

Political Opinions Are Based On Bias and Emotions

WASHINGTON – The most stunning feature of Hillary Clinton's vast popularity is that even her most loyal supporters are unable to name anything she has accomplished while serving as a US Senator and later on as Secretary of State during Obama's first term.

What is Clinton's record?

Interviewees usually argue that they want her to be President because of her stellar record. As we all know, she has done a great job as a public servant. But when asked to name any accomplishment (major legislation she promoted eventually passed by Congress, and/or any landmark US foreign policy achievement she promoted while Secretary of State) in most cases they do not know what to say.

The first woman President

And yet, this obvious inconsistency invites no additional reflection. Clinton's supporters remain fiercely loyal supporters, even though obviously they do not know why. And this tells us that political preferences, even when strongly felt, are based on impulses, emotions and other assorted irrational components. (In Clinton's case, the fact that she may become the very first woman President in US history created some kind of a magic aura around her candidacy. Millions of voters want to make history by electing her, this way showing how a factor that has nothing to do with real qualifications for office may determine the outcome of a presidential election).

All in all, it would appear that political preferences seldom are the consequence of a reasoned analysis of the issues, the positions taken by various candidates and an evaluation as to

which proposed approach seems more viable.

Educated citizens

Thomas Jefferson argued long ago that there is a direct connection between an educated citizenry and a vibrant republic. Indeed, as a republican form of government is all about active participation in self-government, it follows that the system cannot work very well if the people are ignorant about the issues being debated, and who stands for what; while they lack a good understanding of the process to be followed in order to get to lawful policy decisions.

A republic cannot function if the citizens are ignorant

Jefferson and his peers did not mandate tests aimed at verifying a minimum level of knowledge and proficiency. They simply indicated that, while an educated person most likely would be a better and more responsible citizen, a republic in which most citizens are ignorant could not possibly function well.

No civic education

Sadly, if we fast forward to today, we see that Jefferson's wise exhortations have been ignored. In today's America there is very little focus on civic education. Most people know little. They have a vague and usually incomplete knowledge about issues, what's at stake, who is for or against this, and why.

Bias

And the information universe, while incredibly rich, is mostly bad. It is mostly a cacophony of biased opinions mixed with utter falsehood. Worse yet, even traditional media have blurred the lines between information, opinion and entertainment. In the past we had news, political satire and editorial pages. But there were recognizable boundaries. Now

all this is increasingly blurred.

The general public is mostly uninterested in all this and therefore ignorant. Large numbers of those who are engaged are increasingly prisoners of ideological bias reinforced by partisan media that repeat this bias on a constant basis.

Mostly opinion, little news

Take Fox News, for example. Each and every evening, starting at 7:00 pm, this openly conservative cable news network dishes out 4 hours of (mostly conservative) commentary. Yes, 4 hours –every evening. Each hour is led by a different commentator who picks and chooses topics, interviewees and slant. Very often the same topic reappears throughout the evening. The difference is that it is served in a different sauce.

Mind you, all this is quite open and transparent. In other words, Fox is not pretending that these are actual “news programs”. Still, 4 hours of opinionated commentary? Every night? Isn't it a bit much?

How do we form our opinions?

Needless to say, all Americans have a right to their opinions. But Jefferson would have liked these opinions to be arrived at after a careful vetting of the issues and a rational evaluation of the possible impact of this or that proposed solution. Of course, thinking hard about policy choices with an open mind is no guarantee that we shall reach wise decisions.

But now we have millions of voters who strongly embrace biased opinions, rejecting as a matter of course any facts that would contradict what they believe in, while watching or listening only to those who repeat the same biases they already hold. At the same time, voters of both parties will strongly support candidates for the highest office without even knowing why. This cannot be good.

Can Greece Be Saved?

WASHINGTON – The latest round of negotiations aimed at solving the Greek crisis (*Yes, 6 years later we are still at it!*) reminds me of what were described as the heroic but also grotesque efforts by the Spanish doctors who really, really wanted to prolong the life of semi-dead dictator Francisco Franco, back in November 1975.

Franco died

Well, guess what, heroic medical efforts notwithstanding, Franco was an old man. And he finally died.

In the case of Greece, the issue is not old age. It is about the crushing effects of a stupendous amount of debt (the Greek national debt is now \$ 347 billion, 177% of GDP) that cannot possibly be paid back by a very weak country, poorly managed by a populist, ultra-left government.

There must be a solution

And yet, just like the Spanish doctors, the European central Bank (ECB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU) Commission representatives keep on negotiating with Greece, as if by trying harder some magic solution will be found.

Political deal

The only (fake) “solution” is a political deal masquerading as serious debt restructuring. As Athens’ creditors believe that a Greek bankruptcy would cause too much unwanted and possibly unmanageable confusion, may be a panic in international financial markets, I bet that they shall invent a last minute

“agreement” that will solve nothing. It will however provide political breathing room by kicking the proverbial can a bit farther down the road.

No progress since 2009

The facts are known. Greece was on the verge of bankruptcy at the end of 2009 when the new government announced that its predecessor had essentially cooked the books this way falsifying the actual debt figures.

Believe it or not, there has been no real progress since then. There have been numerous bailouts. But the fact is that more bailouts simply mean more debt. In the meantime, there has been and there is no serious plan aimed at reviving a comatose Greek economy, while the Greeks still have a hard time trying to adjust to the harsh reality of the end of subsidies for everyone, tolerated tax evasion, and soliciting bribes as a common practice to increase one's income.

Keep trying

Just like Francisco Franco in 1975, Greece is near death. But, just like the Spanish doctors, most of the players still insist that there must be a way to ensure that Greece will stay in the Eurozone, that its economy will be somehow powered up, and that an orderly program that will guarantee the repayment of all the outstanding debt will be agreed upon and adhered to.

The Spanish doctors were eventually defeated by the limits of human biology. The negotiators trying once more to save Greece will continue until they will realize that this farce cannot go on.

However, based on the record so far, we are still a long way from this moment of truth.

While The US Protests, China Keeps Building Bases In The South China Sea

WASHINGTON – China decided that America is in a (probably irreversible) phase of global retreat. Whatever the rhetoric about a pivot to Asia, most likely aimed at containing China's rising power, America is in fact pulling back.

More construction

Based on this assessment, Beijing ordered the ramping up of construction activities on various islands in the South China Sea, with the obvious goal of creating a permanent claim on these rocks, this way extending its territorial waters so that they would include almost the entire South China Sea.

Indeed, it should be noted that while China has built about 2,000 acres of new land mass, 1,500 has been built since January 2015. This sudden alacrity would indicate that Beijing decided to ramp up the program, this way creating irreversible changes on the ground as fast as possible, after it concluded that the Obama Administration would do nothing in reaction to this flagrant violation of international law.

US protests

The US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, while in Hawaii publicly stated that the US does not recognize China's sovereignty over these disputed rocks and that America will continue to treat the sea lanes around them and the air space above them as international waters and air space open to all.

Strong statement, no doubt. But it remains to be seen how far is Washington willing to push. China has declared that its sovereignty over the islands is proven, and therefore non negotiable. Based on this legally founded claim, China is free to do whatever it pleases in these islands, including building air strips and possibly other military facilities.

What next?

So, here is the situation. China openly engages in behavior contrary to international law, with the obvious goal of extending its sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea. The US complains. China replies that the US has no ground for complaining, and that it should stay out of its sovereign waters and air space in order to avoid unpleasant developments. Then what happens?

I suspect that nothing significant will happen. I cannot believe that (whatever action Secretary Carter may have in his own mind) President Obama, now getting close to his political exit, has any appetite to leave the presidency with America in the midst of a nasty political confrontation, or worse, with China.

America will do nothing

So, here is the thing. Arguing that China is misbehaving is one thing. Doing something about it is something entirely different. And we have seen this before. The Obama Administration loudly complained that Putin's annexation of Crimea was and is illegal. Indeed, officially the US still contends that Crimea should be handed back to Ukraine. But it is obvious that Washington will do nothing really meaningful to force Putin to comply.

End of the American Century

And here is the obvious lesson for all China's neighbors coming out of this "construction on the rocks" crisis. The

American Century is over. The much heralded pivot to Asia, just like other major US foreign policy moves announced by this US Administration, was at best an aspiration, at worst a half backed plan that lacked even the most modest military underpinnings that would make it credible.

China noted all this. And now, taking advantage of America's *de facto* retreat, China has taken over the Spratly islands and other assorted rocks in the South China Sea, and it will not let go of any of them, whatever Washington, Manila or Hanoi may say.

With this clever move Beijing just extended its sphere of influence, signaling to all its neighbors that they better adjust, since America will not lift a finger to help them.

Is Police Brutality The Main Issue Affecting African Americans?

WASHINGTON – Thanks to highly publicized official investigations, some of them led by the US Department of Justice, America is now convinced that we have a national White police brutality issue. Yes, we are told that African Americans are routinely singled out by (racist) White police officers.

Blacks are targeted by racist police

Blacks minding their own business are stopped for no reason by police. They are arrested on bogus charges. They are treated

roughly while in police custody, and so forth. While this happens all the time, in more extreme cases several unarmed African Americans have been shot and killed by trigger happy police officers who later on say that they thought the Black person they killed might have had a gun. In truth, killing Black people is now akin to a sport.

This is what we are told. And, much worse, this is what most African Americans strongly believe: *"We are targeted"*.

Not that easy

Well, it is not that easy. The truth is a lot more complicated. It is undeniable that there are instances of White police brutality, including unnecessary use of force, sometimes leading to the killing of people wrongly suspected of holding weapons with criminal intent.

Policing high crime areas

However, the larger issue is that there is a connection between high levels of violent crime in Black areas and excessive use of force by police forces sent in to investigate crimes. To begin with, there is a much higher level of police activities in Black neighborhoods for the simple reason that these are high crime, or extremely high crime areas, with shootings and killings occurring every day.

So, let's establish that Black neighborhoods are not targeted. The police go where crimes have been committed. It is therefore not surprising that police officers going into a very high crime area in which fire arms are routinely used may be on edge. Being on edge may in some cases trigger unjustified actions, or over reactions. And this unfortunately leads to mistakes and unwarranted use of force.

With this I am not trying to justify the killing of innocent Black victims by police officers, (who at least in some instances are motivated by racists feelings). Police brutality

does exist, and it should be prosecuted.

More police interventions

However, it is truly disingenuous to ignore the fact that extremely high levels of crime in Black neighborhoods make policing of these areas much more difficult. Police officers patrolling streets in Black neighborhood where people are routinely shot are likely to be on edge. And high levels of tension may lead to bad judgment calls, including killing innocent victims.

And yet this high crime context is routinely ignored.

Is it just about the police?

Right now the official narrative is that the only issue at hand is totally unwarranted and unjustified police brutality against innocent, law abiding Blacks unfairly targeted simply because they are Black.

Because of this finding, police departments across America need to be reformed. The instances in which the use of force may be permissible needs to be reassessed.

Again, I see nothing wrong with any of this. By all means, let's make sure that all police officers behave properly.

But it is wrong to believe that police brutality is the only issue, and that there is no connection between policing dangerous, high crime areas and excessive use of force by some police officers.

The roots of Black crime are ignored

Unfortunately, the larger context of how stressful it is for police officers to operate daily in high crime areas is ignored. Moreover, I see national indignation only when a White police officer kills a Black person. But there is zero indignation when homicide statistics are made public.

And these statistics make it clear that the overwhelming majority of African Americans are killed by other African Americans in predominantly poor Black neighborhoods. They are not killed by mean spirited White police officers. Black on Black violent crime is the real, overwhelming problem that needs to be addressed.

Police brutality is an issue. No doubt about it. But it is certainly not the main problem affecting African Americans. The main problems are ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, drugs, and marginalization. These are the toxic factors that often lead to a life of crime and violence.

We should all welcome any reforms leading to well behaved police officers. But even the best trained police officers will be unable to improve –let alone solve– any of the deep social and economic problems affecting millions of African Americans.

Up to 19 Years To Build A Highway

WASHINGTON – In country X *“New highway projects can require up to 200 regulatory steps and take between 9 and 19 years to complete –with planning, design and environmental reviews consuming up to half of that time. Even small projects can take between four and six years from start to finish.”*

Grotesque inefficiency

If true, this is an extreme and sad example of how a grotesque level of bureaucratic inefficiency, combined with layers of overlapping political jurisdictions, (central, regional and

local governments having to agree on where to build a highway), delay or kill investments aimed at improving basic infrastructure. Imagine that. May be 10 years, in many cases much longer, to have a highway project proposed, presented, vetted, approved and finally built.

And where is this happening? Are we talking about India, Sudan, Venezuela, or Uzbekistan?

This is happening in America

No. We are talking about the United States of America, supposedly the beacon of economic modernity, managerial efficiency and effective public administration.

At least this is what we get from a WSJ op-ed piece by Mac Zimmerman (*Taxing for Highways, Paying for Bike Lanes*, May 26, 2015) from which the above quote is extracted.

And we can assume that the author did not make this up, as the data he produced in his article is taken from a 2011 study produced by the non partisan Congressional Research Service.

Losing competitiveness

So, there you have it. Crazy, but true. And here is an incredible paradox. US experts and various consultants go around the world explaining to emerging markets governments how red tape prevents economic development.

May be it is time to redirect this effort. It is frankly absurd that, as a Nation, we tolerate this level of inefficiency. No wonder that our economic competitiveness rankings have been going steadily down in the past few years.

The question is: does anybody care? Do we really believe that 10-15 years or more to build a highway is just about right?

Will The US Stop China's Expansion In the South China Sea?

WASHINGTON – In response to China's totally preposterous sovereignty claims over the entire South China Sea, the US sent a P-8 Poseidon surveillance plane over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Challenging illegal behavior

When the Chinese military ordered the US plane to leave what it claims to be its airspace, the US responded that it was free to fly through what international law defines as international air space.

So far, so good. It is obviously a good thing for the United States to challenge through this flight China's illegal claims. But this is not enough. The Chinese protested. They pointed out that this American challenge to their sovereign air space may turn ugly. If the US insists in this reckless Behavior –Beijing argued– bad things might happen.

What next?

So, what will Washington do next? Back off in order to avoid “provoking a crisis”? This would signal the world that China won. It is obvious that China has no legitimate claim over the entire South China Sea. Its assertion that all the islands and rocks belong to mainland China and that therefore its territorial waters go as far as Borneo and the Philippines is laughable. Except that China is not laughing, while its beefed up naval power is strong enough to intimidate all the other

smaller countries in the region, (Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines).

Will the US risk a real crisis?

The only real naval power that can challenge Beijing is America. Having said that, flying one single mission over the Spratly Islands does not mean much. A true demonstration of resolve would be to fly 10 missions, 20 missions, every day. But this would entail accepting the risk of escalation.

What if some crazy Chinese local commander decides to shoot down a US plane? This might happen. And then what? Is Washington going to go to war with China in order to preserve the freedom of navigation in international waters, in this case the South China Sea? Probably not.

China does not believe that the US will do much

In another era China would not have made these baseless territorial waters claims, with the risk of attracting ill will. Beijing would not have done this.

But now it is different. Now the Chinese have had the opportunity to measure America's resolve, or lack thereof. Washington has done nothing significant against Putin's Russia after it gobbled Crimea. The Obama Administration looked on passively as ISIL took over a big chunk of Iraq, a country in which the US spent about a trillion dollars and where we lost thousands of US soldiers.

It is therefore fairly rational for China's leaders to assume that, just like other aggressors, they can get away with their totally transparent neighborhood bully aggression. America will protest a bit, and then it will do nothing.

What will Washington do?

But if the Chinese are dead wrong in assuming US passivity, what does America intend to do about this crisis?

China is busy building air strips and other military installations on various rocks in the South China Sea, with the open objective of claiming this vast body of water as its own. What will this US Administration do to make them stop? Flying one single Poseidon mission (or may be two or three) over these islands is not an indication of resolve.

No victory until China gives up its claims

In this case there will be no victory until China, explicitly or implicitly, gives up its fabricated sovereignty claims over almost the entire South China Sea. And I do not see this happening. I do not see China quietly backing off, in fear of a US retaliation.

The Chinese were not deterred by US naval or air power when they decided to start their construction activities on those islands. Why should they stop now, when they are close to having transformed the facts on the ground by establishing a permanent military presence on what used to be uninhabited rocks?

American power does not deter anymore

So far, I see nothing in Washington's modest reactions to this openly illegal behavior that will make China stop. It will take more than one Poseidon flight to reverse this course of action that signals China's openly aggressive behavior in its neighborhood.

There was a time in which America's overwhelming military power, combined with the willingness to use it, deterred aggression. Now, this is not working anymore. We still have considerable power. The problem is the willingness to use it.

Obama: War With IS Going Well – Climate Change Is The Real Threat

WASHINGTON – How is the US war with ISIL (IS) going? Well, not so great; but not bad either, according to the Commander in Chief. Rather optimistically, President Obama declared in an interview with The Atlantic that *“I don’t think we are losing”*.

War with ISIL under control

And he said this after Ramadi, the main city of Anbar Province (and a short drive from Baghdad) was captured by ISIL, while the Iraqi troops run away. Meantime, ISIL registered another gain by taking over the city of Palmyra in Syria.

According to Obama, these are temporary setbacks, not at all surprising in what he described as a long campaign that will take years. The message is: *“Do not worry. We have this thing under control. We have been at it only for a few months. Do not focus on the daily news. We have put together a winning strategy. We really know what we are doing.”*

The real threat is climate change

In the meantime, since the war with ISIL is going relatively well, here is what the US President is truly concerned with. In his May 20 Commencement Speech at the US Coast Guard Academy, (New London, Connecticut), Obama stated that denying climate change is a *“dereliction of duty”*.

So, here is America’s true strategic priority: *“Stop climate change”*. The war with ISIL, the first well organized, functioning terror state in modern history, is a mere side show, and we have that situation under control anyway.

But climate change is a different matter. This is the real threat to US national security. No, I am not making this up. This is what President Obama said. And these appear to be his priorities.

The End Of Iraq

WASHINGTON – Let's think of Iraq 10 years from now. Based on current developments, it is not clear that there will be a single country. Whatever the future of ISIL or IS, the Sunni-Shia divide has become so much worse that I cannot see how the two communities can be part of the same country.

Iraq falling apart

Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki did his very best to create a Shia dominated government in which the Iraqi Sunnis played almost no role. No wonder that so many Sunnis welcomed ISIL as liberators when they first invaded Iraq from Syria. Now many Sunnis may regret their early enthusiasm for the radical Islamist force.

But any bad feeling against the ISIL ruthless rulers will not automatically entail rekindled friendship with the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. Which is to say that Sunni-Shia relations may have deteriorated to a point of no return. Even assuming that ISIL will soon disappear, (unlikely development), genuine peace and harmony between the two dominant communities that today make up most of Iraq is probably impossible.

Further north, for all practical purposes, Iraqi Kurdistan

behaves like an independent country, with its own functioning government, its flag and its Pesh merga military forces.

As for the Iraqi Shia majority, they will have to realize that unless their disposition towards the Sunni minority changes radically, and I mean radically, it will be impossible to hold the country together. Since they probably will not change, with or without ISIL, hard to think that 10 years from now there will be a united Iraq.

US lost influence

And let's make it clear that the United States does not have the means, the will, or the prestige necessary to influence Iraqi politics. At the moment Washington is nominally engaged in a fight against ISIL that is not going well. But even assuming that ISIL will run out of gas and that it will eventually implode, (this is at best a hope), America will not be able to put Iraq back together.

So, there will be a mostly Sunni North Western rump, Kurdistan in the North, and the East and South dominated by the Shia. Most unfortunately, given America's dramatic loss of influence in Iraq and in the Region, the Shia component of the former Iraq will become a vassal of Iran.

A sad end to the 2003 invasion

This is a very sad epilogue for an Iraq adventure that started in March 2003 with the assumption that it was smart to replace Saddam Hussein with a secular, non sectarian, pro-Western Iraqi leadership.

In retrospect, the degree of hubristic self-confidence of the foreign and security people in the George W. Bush administration looks almost bizarre. Yes, believe it or not, they really thought that in no time and almost at zero cost you could have regime change in Baghdad and quick and painless democratic transition; while this historic transformation

would yield the incredible gift of planting the seeds of secular democracy in the Middle East. In no time, we were told, the people in the neighboring countries would see how good democracy is. They would kick out their autocratic rulers and embrace free institutions, markets, and all the other benefits of liberty. I am not making this up. All this was said.

Hubris and naiveté

If high school kids would have come up with this game plan for democracy in the Middle East, their teacher would have told them that it was a nice idea but very unrealistic.

But America bought this insanely naive Bush plan. For a while at least, as a nation, we thought that this was doable. Get rid of Saddam and his coterie of Baathists and, with just a little guidance from Uncle Sam, there would be a healthy germination of a modern democracy, fertilized by a large oil revenue that could finally be used to promote development and enterprise instead of being squandered in military aggressions.

Obama made his own mistakes

Well, it did not turn out that way. Sure, we can point out that President Obama did not help much after he took office in January of 2009. He wanted us to believe that all in all it was a good thing that all American forces left Iraq, for good, in December 2011. The country was after all at peace. There was an elected government, nominally on friendly terms with the US. This was his own version of "Mission Accomplished".

Incompetence

And this shows the alarming poverty of America's intelligence and analytical skills. Equally bad under both Presidents. The notion that an incompetent Shia majority government, bent on revenge against the former Sunni rulers would be able to

preserve security and political harmony in Iraq was insane. And yet this is what Obama told America.

ISIL

And then, when ISIL came along, the Administration at first dismissed this dramatic setback as a minor nuisance. Later on, after ISIL had made big advances into Iraq, capturing Mosul, Obama announced a major strategy aimed at creating a broad coalition, with America leading the air war. This was so poorly planned and badly executed that now the whole concept looks like a bad joke.

Sunni and Shia will stay divided

Right now, *de facto* partitioned Iraq is so messed up that no future US President will be able to fix it. It may be possible to contain ISIL. (I am no longer sure about our will to seriously engage its forces and defeat them). But even if this happened, the elimination of the ISIL threat will not be enough to patch Iraq back together.

The strains created by the unintended consequences of the US March 2003 invasion are just too painful.

So, here is what we got. A broken up country with its most valuable part (the part that has most of the oil) becoming an ally of our archenemy Iran, a leading sponsor of terror, according to our definitions. A sad ending of a key campaign in what we used to call the "War on Terror."

“Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL”?

WASHINGTON – *“Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.”* Remember this? This is what President Obama stated less than a year ago, in September 2014. A clear and bold objective: *“Degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL”*.

No success

Well, so far not so good. The US strategy based on building a coalition (believe it or not, more than 60 countries signed up) that will do the fighting on the ground, while America conducts critically important air attacks, is at the very least work in progress.

A less charitable view is that it was and is just hot air. In other words, there was never any intention to mount and conduct a serious military operation. Given this obvious disconnect between stated goals and means allocated to the anti-ISIL mission, this operation is turning (or it has already turned) into a disaster, and consequently an immense blow to US credibility and prestige.

ISIL is winning

We know the facts. As improbable as this may look, ISIL (or IS) is very much entrenched in large parts of Syria, while it controls now almost the entire Sunni portion of Iraq. Just days ago IS occupied Ramadi, the capital of the Anbar Province, a major city just a short distance from Baghdad.

True to form, the Iraqi army did not fight that much. Confronted with a massive attack, the government troops fled, leaving behind arms and ammunitions so that IS militants

can help themselves.

Timid US effort

So, here is the thing. The intention to “degrade and destroy” may be there. But the reality on the ground is that IS is winning. The US-led air campaign while active is very modest in scale and scope. American bombing raids do hit targets here and there; but they are unable to inflict serious damage to IS forces, and thus turn the tide of the war.

And the US Government made it clear from the beginning that it has no intention to deploy ground troops to Iraq. The US-led coalition, with all its 60 members, so far has done nothing that looks even remotely like assembling a ground force to be deployed in Iraq and Syria that will engage and fight ISIL until it is indeed “degraded and destroyed”.

Bad options

So, where do we go from here? The prospects are bad. Right now IS controls a huge chunk of Iraq. The Iraqi Sunnis are unwilling to fight. The US is training some Iraqi troops. But who knows how long that will take. And, equally important, who knows if these trainees will fight or flee, just as the others have done.

In the meantime, the plan announced by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to send Shia militias (some of them trained and equipped by the Iranians) to liberate the Sunnis in Ramadi may create additional problems. The Sunni population of Ramadi may not like IS. But they like Shia militias even less.

US lost credibility

There are many angles to this story. All of them disheartening. But let me just focus on the most obvious one.

Any US President who makes big, bold promises he cannot keep (“degrade and destroy ISIL”) at best loses credibility. At

worst, he looks like a fool.

Hyper Regulated US Solar Energy

WASHINGTON – Recently I read a very good piece on the future of solar power in the United States. Very informative. And yet, there is something really odd about it. The piece has not been written by a solar power expert, or by an industry analyst. It has been written by a lawyer.

Not market-driven

And this detail sheds light on what is really going on with renewable energy in the United States. Whatever the merits of the technology, whatever the progress in improving performance, lowering costs and therefore prices for would-be consumers, the fortunes of renewable energy are not market-driven.

They are driven by laws, regulations, mandates for power generation companies, tax subsidies, set-asides, and what not. In other words, many if not most people in America base their decision on whether to buy or not to buy solar panels for their homes not on the merit and cost-effectiveness of the technology but on the tax advantages, rebates and/or subsidies that come with purchasing solar panels.

Lawyers are the real experts

And this is why the “go to people” when you have questions are lawyers and not engineers. Lawyers are indeed the most qualified experts. They can go through the thicket of laws,

regulations and tax exemptions. They can tell you whether or not solar energy will be financially rewarding for you.

Renewable energy's fortunes dictated by regulations

And here is the problem. We have a large new industry coming along whose future is not dictated mostly by the inherent strengths of its products, but largely by the inducements provided by many policy makers who believe that renewables are "good", while carbon based energy is "bad". For this reason they encourage consumers to embrace renewable energy through a variety of fiscal inducements.

Sadly, regarding power generation and distribution, it is true that even before renewable energy came along there was no level playing field. Electrical utilities are highly regulated and already subjected to all sorts of restrictions, obligations and mandates. But adding to this bloated regulatory environment by favoring a new industry (at the expense of others, such as coal-fired power plants) is hardly a way to improve things.

Bad public policy

This is a really bad way to conduct public policy. Of course, we have to acknowledge that taxation and regulations are commonly used to favor other industries as well. Still, the fact that we accept policy-driven market distortions in some sectors of the economy (housing for instance) is not a good argument for extending this bad practice to new technologies affecting other key sectors, already heavily regulated or not.

Market economy, different rules

In a real market economy, consumers would choose products based on their value, and not on tax advantages.

But if we do believe that we are no longer in a market economy, then we should accept as "normal" the absurdity of

getting advice on solar power (and many other products) from lawyers and other regulations experts.

However, if we accept this as the new “normal”, then we also kiss good-bye to capitalism and to its ability to allow the best companies to emerge and thrive on the basis of the value they offer.

What we are getting now is that too many companies and/or sectors do well or at least survive because they are in political favor, or because they can hire the best lobbyists who will help them get the most favorable tax regime.

This non-market economic system may work well for the well-connected; but it is a disaster in the making for the overall US economy and for its overall future competitiveness. Be it in Soviet Russia or statist France, politically mandated economic choices never work. And I really mean “never”.