



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on September 11, 2014

Obama Follows Bush's Iraq Playbook

U.S. politicians are exploiting the gruesome beheadings of two American journalists to whip up war fever against ISIS, the “[criminal gang](#)” masquerading as an organization of devout Sunni Muslims that controls large parts of Syria and Iraq. The American propaganda campaign seems to be working if [recent polls](#) are accurate.

No decent person is anything but appalled by those executions. But are they grounds for the United States to go to war?

No, they are not. Barack Obama says his job is to protect Americans *wherever* they are, but he doesn't cite the source of this power. No such power is implied in the president's [oath of office](#), which obligates him only to “faithfully execute the Office of President” and to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution.”

[Article II](#) of the Constitution vests the “executive power” in the president, but that just means he has the power to execute laws passed by the legislative branch. There is no blank-check language about protecting Americans, particularly outside the country.

Section 2 of that article of course says the president is “commander in chief” of the armed forces, but no matter how many times the war party repeats that phrase, it cannot be reasonably interpreted as unilateral power to take the country to war. Article I reserves the power to declare and finance wars to Congress alone.

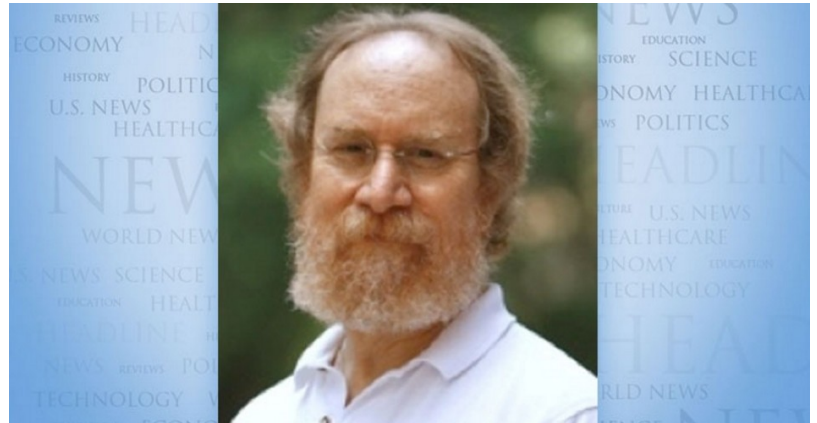
True, since the end of World War II, presidents have assumed the unilateral power to make war, and most members of Congress have been more than happy to defer. But this does not mean that we who understand the danger of autocracy should acquiesce.

Obama says he can go to war against ISIS anywhere without “authorization” from Congress. (No one in government or the media uses the word *declaration*.) In his interview on *Meet the Press*, Obama [said](#),

I'm confident that I have the authorization that I need to protect the American people. And I'm always going to do what's necessary to protect the American people. But I do think it's important for Congress to understand what the plan is, to have buy in, to debate it.

But understanding, buying in (whatever that means), and debating are not the same as authorizing through a declaration of war. Just because most members of Congress would hate to sign off on a [years-long](#), offensive war less than two months before an election, that's no excuse for Obama to exercise autocratic powers.

Note that Obama speaks of protecting the American people. He means Americans both abroad and at home. Americans of course are free to travel anywhere. If the U.S. government is to have the power to protect or avenge them abroad, it will have to be able to exercise military power globally. Such imperial power, which the government has long exercised, should disturb peace- and freedom-loving Americans precisely because it creates the potential for perpetual war, invites retaliatory terrorism, and requires





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high government spending and borrowing.

It may be taken for granted that a president can go to war when an American is killed overseas, but that kind of power is too dangerous to accept meekly. Americans, especially war correspondents, should be on notice that they travel at their own risk. This may sound callous, but the alternative is a global empire that we cannot afford either in blood or treasure.

What about protecting Americans at home? Here the irony of Obama's position is striking. U.S. intervention in the Middle East is what endangers Americans at home. Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda hit Americans here because for many years the U.S. government had perpetrated and supported violence against Arabs (Palestinians, Iraqis, Egyptians, Lebanese and others) — and it still does.

No al-Qaeda affiliate existed in Iraq before George W. Bush launched his invasion and occupation in 2003. ISIS is an offshoot of al-Qaeda, and its execution of the two journalists was retaliation for recent U.S. bombings in Iraq. No doubt those murders were intended also to goad Obama into sending American forces, which would boost ISIS's recruitment and prestige. Bin Laden did the same thing, bragging he would bleed the United States bankrupt through long years of war. He succeeded.

Hold on tight: Obama is about to replicate Bush's folly.

Sheldon Richman is vice president and editor at [The Future of Freedom Foundation](#) in Fairfax, Va..



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