

## Obama opts for diplomacy instead of war

Written by George E. Curry NNPA Columnist  
Tuesday, 17 September 2013 13:01

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Speaking to a war-weary nation Tuesday night, President Barack Obama asked Congress to postpone a vote authorizing him to launch an air attack against Syria while he explores a Russian diplomatic proposal that could rid Syria of its arsenal of chemical weapons.

In a televised 16-minute address from the White House, Obama said: "...over the last few days, we've seen some encouraging signs. In part because of the credible threat of U.S. military action, as well as constructive talks that I had with President Putin, the Russian government has indicated a willingness to join with the international community in pushing Assad to give up his chemical weapons. Assad has since admitted that it has these weapons, and even said they'd join the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits their use."

In a speech originally planned to drum up support for military action against Syria, President Obama changed gears as he expressed willingness to exhaust all diplomatic initiatives before using force.

"It's too early to tell whether this offer will succeed, and any agreement must verify that the Assad regime keeps its commitments. But this initiative has the potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force, particularly because Russia is one of Assad's strongest allies. I have, therefore, asked the leaders of Congress to postpone a vote to

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authorize the use of force while we pursue this diplomatic path."

Russia, a close ally of Syria, announced that it had gotten Syria's agreement to turn over its chemical weapons to Russia, the United Nations and other countries. However, Russia is opposing a UN resolution that would authorize military action if Syria does not follow the outlined plan. President Obama announced that Secretary of State John Kerry will meet with his Russian counterpart in Switzerland on Thursday and that he would continue to hold talks with Putin in an effort to break the stalemate with Syria.

Opinion polls show that most Americans opposed taking military action against Syria although they are convinced Assad gassed his own people.

The latest intervention by Russia gives Obama time to seek more support in Congress. There was little doubt that the president's plan, at least in its present form, was headed for defeat on Capitol Hill. Postponing the vote spares President Obama public humiliation.

In an uphill battle to shift public opinion, President Obama listed and answered many of the "hard questions" Americans have against being involved in yet another war: Won't this put us on a slippery slope to another war? It is worth acting if we don't take out Assad? What about the dangers of retaliation? Why should we get involved at all in this place that's so complicated, and where those who come after Assad may be enemies of human rights? Why not leave this to other countries, or seek solutions short of force? Why should we be the world's policeman?

Obama offered a point-by-point rebuttal to each objection, all of which led back to the president's primary theme:

"If we fail to act, the Assad regime will see no reason to stop using chemical weapons. As the ban against these weapons erodes, other tyrants will have no reason to think twice about acquiring poison gas, and using them. Over time, our troops would again face the prospect of chemical warfare on the battlefield. And it could be easier for terrorist organizations to obtain these weapons, and to use them to attack civilians.

"If fighting spills beyond Syria's borders, these weapons could threaten allies like Turkey, Jordan, and Israel. And a failure to stand against the use of chemical weapons would weaken prohibitions against other weapons of mass destruction, and embolden Assad's ally, Iran — which must decide whether to ignore international law by building a nuclear weapon, or to take a more peaceful path. This is not a world we should accept. This is what's at stake."

Obama provided graphic descriptions of the toll the turmoil in Syria has taken on its citizens. On Aug. 21, according to U.S. officials, Assad forces used chemical weapons that killed more than 1,400 people outside Damascus, many of them children. Obama said that put the death toll in Syria to at least 100,000 at the hands of Assad's administration.

The president said he understands the reluctance engage in another war.

"Now, I know that after the terrible toll of Iraq and Afghanistan, the idea of any military action, no

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matter how limited, is not going to be popular. After all, I've spent four and a half years working to end wars, not to start them," he said. "Our troops are out of Iraq. Our troops are coming home from Afghanistan. And I know Americans want all of us in Washington – especially me – to concentrate on the task of building our nation here at home: putting people back to work, educating our kids, growing our middle class."

Still, the president said, the U.S. has a vested interest in what happens in Syria.

"After careful deliberation, I determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike. The purpose of this strike would be to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, to degrade his regime's ability to use them, and to make clear to the world that we will not tolerate their use."