

Obama's Greatest Asset: Clueless Americans

☒ H.L. Mencken made Andy Rooney look like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Both gave curmudgeons a bad name. But Andy was shrewd; he played to Middle Americans. He would say something like, "Have you ever wondered why we collect string?" – and they would swoon. He was one of them, they thought. I knew Andy. He wasn't one of them and I suspect he didn't think much of them. Mencken, on the other hand, made no secret of his disdain for ordinary Americans, whom he saw as hopeless dolts.

Mencken, a Baltimore newspaperman, once said this about his fellow Americans:

"Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance. No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have researched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people."

Pretty cold. But given that the great masses of plain people elected Barack Obama twice, maybe H.L. was onto something.

They elected him the first time because he was a historical figure. He wasn't Mondale or Dukakis or Gore or Kerry. He was young and cool and black and liberal. And Americans wanted to make history.

But the second time around? Unemployment was high, a big majority of Americans thought we were on the wrong track, the economic recovery was anemic, and most Americans had little confidence that things would get better anytime soon.

Yet he won again. So how do we explain it? Yes, you could pin it on a weak Republican candidate, but maybe Mencken was

right. Maybe Americans – or enough of them anyway – are just not that smart.

I've been thinking about this the past few days as I, along with everyone else, watched how the president has bungled the Syrian situation. First, during his campaign for re-election, he needlessly draws a red line, warning Syria that the use of chemical weapons is something the United States would not tolerate.

So far, there have been no repercussions.

Then, a week or so ago, after the world witnessed gruesome videos of dead children who had been exposed to poison gas, presumably the work of the Syrian regime, Secretary of State John Kerry makes a forceful statement about Bashar al-Assad's immorality and makes clear that military action is coming.

Twenty-four hours later the president, who said he didn't need Congressional approval for a military attack, decides he wants Congress in on the decision. The president says he still wants to attack Syria, but that there's no rush.

John Kerry, mindful that Congress is as war-weary as the American people, explains that any U.S. action would be an "unbelievably small, limited kind of effort," prompting groans and guffaws from all over the place.

Enter Vladimir Putin, who comes riding to Mr. Obama's rescue – rescue, that is, from a certain no vote in the House and perhaps another no vote in the Democratically-controlled Senate. Putin pushes the idea – originally put forth, tongue in check, by Secretary of State Kerry – that Russia would work with the Syrian regime to put their chemical arsenal under international control "for subsequent destruction."

The result of all this is a president who comes off looking like more like a community organizer than a commander-in-chief. I keep waiting for Ted Mack to come out and say:

Welcome friends to the latest edition of the Amateur Hour.

At heart, Mr. Obama may or may not be a nice guy. Reasonable people may disagree on that. But when it comes to being president, he's clearly in way over his head.

In a piece for Commentary that runs under the headline, "The Collapse of the Obama Presidency," Peter Wehner makes that very point. This is how he puts it:

"How bad has 2013 been for Barack Obama? Let us count the ways.

"In the first year of his second term, the president has failed on virtually every front. He put his prestige on the line to pass federal gun-control legislation—and lost. He made climate change a central part of his inaugural address—and nothing has happened. The president went head-to-head with Republicans on sequestration—and he failed. He's been forced to delay implementation of the employer mandate, a key feature of the Affordable Care Act. ObamaCare is more unpopular than ever, and it's turning out to be a 'train wreck' (to quote Democratic Senator Max Baucus) in practice. The most recent jobs report was the worst in a year, with the Obama recovery already qualifying as a historically weak one. Immigration reform is going nowhere. And then there's Syria, which has turned out to be an epic disaster."

Barack Obama is the man who told us that his candidacy would "ring out across this land as a hymn that will heal this nation, repair this world, make this time different than all the rest." No wonder his acolytes thought he was the messiah.

So why do I think that if he were constitutionally able to run for a third term, despite everything, there's a good chance he'd win? Let's turn again to Mr. Mencken and that observation he made many years ago for an answer.

"Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of

individual ignorance. No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have researched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.”

Or to put it in a slightly different way: Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups.