

Can Clinton Unify Left And Center Against Trump?

WASHINGTON – Hillary Clinton's performance at the Democratic National convention in Philadelphia was "mission impossible". Now the anointed presidential candidate of a Democratic Party that has once more moved decidedly to the left, Clinton needs to patch together the centrist base and the noisy far left Sanders' crowds.

A progressive and a centrist

Clinton's objective was to reintroduce herself to America as a progressive, (wink to Sanders' people), but also as a reliable, pragmatic unifier (wink to the center, and hopefully some Republicans), who can get things done.

Still, too many conflicting messages were packed in her speech: continuity with the Obama policies which she called very successful; and at the same time a strong indictment of injustice, enduring racism, and widening inequality in America, all of which apparently did not diminish during the 8 long Obama years.

So, her speech gave good marks to Obama's progressive agenda, and at the same time bad marks to Obama's America for being so far behind in implementing a true progressive agenda, this way causing misery and suffering among the under privileged. A clear contradiction here. Is she proposing continuity or disruption?

Appeal to the middle

At the same time, Clinton wanted to appeal to middle of the road Republicans truly worried about the possibility of a Trump victory. However, she also had to shore up her now left leaning Democratic Party base by endorsing the essence, if not

the details, of the Bernie Sanders far left economic agenda.

Something for everybody

So here are the ingredients of this political and policy stew: Clinton is the candidate who stands for continuity and disruption. She is with both the far left and the center, and may be some conservatives. And, mind you, this convoluted message is coming from an aged, quintessentially establishment, professional politician with extremely high negatives. Many voters will simply not buy this catch all “agenda”.

Stronger Together?

Supposedly, the magic glue that would unite all these diverse and in fact mutually exclusive themes is the “Stronger Together” slogan adopted by the Clinton campaign. In her acceptance speech Clinton tried to paint a picture of how her administration would operate. She would get everybody to work together—congressional Democrats and Republicans, disgruntled Republicans longing for centrist policies, and Bernie Sanders’ “revolutionaries” who want radical economic and societal transformation.

Nice idea, may be inspiring for some; but hardly the articulation of a clear and compelling policy program.

A leftist agenda

In fact, her speech was rich in anecdotes and vignettes but thin on policy details. To the extent that there were any, they show a Democratic Party that has moved to the left, in fact the far left. Indeed, Hillary Clinton now looks very much like a female George McGovern leading a leftists party that may have lost its connection with America’s more centrist middle.

In her speech, there was absolutely nothing about reducing the

national debt, the need to have common sense entitlement reform, or enacting pro-business tax reform. So, nothing on fiscal responsibility and measures leading to the promotion of higher economic growth.

On the contrary, plenty on more money for an expanded Social Security system, free college for everybody, and higher taxes for the rich to pay for all this. Lace that with full legalization of illegal immigrants and syrupy stuff about "Love Trumps Hate" and you get a Europe-style Socialist-lite agenda big on income redistribution, economic equality, fiscally irresponsible and instinctively pacifist.

This is quite frankly the Sanders agenda.

Just tactics?

Was Clinton just paying lip service to the themes loved by the party left in her speech simply because she had no choice? The truth may be that she had to endorse the Sanders agenda, because she did not want to be heckled by his supporters who filled the convention venue, and because she fully realizes that she is now the presidential candidate of a Democratic Party where socialist leaning ideas have become core beliefs.

Tough road ahead

While Clinton will get the usual "post-convention bump" in the upcoming polls, for the moment Trump, notwithstanding his boisterous style and open disunity within his own party, is doing quite well in the polls.

Unpredictable Trump

No matter what he said about dumping NATO allies who do not spend enough on defense and inviting Russia to disclose hacked Clinton e-mails, Trump is surprisingly competitive in all the critical swing states. Is this a reflection of his strength, or a clear sign that Clinton is even more unpopular than we

thought? Probably the latter.

Trump's Remarks On NATO

WASHINGTON – Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump made headlines in Europe when he declared that America would intervene to assist a European NATO under attack only if this ally has paid its full share of the bill for the common defense. This is unprecedented. No U.S. leader or aspiring leader has ever publicly questioned U.S. determination to intervene on behalf of a NATO member in case of hostile actions against it.

NATO's credibility at stake

NATO's credibility rests mostly on the U.S. unconditional commitment to defend Europe. If future U.S. policy indicates that this blanket commitment is subject to conditions, this may encourage aggression, or at least unfriendly actions on the part of Russia, always keen to exploit divisions between the U.S. and its European allies.

Here is what Article 5 of the NATO Treaty says: *The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of*

individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. [Emphasis added].

Unconditional pledge

It is clear that the NATO Treaty makes no mention of added conditionalities. It clearly stipulates that an attack against one NATO member shall be considered by all the others as an attack against all. Therefore, technically speaking, Trump's remarks are wrong, and frankly ill-advised. Indeed, Trump's glib remarks about circumstances that he would look at as president before deciding whether or not to come to the help of a European NATO country in peril are most inappropriate. The U.S. is bound to help a fellow NATO member because of a Treaty obligation. There is no gray area.

That said, Trump, while wrong on his interpretation of the Treaty, diplomacy and more, is actually right on substance. Let me explain.

Not paying for the common defense

In his usual inelegant but (sometimes) effective style, Trump pointed out what every U.S. defense official knows but will not say so bluntly, especially in public. It is a well-known fact that Europe is not paying its fair share of the common defense.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, European defense budgets have been (with very few exceptions) in free fall. The official pledge taken by all NATO countries to invest at least 2% of their GDP on defense has been broken by most of the Alliance members. There is no sign that all or at least most Europeans will soon be in compliance. Again, these are

undisputed facts.

U.S. and NATO officials have repeatedly noted (albeit using muffled language) this huge gap between promises and actual defense spending. President Obama himself expressed his distress while contemplating European allies who do not spend even the bare minimum for the common security.

Trump said what most defense officials believe

Given all that, what Trump said is very much in line with what most members of the U.S. national security establishment know and say –but mostly in private meetings. The huge difference is that Trump publicly and bluntly said that America will not come to the rescue of delinquent members. And this is news.

Of course this unprecedented statement by someone who may be the next U.S. Commander in Chief come January 2017 made headlines, especially in the front line NATO countries in Eastern Europe that are directly facing Russia. (Think Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland). By saying to the Europeans something that amounts to *“First pay up, and then we shall see what I can do for you”*, Trump created nervousness and potentially contributed to enhancing instability in Eastern Europe. Given what he said, will Trump’s America come to the rescue of Estonia in case of an attack? May be not. His statement allowed all sorts of bad conjectures. This is why it was most ill-advised.

Pledges should be honored

That said, on the broader issue of lack of a European serious commitment to the common security, Trump is basically right. Throughout its long history that goes back to 1949, NATO has always been an unequal arrangement, with the U.S. doing the heavy lifting when it comes to defense spending.

But now we are at the point in which many European members of this old security pact contribute little to the common

defense, some almost nothing; with the hope that they can get away with routinely unfulfilled pledges. This has to stop. Otherwise this old alliance turns into a joke.

Trump pointed out this huge gap between promises and actions. Again, really wrong on form; but right on substance.

Will Tim Kaine Help Hillary Clinton Get Elected?

WASHINGTON – Hillary Clinton, about to be nominated presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, just veered back to the political center. By picking moderate Tim Kaine, Senator from Virginia and former Governor of the State, as her choice for Vice President Hillary Clinton wants to reassure middle America –independent voters in particular. No, a Hillary Clinton administration will not be hostage to the far left of Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Senator Kaine, her pick for VP, is a solid centrist.

Experience

But there is more. Kaine is also an experienced public servant. He served as Mayor of Richmond, later on Lieutenant Governor, then Governor of Virginia, and now Senator from the state. (By the way, Virginia is a very important state that the Democrats *must win* in order to get Clinton into the White House).

When it comes to policy positions, Kaine could not be more different from Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the self-

declared Socialist who turned out to be a formidable challenger for Clinton during the primaries.

Most fundamentally, based on this resume, Kaine knows a great deal about government. Therefore, here is the larger, reassuring message to America coming from the Clinton campaign: the Clinton-Kaine ticket will be about experience, reliability, good judgement, and proven ability to govern: *"Don't be crazy, America. Do not allow a mercurial and totally inexperienced Trump into the White House. The Clinton-Kaine ticket offers you a far better choice: steady hands on the wheel"*.

Kaine will speak in Spanish to Latino voters

Besides, Kaine speaks fluent Spanish, a significant asset. (As a young man he served as a volunteer in Honduras). It will be a huge advantage for Clinton to have a running mate who can speak in Spanish to increasingly important Latino voters. Indeed, given the changed U.S. demographics, it is clear that it is almost impossible to get elected president of the United States without getting a majority, or at least a significant minority of the Latino population.

(With his harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and promises to build a wall on the southern border with Mexico, Donald Trump has managed to burn all the bridges with this significant and growing Latino constituency).

Sanders endorsed Clinton

We know that Senator Bernie Sanders recently endorsed Hillary Clinton. This gesture from Clinton's feisty (and surprisingly popular) primaries opponent, albeit a little late, was expected. But will this endorsement from the chief representative of the party left recreate real, as opposed to cosmetic, party unity? Many Sanders supporters clearly do not like Clinton, and they will like even less her choice of (boring?) centrist Kaine as her running mate.

Problems on the left

Down the line this may be a serious problem when it comes to real party unity and the ability to get all Democrats, whatever their ideological leanings, to really show up and vote for Clinton on election day in November. The problem for Clinton is that at least some hard-core Sanders supporters –those who really believed the old Vermont Senator when he was calling himself leader of a revolutionary movement aimed at radically transforming American politics– will not follow their leader’s endorsement of Hillary Clinton, the quintessential establishment politician who in their eyes symbolizes corruption and collusion with Wall Street.

Sanders’ supporters will not like Kaine as VP

And now, with Clinton signaling a move back to the center with the selection of Kaine as VP candidate, it is possible that many of these leftists Democratic voters who wanted Sanders to be the party nominee may stay home, come November. Indeed, various polls indicate that may be up to 1/3 of those enthusiasts for radical change who voted for Sanders in the primaries will not vote for Clinton in the general election. These polls of course are only indicative. Election Day is still a few months away. A lot can change between now and November.

Still, for the moment, Sanders’ endorsement is a plus for Clinton. It formally ended the political rift that had become quite bitter during the Democratic primaries. It unifies the party, creating a perception of strength in numbers. However, now that she pocketed Sanders’ endorsement, and hopefully the support of many of his leftist followers, Clinton is moving back to the center, as the Kaine choice for VP indicates. How will this Clinton center-to-left-and-back-to-center dance look to the Sanders people? Probably not very appealing.

Trump’s unity problems

That said, while the recent Sanders-Clinton unity announcement may look very uninspiring to some hard-core Sanders supporters, (they truly believed they had joined an anti-system political revolution that they know will never be carried on by Clinton), Republican nominee Donald Trump does not even have fake unity behind him, as the GOP Convention in Cleveland demonstrated.

Party notables did not show up

Indeed, many Republican Party national leaders did not even attend. That includes John McCain, and Mitt Romney, the party nominees in 2008 and 2012. Most notably, Ohio Governor John Kasich, a Trump opponent during the GOP primaries, did not show up. Imagine that. The Republican Governor of Ohio not showing up for the event, held in his own state of Ohio, that led to the nomination of the Republican presidential contender. And forget about the Bush Clan and many other notables.

The only one who showed up is arch-enemy Ted Cruz. But Cruz had no intention to be conciliatory. In his speech at the Convention he failed to endorse Trump, thus telling everybody that the political rift is still wide open.

No real unity

Trump is now the candidate. However, as the Cleveland “non shows” indicate, he is not leading a unified party. Which is to say that, if the authenticity of the Democrats unity is questionable, the Republicans show deep, wide open rifts.

Combine this with the lack of a real Trump campaign field organization, especially in critical swing states, and it becomes clear how Clinton may indeed prevail in November.

Clinton is a weak candidate, but stronger than Trump

While Clinton is a weak candidate, (just like Trump’s, her

negatives are also very high), all told she is in a much better position to win in November than Trump is.

She will probably lose some disaffected young and leftist Democrats in November. However, she can count on the powerful support of all the labor unions and of their significant grass-roots organizations. She will have women, Blacks, Latinos and more young voters in her camp.

On the other side of the divide, Trump is also likely to lose many Republicans. And there are more Democrats than Republicans.

In order to win the general election, Trump would have to surprise everybody by getting most of his GOP base behind him and most of the independents, the unaffiliated American voters whose support is generally decisive in presidential contests.

To get elected you need a broad base

Clinton's decision to pick Tim Kaine as VP is a clear move aimed at increasing the ticket's appeal among moderates (this may include some centrist Republicans who really detest Trump) and independents. If Kaine proves to be an effective campaigner, especially with critical Latino voters, really hard to see a path to victory for Trump.

Trump's support is really strong among older, white, mostly male voters without a college education. The trouble is that this group is no longer the majority in America. Great to have their enthusiastic backing. But it is simply not enough to get elected president.

Terrorism Is Not An Existential Threat

WASHINGTON – Sadly, there has been another terror attack. This time it took place in Munich, one of Germany's most important cities. Here is my take on this tragedy. It is alright for the news media to report the facts. What is not alright, in fact down right insane, is for every news channel to provide endless coverage of the event that quickly turns into wild speculation in the absence of hard facts.

Obsessive coverage

Indeed, all the networks kept the topic on the air by creating an endless loop in which there was no real news. The same skimpy facts were repeated again and again, in an obsessive fashion. In an equally obsessive fashion, viewers were treated with endless reruns of the same footage that showed scared people in Munich running away.

Uninformed commentary now part of the news

And it got a lot worse. In order to keep viewers interested, the news editors laced these non-reports from Munich with interviews with "experts" who knew absolutely nothing about the evolving situation in Germany. But supposedly they are "terrorism experts" who can opine on what is going on, even though they are totally in the dark regarding the key facts. As this "coverage" unfolded, nobody knew anything about the Munich shooter. Was he a German? Was he Middle Eastern? Is this about ISIL and jihad? Is this the work of extreme right militants? Or is it about a mentally disturbed person with no political agenda?

Ignorance is OK

But none of this matters. And so you could see on various TV

channels a parade of retired U.S. Generals who were asked to offer their (supposedly insightful) opinion about an ongoing police action aimed at capturing a shooter in a German shopping mall about which they knew absolutely nothing. As if their military background would allow them to know what was happening and why.

And then add to the experts mix retired CIA and FBI agents, think tank people, and assorted others. One thing is clear. None of these people knew anything whatsoever about what happened in Munich. But this does not matter. Speculation, sometimes totally irresponsible, by experts is now considered an integral part of news coverage.

And it got really crazy. "Let's assume that these are ISIL inspired terrorists", said one. "Well, in this case, this means that...blah, blah, blah". This is how the news media transformed a sad event whose causes were unknown (and that is very limited in scope) into yet another chapter of an unfolding global war waged by Terror against us that does not exist.

A global war that does not exist

Yes, the media want you to believe that this Munich attack must be part of a general war waged by Islamic fanatics against the West. Another terror attack signals that we are dealing with a ferocious enemy, determined to totally destroy us. And then the really stupid questions follow: "In your opinion, what should governments do to keep us totally safe?" As if there were an intelligent, cogent answer to such a broad question.

Terrorism is real

Terrorism is unfortunately real. Yes, innocent people across the world are being killed, and many more are potentially vulnerable. This is true. But by amplifying the news coverage of all these attacks the news media creates the false

impression that there are thousands and thousands of terrorists ready to jump on us. They describe all this as an existential, truly overwhelming threat; when it is not.

A total of a few hundred people killed over a few months period across many countries is serious business. But these killings do not amount to an ongoing massive slaughter. By comparison, during WWI thousands of soldiers were killed in just a few hours in one of the many battles that were fought almost daily, over a number of years. Again, thousands of people get killed every year in America by criminals. But, somehow these deaths are not as important.

No perspective

I am not saying that terror-related killings should be ignored because they are not large enough to deserve attention. I am saying however that they should be looked at in perspective. Unless we see a real change in the momentum of these terror operations showing us that there is both willingness and operational ability to attack all Western (and other) countries from all angles on a regular basis, these terror attacks are not about to destroy our civilization. Of course we should deploy all our intelligence and police resources to deal with this threat. This is serious business. But we should leave its handling to law enforcement agencies and not panic.

World not coming to an end

However, this is not what the media tell us. Indeed, by providing truly over the top, excessive coverage and by allowing the wildest speculations about "*what other terrible things will happen next*" to be mixed with incessant news coverage the media give the public the impression that, on account of "Global Terrorism", the world may be coming to an end.

This is just not true. Allowing this perception to be created by exaggerated coverage the media are creating fear, if not

panic when we need perspective and calm. This is truly irresponsible. This distortion amounts to a huge disservice to Western societies which rely on the news media for balanced accounts in order to gain a reasonably accurate understanding about what is going on in the world.

How To Handle Terrorism: Stop Media Coverage

WASHINGTON – A 31 year old French citizen of Tunisian origin, using a truck as his weapon, run over and killed scores of people who had gathered on a sea side promenade to celebrate the French National Day in the southern city of Nice. Confronted with another episode of mass murder perpetrated by another psychopath inspired, it seems, by radical Islamist ideology, the French Government and the world react in the same way. We mourn, we cry, we express solidarity and sympathy to the French people, and we swear to continue our fight against terrorism.

A better counter terror strategy?

Is there a better strategy? When it comes to intelligence and police work, probably not. This ongoing international counter terrorism effort is enormously complicated because we are talking about finding the proverbial needles hidden in many haystacks.

Indeed, given limited resources and potentially hundreds of thousands of militants who may turn into terrorists, it is next to impossible to make sure that all credible suspects are known and tracked by various law enforcement agencies, so that they can be stopped before they act. Case in point, based on

early reports, the young man who slaughtered so many people in Nice was not on any terror list.

One person can create a slaughter

Furthermore, we know very well that just one determined terrorist can inflict enormous damage when targeting large numbers of unarmed civilians who are gathered in one place. Indeed, in order to perpetrate this horrendous slaughter in Nice, the young man who planned it needed a driver license and a truck. We are not talking about expensive, sophisticated weapons that require intensive training before they can be properly used. Sadly, committing mass murder is easy.

That said, intelligence agencies and law enforcement simply must persevere in this thankless investigative effort. They must try their best, hoping to catch more bad guys before they can act.

Stop endless media coverage

But there is something else that we should do. World media should stop behaving as the unwitting propaganda arm of international terrorism. By this I mean that the biggest victory for terrorists is that we treat their acts as something that precipitates a national crisis, while scaring all of us to death.

After these events, there is non-stop coverage, laced with testimonials from eye witnesses, sad stories of orphaned children, and more. All this creates an atmosphere of helplessness, fear and confusion. *"We are all targets". "This will never end". "I can be dead tomorrow"*.

Report the facts, and then stop

Of course it is the job of all media to report facts. But, after having done so, they should stop, simply because endless 24/7 coverage proves to other would-be terrorist watching all

this that terrorism scares everybody. Therefore "it works".

If we could think of a different scenario in which terror attacks are treated just like accidents, that is unfortunate events (think two trains colliding) with no political or ideological angle, societies would register the sad news about loss of life, and then move on; without the endless and frankly counterproductive debates on how can governments provide perfect protection to all of us from this calamity.

Attackers are narcissists

The fact is that most of these attackers, and would-be attackers deep down are publicity seeking narcissists. Sure enough, in some fashion they see themselves as noble warriors engaged in jihad. But they also want to be famous, even in death. Imagine being an obscure young man of Arab origin living in France. You see yourself as a nobody. Most likely, you feel that you are treated unfairly. You believe that the French people around you harbor racist feelings against you.

Become famous

But from the vantage point of the paradise you earned after your noble deed of martyrdom (the slaughter of all those civilians) you rejoice seeing that the whole world talks about you. You are famous, and for all the right reasons. You are a hero, a martyr in the just war against the infidels.

Given all of the above, by toning down media coverage and the endless commentary and speculations, we would take much of the oxygen out of the terrorism breeding grounds.

No rational goals

From a rational perspective, it is obvious that these acts of terrorism achieve nothing. Killing 80 people here and 50 there is not a strategy that leads to anything. But these perpetrators are not thinking rationally.

That said they certainly want the world to know that they are heroes in this global battle for the establishment of the true faith. Becoming famous after having accomplished a great deed is seen as part of the just reward for martyrdom. And this by itself becomes a strong motivation for others to engage in similar acts.

Stop the coverage

However, if in the future these tragedies were not incessantly covered by the media, then there is no free publicity, and therefore no aura of fame for the actors. If nobody talks about them after their glorious martyrdom, then part of the incentive to follow on the footsteps of other famous jihadists vanishes.

So, please, report the facts, by all means. But stop “promoting” terrorism by giving so much free publicity to the perpetrators. Endless media coverage simply encourages others.

Italy Overwhelmed by Poor African Immigrants

WASHINGTON – Italy has two major demographic problems. Both of them carry bad outcomes. Italy is the destination of too many immigrants from poor countries in Africa and the Middle East; while its native population is shrinking due to extremely low fertility rates. In plain language: not enough new babies.

Gloomy picture

Here is the gloomy end game. Italy’s population is progressively becoming more African/Middle Eastern. And this

trend brings no economic gains, because most of the new residents are either illiterate or low skilled, while at the same time they are entitled to receiving costly social services.

Crisis point

Add to this social and political tensions caused by the new immigrants. Indeed, according to public officials, Italy has reached a crisis point when it comes to its ability to welcome and integrate immigrants arriving mostly from Africa and the Middle East. Piero Fassino, former Mayor of Turin, a major city in Italy's North West, recently stated that: *"In terms of numbers [of new immigrants] we are at the point of surpassing what can be managed by the public authorities. Unless we deal with it, this immigration problem may overwhelm us"*.

Political tensions

Among other issues, Fassino pointed out that immigrants come up on top of the waiting list for low-cost housing, because they usually have large families (unlike the Italians), and large families have a priority among those waiting for these units.

This way immigrants end up getting the housing originally planned for low income Italians. And this unforeseen development clearly breeds strong anti-immigrant resentment.

Lowest fertility rates

And it gets worse. If we look at the never-ending immigration tidal wave in conjunction with low fertility rates among Italian women, then we have the elements of a demographic/political crisis. Italy now has the lowest number of new births per unit of population in the entire European Union. Simple math: fewer native Italians and more Africans permanently settled in Italy will transform the country's ethnic composition—rather rapidly.

Indeed, Italy is now at the point in which deaths have surpassed new births. This means a progressively shrinking native population. If we consider that in Italy, (like in most other developed countries), social services and pensions going to current recipients are paid for through contributions by active workers, it is obvious that the entire fabric of the Italian welfare state will soon become unsustainable. There will not be enough revenue to finance benefits. Simply stated: too many retirees, and not enough active workers paying into the system.

Immigrants do not add to the quality labor pool

From this perspective, the arrival of large numbers of new immigrants should be viewed as good news, no? More young people with jobs paying into the welfare system, should help re-balance it. Right?

Well, not really. Because these new immigrants are unskilled and mostly illiterate. These new arrivals have hard time get real jobs. They often become part of an informal, underground economy. To put it mildly, they do not add to the quality of Italian human capital. They are a net cost to the country.

No way out

Is there a way of this? Probably not. Italians do not have more children because of a changed culture in which family is no longer thought of as important, and in part because children are deemed to be too expensive for millions of struggling lower income Italians who can barely make ends meet.

Immigrants driven by poverty

At the same time, abject poverty will continue to drive hundreds of thousands of poor Africans out of their Continent. Same thing for Middle Eastern people trying to escape from civil wars, and political chaos in their native lands. Many of

them end up in Italy because Italy is close to Africa, Syria, and Iraq. Once the new immigrants get there, hard to move them elsewhere.

So, here are the facts. Soon enough, Italy and others parts of Europe, especially Southern Europe, will look more like Africa and the Middle East.

Can U.S. Fight Insurgencies?

WASHINGTON – Under pressure, the Obama administration released the estimated number of civilians killed (unintentionally) in the course of U.S. drone strikes that have taken place in various theaters. Along with the figures came new guidance aimed at further reducing “collateral damage”, i.e. the killing of civilians in the course of U.S. air attacks via drones. (These attacks are always aimed at military targets).

Indeed, sometimes, civilians get killed accidentally due to their proximity to military targets. (There have also been a few cases in which civilians have been mistakenly targeted, because it was wrongly assumed, based on the information available at the time, that they were in fact enemy fighters).

Civilians killed by drone attacks

US Intelligence sources stated that 116 civilians were killed in the course of drone strikes aimed at hitting legitimate

military targets in different theaters. This usually happens because enemy positions are located in the midst of populated areas.

President Obama stated that America, from now on, will do its very best to further reduce these numbers. Of course, several critics immediately argued that the real number of civilians killed is a lot higher. Besides, this total just announced excludes the death toll from operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

This U.S. announcement could be just public relations; or it could be an oblique way to tell the world that from now on the U.S., while fighting elusive enemies on different fronts, will be more restrained. It will bomb less, with drones or conventional aircraft. Indeed, if this new guidance will take effect as stated, hard to bomb more enemy positions most often located in populated urban areas, when your goal is to further reduce the chance of killing civilians.

Restrictive Rules of Engagement

Still, whatever the real numbers of civilians accidentally killed, the truth is that America's current "Rules of Engagement" are already extremely restrictive on when and where U.S. bombs can be legitimately used.

Drones strikes are usually planned on the basis of carefully sifted intelligence. "Dynamic" strikes that occur in the context of ongoing military operations however are also subject to complex procedures. Tactical Operations Centers need to authorize them, often only after having received the input of military lawyers who are standing by 24/7 and who are called upon to assess the legality of strikes, on the basis of the available intelligence regarding the situation on the ground.

Is the way to fight a war?

This way of fighting a war looks crazy. But these are the standard rules. Given all these restrictions on what targets can be bombed aimed at avoiding or at least reducing possible civilian casualties, quite often requested strikes are simply not authorized by the U.S. military authorities.

Well, then why do we have non combatants killed by U.S. bombs? Very simple. Al Qaeda, the Taliban and now ISIL do not follow the established laws of warfare. They routinely place their own assets (troops, ammunition, logistics) in the middle of densely populated areas. They deliberately use civilians as human shields. And the purpose of all this is obvious: to deter American attacks.

Civilian deaths become propaganda tools

And when some ISIL positions are indeed attacked and civilians are killed, then there is a huge publicity gain for the insurgents. *"The blood thirsty Americans bomb indiscriminately, deliberately targeting women and children"*.

Needless to say, ISIL and others have a vested interest in inflating the numbers of civilians killed through drone or other U.S. air strikes. This is their own way of fighting the propaganda war, using the argument of American barbarity in order to recruit more people willing to fight and die for the cause.

Impossible to avoid civilian casualties

The fact is that, even with heroic efforts, it is impossible to avoid civilian casualties while fighting irregular forces that hide within populated areas. It is just impossible. Even with highly sophisticated satellites and other sensors that gather detailed images and provide real time data to those who operate drones, or to pilots of manned aircraft, it is just impossible for the U.S. military to neatly separate combatants who usually wear no uniforms from innocent civilians in populated areas.

No way to win

So, here is the bottom line. If Obama is serious about cutting the number of casualties going forward, then this means that America cannot realistically fight aggressively and win against insurgents who routinely hide in urban areas. Even today, without new restrictions in place on the use of air power, the effort to minimize collateral damage means relatively few air strikes, because many targets are deemed to be unlawful by the military lawyers, and therefore excluded.

More targets will be declared off-limits

If America wants to further diminish the likelihood of future civilian casualties while fighting insurgents, this means that an even larger number of possible military targets will be declared off-limits by the military lawyers, due to their close proximity to civilian areas.

And here is the absurdity. This is no way to fight any war. As troubling as this is to our civilized conscience, it is just impossible to fight an insurgency that operates in cities and towns without causing some unwanted suffering.

If America wants to win against ISIL and other insurgents, it has to accept this fact: if you want to destroy enemy forces that hide in populated areas, you have to accept that civilians will also be killed.

Long, inconclusive conflicts

Otherwise, if avoiding civilian casualties is more important than destroying at least some enemy targets, let's prepare for an endless and inconclusive conflict with adversaries who do not play by the accepted rules of war.

With all the restrictions outlined above, and possibly more to come, the U.S. cannot fight properly; because Washington feels the pressure of a world public opinion that requires America

to behave according to an impossible standard.