

# A Syrian Gulf of Tonkin Resolution: Will Congress Give Obama a “Blank Check for War”, a “Green Light” to Killing More Syrians

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## **When it comes to war, isn't our account overdrawn?**

When the president asks Congress for a blank check for war, why does the Congress fret about setting a limit on war powers instead of just saying: “NO” to any check? What happened to checks and balances (as if we all didn't know)?

Already quislings of both parties in the Senate – Democrat Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Republican Pat Roberts of Kansas – are staking out the “compromise” position of a limited war in response to President Obama's proposal for an open-ended war authorization. According to Leahy, Democratic senate staffers are working on an alternative authorization for killing Syrians.

Several Republican senators, including John McCain of Arizona, Bob Corker of Tennessee, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina just want the Obama administration to start killing people, the sooner the better, their only caveat being that the president should have a plan.

McCain wants the US to do more – he hasn't said how much more, or if he would accept any military limitations. “It can't just be, in my view, pinprick cruise missiles,” McCain said, describing a weapon that doesn't exist outside of military fantasy.

## **Rand Paul offers tepid resistance, flatters president for obeying law**

One of the few clear voices opposed to the US engaging even “surgically” in the Syrian civil war is Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, who calls the president's proposal an effort to “save face and add bad policy to bad policy.” Paul also said:

“I would ask, ‘How do you ask a man to be the first to die for a mistake?’ I'm not sending my son, your son or anybody else's son to fight for a stalemate.”

With as mealy a mouth as anyone, Paul stands with the apparently overwhelming majority of our elected leaders, bravely telling reporters he was “proud” of the president for coming to Congress for war-making support. Translation: “Oh thank you Mr. President for not acting like a dictator and embarrassing us with our complete lack of spine to oppose your imperial enterprise (which is, after all, our imperial enterprise, too, but we really don't like having to say so and some of us even blush).”

Conventional wisdom on September 2 predicted that the Senate would endorse whatever

the president wants to do, just not as long as he might want to do it. The prediction for the House is generally iffy, but House Minority Leader Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California is cheerleading from the front of the war bandwagon.

Such actual Congressional opposition to the whole idea of putting the US any deeper into Syria for any reason comes from a few representatives in the House:

- Republican Chris Gibson of New York, an Army veteran with multiple foreign deployments: “I hope my colleagues will fully think through the weightiness of this decision and reject military action. The situation on the ground in Syria is tragic and deeply saddening, but escalating the conflict and Americanizing the Syrian civil war will not resolve the matter.”

- Democrat Betty McCollum of Minnesota: “Unilateral U.S. military action against the Syrian regime at this time would do nothing to advance American interests, but would certainly fuel extremist groups on both sides of the conflict that are determined to expand the bloodshed beyond Syria’s borders.”

- Republican Devin Nunes of California: “The apparent chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime is an appalling, unconscionable act by a bloodthirsty tyrant. The ‘limited’ military response supported by President Obama, however, shows no clear goal, strategy, or any coherence whatsoever, and is supported neither by myself nor the American people.”

### **The blank check comes with no due date, late fees, or penalties**

The White House draft “authorization for use of United States armed forces” is problematical from the first “whereas,” which asserts as a fact a charge that remains in dispute:

“Whereas, on August 21, 2013, the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria, killing more than 1,000 innocent Syrians....”

If this premise is wrong, as seems quite possible, than the following seven “whereas paragraphs are mostly accurate but irrelevant, with some demagoguery thrown in to persuade or intimidate Congress.

But even if the premise turns out to be correct, the “authorization should be unacceptable for the unlimited scope of action allowed to the president, who still uses the 2001 AUMF (Authorization for Use of Military Force) against terrorism to justify his authority to wage war by whatever means he chooses in Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Mali, and elsewhere. That law remains open-ended and unmodified by Congress, allowing the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force” against pretty much anyone he “determines” deserves to be attacked.

The new authorization gives the president the freedom “to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in connection with the use of chemical weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in the conflict in Syria,” which seems as if it’s at least limited to the geography of Syria, and only as long as there’s a conflict there. Of course it implicitly leaves it up to the president to determine what a “conflict” is and even, arguably, what “Syria” is.

Such limitation is a chimera. Unfettering the president from even that illusory constraint,

the authorization goes on to allow him respond to any “proliferation” inside – *or outside* – of Syria “*of any weapons of mass destruction, including chemical or biological weapons or components of or materials used in such weapons....*”

And just in case that’s not broad enough to let the president do most anything he chooses, the authorization goes on to allow him to do anything necessary to “*protect the United States and its allies and partners against the threat posed by such weapons.*”

When protecting against a “threat,” nothing is ruled out, no matter how crazy paranoid the threat may be. In post-9/11 United States, threat perceptions don’t have much restraint on the paranoid crazy.

In a fundamentally cowardly Congress, members are unlikely to oppose this kind of threat to the national interest, especially now that they getting their egos stroked by the White House.

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