

Nov 04, 2016 by [Rob Asghar](#)

When Silence is Golden in PD ^[1]

An unyielding belief in strength over suppleness — constantly deploying the full force of both the sword and the mouth — may lie at the core of that old warrior Sen. John McCain's criticism that President Obama has been too passive in reacting to Iranian protests against that country's controversial elections.

Critics of McCain, including a number of conservative commentators, questioned the notion that the United States should engage more aggressively in the Iranian melee — even if just at the rhetorical level. Columnist Peggy Noonan wrote that McCain and other colleagues "went quite crazy insisting President Obama declare whose side America was on, as if the world doesn't know whose side America is on This was Aggressive Political Solipsism at work: Always exploit events to show you love freedom more than the other guy, always make someone else's delicate drama your excuse for a thumping curtain speech."

I'm willing to consider that McCain's motives are pure and that he sincerely believes that "America has a moral obligation" as well as a practical opportunity to usher in a better era for Iranians. Yet I will still say that McCain is wrong.

If I were a ruthless tyrant clinging to power in Iran right about now, I would be praying to God above that He would intervene by pushing the United States — otherwise known as the Great Satan — into the conflict. It would be the most effective way to get 60 percent of the public to support the regime without having to resort to further vote-rigging. If I were a young leader of the opposition, I would be praying that John McCain gets less airtime.

As I've argued elsewhere recently, America has been a scapegoat for despots in that region of the world, thanks to their perceptions of relentless meddling on our part. Take us away as a convenient devil, and those despots will now be judged for their failures, not America's failures.

Obama has been hammered by many would-be presidents for his PD, often dismissed as his "global apology tour." Yet such critics seem to forget that there has in fact been much to apologize for recently; that the humility inherent in such apologies generates trust internationally; and that a grasp of our own limited ability to interpret signs is an important speed bump as we move forward.

All that comes into play here. As Noonan noted, we have often gotten Iran wrong while wildly flipping levers there — and thus, "modesty and humility seem appropriate stances from which to observe and comment."

Let us admit that there is much we do not know yet, as we gain scraps of information from Twitter and cable news coverage. Do we know precisely what short-term and long-term forces are in play in Iran? Are these forces that can usher in long-lasting moderation? Bear in mind that moderates don't like getting shot at, which has kept them from taming passionate impulses across the Middle East and South Asia; so the resilience of the current mob may be

something to watch with hope and with great caution. America has a huge stake in the outcome, but PD posturing at this stage would be greatly counterproductive on the part of a nation that has not been a friend of Iran during the lifetimes of most of the protesters.

Indeed, a modest and humble silence seems the only way forward at the moment for the U.S. government.
