

Views

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HIS ANGER IS A START

To get the economy growing again, America needs policies big enough to match the president's newfound anger.

Faced with an economy in desperate straits, President Obama tried bargaining with Republicans, and pleaded with them for reasonable policies to help stave off disaster. He got nothing but a cold shoulder and America got a credit downgrade.

Now, on a bus tour in the Midwest, he is bitterly pointing the finger at his opponents for their refusal to consider any new revenues to tackle the deficit and their insistence on deep near-term spending cuts that will only cause more economic pain. His anger is long overdue. But it would be much more effective if he combined it with strong ideas of his own for how to fix the economy, rather than the thin agenda he is now promoting.

Fearing the real possibility of a default, the president stayed largely mild-mannered through the whole debt-ceiling hostage ordeal. He even praised the bill that emerged, even though it cut spending excessively at a time when the fragile economy can't afford it. But on a factory trip last week and again on his tour of Iowa and Illinois, he was far more candid. He accurately referred to the "debt-ceiling debacle" and pointed out that the resulting downgrade was an assessment that Congress cannot make necessary compromises. "We've got the kind of partisan brinksmanship that is willing to put party ahead of country," he said.

He left no doubt of his target when he noted that Speaker John Boehner walked away from a more balanced deficit-cutting deal and that, in last week's debate, the Republican presidential contenders who participated unanimously rejected the possibility of a deal that cut spending 10 times as much as it raised taxes. "What that tells me is, O.K., you've gotten to the point where you're just thinking about politics. You're not thinking about common sense."

Mr. Obama has proposed a series of small-bore measures to reduce the jobless rate, chosen in the hopes that they are so obvious that even House Republicans would consider going along with them. That was a mirage, of course. When Republicans reject even tax cuts, something else is going on, and Mr. Obama identified it on Monday. "There are some folks in Congress who think that doing something in cooperation with me or this White House, that that somehow is bad politics," he said. It is, in fact, entirely about politics.

He also pushed back against the government bashing by Representative Michele Bachmann and Gov. Rick Perry of Texas. While Mr. Perry even accused the Federal Reserve of treason for increasing the money supply — and shamefully threatened its chairman, Ben Bernanke, saying "we would treat him pretty ugly down in Texas" if he does so again — Mr. Obama said government is hardly broken. It houses people during emergencies, he noted, fights fires and crime, and sends out pension checks. That argument and that contrast would be much easier to make if Mr. Obama came up with policies big enough to match his newfound anger — and big enough to get the economy growing again.

PRESSING SWISS BANKS

Despite all of the efforts by the Internal Revenue Service, wealthy American tax cheats are still able to hide their money because Swiss banks are still eager to help them.

An indictment disclosed earlier this month by the U.S. attorney in Manhattan noted that when the Swiss bank UBS — under strong pressure from Washington — abandoned the secret account business, one of its bankers left, taking with him several clients for whom he then opened secret accounts at five other Swiss banks. Another indictment claims that a Swiss financial adviser who managed secret funds for American clients moved accounts from UBS to two private Swiss banks.

Both advisers are accused of using shady tactics, like opening phony businesses in Hong Kong and fake foundations in Liechtenstein to conceal the money from the I.R.S. The banks, which are not named in the indictments, were not accused in the fraud because the advisers gave them false documents stating that the account owners were not American. But the banks did have information that could have alerted them to the accounts' ownership had they done better due diligence.

These indictments follow the disclosure by Credit Suisse that it was the target of a criminal investigation by the Justice Department into how Swiss institutions assisted American income tax evaders. The cases underscore how deeply Swiss banks rely on tax evasion.

The U.S. government, which fined UBS \$780 million and forced it to reveal data on 4,450 American customers, is reportedly negotiating a global agreement with the Swiss government that could result in a hefty collective fine against these banks. Switzerland is again resisting demands for more information. Washington should not stop pushing until all Swiss banks hand over their files and close those accounts.

Silencing Cambodia's honest brokers

Phnom Penh is set

to enact a

law that will

hamstring the

country's last independent

voices.

Elizabeth Becker

WASHINGTON This year is the 20th anniversary of the Paris peace accords that ended the Cambodian war and any further threat from the murderous Khmer Rouge. It required all the major powers — the United States, leading European countries, the former Soviet Union and China — as well as most Asian nations to come up with an accord, a rare achievement. In a speech last week, Gareth Evans said that during his eight years as the Australian foreign minister "nothing has given me more pleasure and pride than the Paris peace agreement concluded in 1991."

I reported from Paris on the negotiations, which took several years of convoluted diplomacy since few countries or political parties had clean hands in the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge. When the deal was finally signed in October of 1991 there were self-congratulations all around, champagne and a huge sigh of relief that Cambodia could move on to peace and democracy.

It didn't turn out that way. Cambodia today is essentially ruled by a single political party with little room for an opposition, has a weak and corrupt judiciary, and the country's most effective union leaders have been murdered.

That wasn't the scenario envisioned in Paris. Now, just as 20th anniversary

commemorations are approaching, one of the few groups still enjoying the freedoms created under the peace accords are about to be silenced. The government of Cambodia is poised to enact a law that will effectively hamstring the country's lively civil society and NGOs, among the last independent voices in Cambodia.

In Paris, the framework for Cambodia's democracy was a much debated element of the peace accords. That debate led to Cambodia's Constitution and its guarantee of freedom of association and speech. The proposed law on civil society would deprive these independent Cambodian groups of those rights and undermine much of their work representing the country's most vulnerable citizens — advocating for their rights and dispensing aid, largely paid for with foreign donations. Most recently, these civil society groups exposed the government's eviction of the poor from valuable land in Phnom Penh. As a result, the World Bank is suspending all new loans to Cambodia until those made homeless receive proper housing.

Under the new law, these independent citizen groups would have to register with the government and win approval to operate under vague criteria; if the government disapproves of a group's behavior it can dissolve it using equally vague criteria. There would be no right of appeal.

The normally fractious Cambodian civil groups have joined together against

the new law and asked the government for serious amendments to protect basic constitutional rights. They were rejected and only superficial changes were made. With little time left, one of their NGO leaders made an emergency trip to Washington to meet with international organizations, foreign embassies and the U.S. government, asking them to speak out loudly against the measure before it passes in the coming weeks.

"If this law is passed we will be silenced. Foreign donors will give us less money. The people who will suffer are the poor," said Borithy Lun, the head of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia. He led a meeting at the offices of Oxfam America, where I am a member of the board of directors. The law would diminish the ability of international NGOs, like Oxfam, to help the poor in Cambodia as well, since it requires all foreign non-profit organizations to work directly with official agencies, essentially becoming an arm of the government.

All of this will have a direct impact on Cambodia's impressive economic gains. Foreign businesses have come to rely on Cambodia's civil society groups to act as honest brokers, pointing out the pitfalls in an economy marked by corruption and weak law enforcement. Foreign governments and institutions have already warned the Cambodian government that if the proposed civil society law is passed, they will rethink the \$1 billion in aid given to Cambodia every year, which is roughly half of the coun-

try's budget. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has spoken up repeatedly in favor of strong, independent civil societies and Cambodia has made no secret of its desire to continue improving relations with the United States.

As the commemorations of the Paris peace accords begin, with more champagne and seminars, instead of looking backward to past glory, it might be better to focus on today and reinforce the accords. Countries that are rightfully proud of their role in bringing peace to Cambodia are in a good position to require preserving the independence of civil society when Cambodia comes asking for their votes at the United Nations this fall.

The Cambodian government has two big objectives: It wants to win one of the nonpermanent seats on the United Nations Security Council, and to get the United Nations to help resolve the Thai-Cambodia border dispute centered on the temple of Preah Vihear. Cambodia has dispatched senior diplomats to countries large and small to win their votes and has initiated border talks with the government of the new Thai prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra. The price for greater influence and prestige in the world should be reinforcing democracy, not diminishing it.

ELIZABETH BECKER is a former New York Times correspondent and author of "When the War Was Over," a history of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge.

U.S. and Russia: Agreeing not to disagree

We need to

move past

Cold War

thinking

and co-

operate on

missile de-

fense.

Kevin Ryan

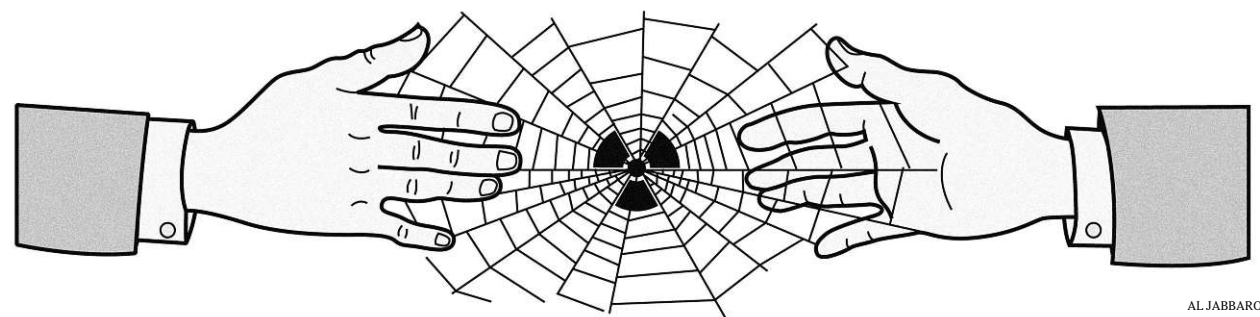
According to media reports, the United States and Russia were close to signing an agreement on missile defense cooperation on the margins of the G-8 summit meeting in May. The details of the proposal are not public, but the disappointment over not achieving the agreement is.

It's true that not since the failure at the Reykjavik summit 25 years ago to stem deployment of offensive nuclear missiles in Europe have Russia and the United States faced off on such a serious arms issue. But let's get a grip. It's not 1986, and America and Russia are not squared off in a nuclear stalemate. We're discussing defensive missiles — not offensive ones. And we're discussing cooperation — not confrontation. Or at least we could be.

The public is not privy to the details of the recently aborted agreement, but there's so much confusion over terms like "joint" and "sectors" and misunderstanding of actual system capabilities that it's a wonder we can even schedule a meeting in which to disagree.

Although it's not 1986, we should take a page from our predecessors' playbook. A year after the failure at Reykjavik to resolve the nuclear stand-off in Europe, both sides achieved a historic agreement to eliminate an entire class of offensive missiles. All we need today is a clear understanding of the problem and some common-sense thinking.

Here is the problem. Today, to prevent a nuclear missile attack, the



AL JABBARO

United States and Russia are pursuing two fundamentally opposing strategies: one a missile defense system, and the other the capability to defeat a missile defense system. America and Russia are aiming for the same goal — freedom from a nuclear missile attack — but the strategies are antithetical. The reasons are that Russia knows it cannot afford a robust missile defense system, but the United States believes it can.

The United States does not need Russian cooperation to deploy missile defense; it is already doing so. Washington, however, does need Russian cooperation to prevent a missile attack against the United States. That is because, for the foreseeable future, Russia will retain the capacity to attack the American homeland with nuclear missiles despite our missile defense deployments. So, U.S. leaders must address Russian concerns or risk actually increasing the threat of nuclear attack by the very deployment we hoped would reduce that threat.

Each side has set conditions reminiscent of Cold War days. What we need now are ideas that reflect our improved relationship. Here are some thoughts:

- Jointly develop separate systems: The reality is that today our two systems are different and we don't talk to each other. But who in the 1960's would have predicted that competing U.S. and Russian space programs would be working together by the 1970's? Or that by 2011, the United States would rely on Russia to send its astronauts into space? Maybe we should let NASA and the Russian Space Agency work this out. Both Russia and America must make their technologies more open to each other so that coordination can be achieved between the two systems. This is a job that industry can lead with government permission.
- Steps by the United States: It's time for America to realize that Russia is not the adversary it once was. I am a proponent of missile defense, but I have enough experience to know that it will always remain a limited system, capable of protecting our forces, allies and homeland only partially. Let's promise Russia in writing what we already know is reality — our system will remain limited and will not be directed against Russia.
- Steps by Russia: It's also time for Russia to realize that the United States is not

its enemy, and to admit that NATO is not a threat. Every new radar site or missile defense launcher is not an existential danger to Russia. Russia should agree to share its major military advantage — its geography. U.S./NATO radars in Russia's southern tier would be ideal for defense against missiles from Iran. And, for U.S. engagements by the Aegis SM3 missiles, Russia should grant permission to intercept enemy ballistic missiles over or near Russian territory.

There are many other steps we can take, such as a serious and open joint assessment of the ballistic missile threat, joint research and development agreements, and joint training. Perhaps we could even expand on our 1987 success in eliminating our own intermediate range ballistic missiles by encouraging the rest of the world to follow suit. Let's emulate 1987 and not 1986.

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The joys of a Facebook birthday

Why the

social net-

work is the

best thing

that's ever

happened

to birth-

days.



Virginia Heffernan

Happy birthday!! With two exclamatory points, as we do it on Facebook. It's your birthday today, right? I send you many happy returns — and a wish that you are, if only for today, among the 750 million active Facebook users.

Yes, Facebook can be capricious and tyrannical and tedious, but the leviathan social network is the best thing that's ever happened to birthdays.

Come to think of it, how did we manage birthdays, those nettlesome sources of narcissism and guilt, before the Internet? I'm trying to remember. It seems there was always a scale problem. Birthdays in analog times were over-celebrated (as for children or the powerful), or they were neglected (as for everyone else). It stung when people forgot your birthday, sure, but the shame of caring or, worse yet, reminding people to care about your birthday stung much more deeply.

I'm now convinced that if you'd asked me what I wanted for any birthday, or in-

deed for anyone else's birthday, before 2007, when I joined Facebook, I would have said I wanted a mechanism that made it easy for people to wish one another happy birthday. In my fantasy app, celebrators of birthdays wouldn't have to be seen craving attention, but they'd still have their presence on this third rock from the sun gratefully acknowledged. At the same time, acquaintances and intimates wouldn't have to go to heroic mnemonic lengths, or hire secretaries, to keep calendars marked and birthday greetings in the mail.

Facebook's birthday feature is a seemingly small but cleverly gracious component of the digital universe. When you join the massive site, you enter in the date you were born, leaving off the year if you choose. You don't do this because you are a birthday-fanatic who expects weeks of flowers. You do it because — well, you're also entering in where you went to college and whether you like "Rescue Me," so why not your birthday?

And then the day arrives. Alerted to its imminence, and then to its arrival, Facebook friends have been conspicuously urged on their own pages this way: "Joe Jones. It's his birthday. Say happy birthday!" To honor this command, they need only click "Say happy birthday" and type a few characters. It takes effort and misanthropy to refuse.

"Happy birthday!!" a friend can type with the exact degree of effort — no less and no more — that one human honestly feels like mustering once a

year on behalf of the existence of another human to whom she is not related or similarly psychically indebted.

The keystrokes of a birthday greeting cost the person who enters them next to nothing. But the Facebook greeting still carries something like eye contact and a smile — humanness. Which is, paradoxically, what people most fervently traffic in the cyberworld of the Internet.

At this moment, when the world's markets seem haywire, seeing an economy that works as well as Facebook's birthday feature gives a flash of hope. But not everyone sees Facebook's birthday-nomics as the creation of efficiencies in a marketplace of kindness and humanity. In Slate, not long ago, David Plotz decided that Facebook birthday greetings were fakery itself, and an attempt by people who offer them "to build social capital — undeserved social capital." What was so obnoxious and opportunistic about the greetings? Plotz had an answer: "It's all too obvious that the greetings are programmed, canned, and impersonal, prompted by a Facebook alert."

Hmm. Fascinating — and enlightening about how different reality and humanness are defined in virtual space. To Plotz, a birthday greeting is only meaningful — only real — if the person offering it uses analog memory aids. (Presumably, a birthday greeting inspired by a calendar, a good brain for dates or a nagging spouse would not be fraudulent.) "It's one thing to remember your

friend's birthday because you took him out a decade ago for his drunken 21st birthday debauch," Plotz writes, applauding a path to memory that requires 10 years and possibly the psychic penetration of a boozy blackout. "It's much lamer to 'remember' your friend's birthday because Facebook told you to."

For a birthday greeting to really sing with authenticity, then, the memory-retrieval behind it should have required some genuine battle with the limits of neurobiology. Plotz, for his birthday, wants to see a little sacrifice from his friends. By contrast, what makes the Facebook birthday alerts insidious to him is what makes them benign to me: that the alerts work, don't disproportionately favor calendrical geniuses, and never fail. Also, I like that they engender actual greetings.

That's right: So far, bots and spammers don't seem to be among the well-wishers on a Facebook birthday. Real humans send the greetings. And they're customized. The majority of Facebook birthday greeters use exclamation points; many add earnest hopes for well-being and prosperity; some come up with real witticisms. To me, on my birthday, these well-wishes invariably seem like a surfeit of good will beamed at me from the universe itself.

Facebook's greeting says to a human, "I was told your name, and told it was your birthday, and I didn't do *nothing*." Sometimes, like on your birthday, that's a perfect gift.