased its gas production, surpassing Russia. Because of added production, natural gas prices have plummeted and the US is now one of the countries with very low electricity costs, an enviable position. And all this bonanza is the result of fracking practiced quite safely. Again, no mention of any of this impressive safety record in the BBC report. Not even one word.

Indeed, there are literally thousands and thousands of wells exploiting shale gas through fracking in operation in Pennsylvania, Texas, Oklahoma, Ohio and many other states. This has been going on for years, with no major issues. And yet no word about any of this on the BBC. Would they argue that the US experience is not relevant in assessing the safety of fracking?

Americans against fracking

Certainly there are groups and organizations in America that are in principle against the exploitation and use of carbon based energy. And they have protested and are still active against fracking.

However, nobody to date has been able to provide any evidence that fracking is inherently dangerous.

Besides, the energy industry is highly regulated in America. There are environmental protection agencies in each state that constantly monitor drilling and drilling related activities. They are quite ready to stop operations in cases in which rules are broken. At the federal level, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, now in the hands of a Democratic administration generally suspicious of the activities of

energy companies, has not found any reason to stop fracking. In other words, based on many years of experience, and thousands of wells in operation in a number states, the evidence indicates that fracking is safe.

It is safe

It is incredible that the BBC in a major report about fracking in the UK gives credence to unsupported “beliefs” about inherent dangers related to fracking, while it fails to even mention the impressive body of evidence gathered by more than a decade of US experience that indicates precisely the opposite. What kind of journalism is that?

Chris Christie And American Political Tribalism

By Paolo von Schirach

January 11, 2014

NAIROBI – African countries are often criticized for their tribal social structures that still affect politics and governance. In simple words, the political process often results in the victory of one tribe or ethnic group. This group then proceeds to grab all relevant positions, revenue sources and more, while the others get little or nothing. The implicit justification for all this is that you have to reward loyalty. And loyalty is based on blood and clan connections. (Do you want a pearl? The President of Angola appointed his son as the chief administrator of the nation’s Sovereign Wealth Fund in charge of investing the country’s huge oil revenue). Needless to say this does not work very well for the

broader society.

New Jersey Tribalism

That said, leave it to New Jersey to concoct something not too dissimilar from tribal politics. Well, instead of blood relations the metric used here is political affiliation and loyalties. You are a friend? You shall be rewarded. You are an opponent? You shall be punished. Look, to some extent this logic has some value. In politics there must be winners and losers. But do you cut electrical power to the towns that voted against your boss? No, as this would be illegal.

Close that bridge

Well, apparently nobody explained to senior staff working for newly re-elected (and now GOP rising star) Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey how far you can go in rewarding friends and punishing political adversaries. Someone decided that it would be really cool to create artificial traffic jams for the citizens of the city of Fort Lee, whose Democratic Mayor, Mark Sokolich, had refused to endorse Christie. With an excuse, they closed lanes of a major bridge (sadly called George Washington Bridge) heavily used by tens of thousands of commuters every day. After the closure, chaos ensued.

In so doing these Christie loyalists thought that they would “teach a lesson” to the deviant Mayor. Well, they certainly managed to cause huge problems for tens of thousands of citizens.

Christie the fair pragmatist?

Governor Christie claims to be a non nonsense Chief Executive who has principles but who is always ready to negotiate fairly with anybody. Well, apparently his enlightened pragmatism has not percolated among his senior staff. The question is: does Christie promote mostly fanatic loyalists capable of such behavior? Therefore is all the talk about “pragmatic

bipartisanship” just that: “talk”? (At the moment there is no evidence that Governor Christie had anything to do with this action, directly or indirectly).

Let’s be clear, this almost unthinkable action motivated only by politics, resulting in traffic mayhem for the citizens of Fort Lee, is not akin to an innocent, if crude, high school prank. This incredible idea of “punishing a city” because its Mayor failed to support your man is egregious, and it is most likely criminal. (An investigation is now under way).

But, more than anything else, it reveals a level of narrow-minded pettiness that makes African tribalism look enlightened and noble in comparison.

If Christie wants to become president, he better start rethinking the criteria he uses to hire senior aides. Among the ones he has chosen so far, there are idiots and criminals. And these staff choices do not make him look smart.

The War In Syria And Its Victims

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania – The breakfast buffet spread at the hotel looked splendid and elegantly presented. In typical African style, there is “everything”: from eggs and bacon to stir fry and hummus, fresh fruits, baked onions, pastry and plenty of juices. As I was looking at this wonderful display, My eyes fell on an inviting plate of *baba ghanoush*, a typical Arab and Mediterranean eggplant dip made with mashed roasted eggplants, tahini, garlic, cumin and olive oil. There is

something truly appealing for me in the delicious smell of roasted eggplants and all the other flavors combined. I helped myself. It was truly delicious.

Pride and sadness

So, I went back to get some more. As I approached the buffet, I saw a young, handsome chef walking near by. He could be an Arab. With enthusiasm, I said to him: “This *baba ghanoush* is really delicious”. “You liked it?”, He asked with a smile, “I made it fresh this morning”. And there was joy in his face. Then he added, “The Egyptians call it *baba ghanoush* but in Lebanon and in Syria they call it [and here I missed the words he used].

“And where are you from?”, I asked him. And, as I got closer, I looked at him in the eyes. And I saw a strange mix of pride and extreme sadness.

“I am Syrian”, the young chef replied. As I said, there was pride in his expression; and yet he looked dejected. “I had to go, all my family had to go. Because of the civil war, we lost everything”.

Let “Mr. Smith” Come To Washington

WASHINGTON – As the New Year begins, I express my wish: I would like a real “Mr. Smith” to come to Washington. Senator Jefferson Smith is the leading character (superbly played by a young James Stewart) in the famous 1939 movie “*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*” directed by Frank Capra. The plot is simple. A bunch of corrupt “machine politicians” out West need a quick

replacement for a deceased senator. They pick Jefferson Smith, (James Stewart), mostly because he is young, naive and simple; therefore likely to follow orders.

Mr. Smith is sincere

Well, without getting into the details of a well crafted plot, newly arrived Senator Jefferson Smith soon enough finds out the truth. Yes, he is simple and unsophisticated. But he believes in America and in its institutions aimed at preserving Freedom. All alone, he fights the good fight. He gets allies; and in the end he wins. The crooks are exposed and the institutions of the American Republic are preserved. It may be no accident that Smith's first name is "Jefferson". Not a rare name in America; but particularly fitting in this case.

America is good

The moral lesson of this movie is clear. America is good. Its foundations are good. Yes, there will be crooks and manipulators. But then, a Good Man, sustained just by his decency and by his belief in the goodness supporting the foundations of this government, will rise and lead the fight to restore them when they are under threat. Eventually Senator Jefferson Smith wins. Not because he is super smart. Not because he has a mass following. But only because he is honest and sincere.

Barack Obama as Mr. Smith?

In a sense, back in 2008 Barack Obama looked a bit like Mr. Smith. He was new and untested. A young man of mixed race, he talked a lot about his vision of a reconciled America that would move from greatness to greatness. He energized the younger generation, usually cynical about politics. All this contributed to his surprising primaries victory against Hillary Clinton, the "safe" candidate of the Democratic establishment.

But then the whole magic fizzled. Sure enough, Obama got re-elected in 2012. But this was almost entirely because of a clever message crafted by professionals. *"I am the defender of entitlements. Republican Mitt Romney is a greedy capitalist who wants more tax cuts for the rich, while he could not care less about the poor"*. Nothing new and magic in this campaign message. It was old-fashioned manipulation. And now we are stuck. A diminished Obama is in the White House. But he has no freedom of movement because the Republicans can block anything, due to their control of the House.

Republicans are not in better shape

The Republicans, in turn, are not shining these days. They are torn apart by their internal ideological wars between traditional, middle of the road conservatives and radical, often ideological libertarians. So far, no real national leader has emerged from this squabble. Overall none of this looks very inspiring.

Let Mr. Smith come to Washington

Therefore, at the inception of this New Year, please allow me to dream. Yes, let not just one but many "Mr. Smith" come to Washington. Sure enough, America needs national leaders who have the background and the intellectual abilities to run a complex state. But most of all we need people with simple but strong beliefs in the goodness of the principles at the foundation of this republican government. Following these principles elected leaders will do their best to advance, without partisanship, and in a transparent fashion, the interests of this Nation. America's success was and is still premised on the existence of such people.

The Constitution provides the guidelines. But without people who understand what it takes to have a vibrant and successful self-government, the rules alone are meaningless. In the Capra movie America was reminded that it needed moral people in

charge in order to succeed. People like Jefferson Smith who sincerely believe in the principles outlined in the Declaration and in the Constitution. Today the 1939 story, so well presented by Frank Capra, may appear quaint.

And yet, do we have anything better to replace it? I doubt it.