

The Washington Post

Fact Checker Analysis

President Obama and the ‘red line’ on Syria’s chemical weapons

By **Glenn Kessler** September 6, 2013

“I didn’t set a red line. The world set a red line.”

— **President Obama, news conference in Stockholm, Sept. 4, 2013**

“We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”

— **Obama, remarks to reporters, August 20, 2012**

This is a puzzler. How can the president say he did not create a “red line” when his statement last year about a “red line” is one of the most famous statements of his presidency? We’ve certainly received many tweets and e-mails from readers eager to see The Fact Checker slap a bunch of Pinocchios on him.

It’s not quite so simple. The “red line” has been rhetorically troublesome for the president ever since he uttered those words about a year ago — apparently to the surprise of his aides. Let’s see what the fuss is about.

The August 2012 statement

Obama’s initial comment was prompted by this question:

“Mr. President, could you update us on your latest thinking of where you think things are in Syria, and in particular, whether you envision using U.S. military, if simply for nothing else, the safe keeping of the chemical weapons, and if you’re confident that the chemical weapons are safe?”

Note that the question has to do with whether the Syrian government has enough controls on its stockpile of chemical weapons that such weapons would not fall in the hands of terrorist groups. Obama gave a [long answer](#), but here’s the key section:

“I have, at this point, not ordered military engagement in the situation. But the point that you made about chemical and biological weapons is critical. That’s an issue that doesn’t just concern Syria; it concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us. We

cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people.

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Obama's formulation is very loose and informal, focused mainly on the question of movement of chemical weapons: “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.”

When The Fact Checker was a [diplomatic correspondent](#) for The Washington Post, one rule of thumb was that prepared statements should be given more weight than off-hand statements at news conferences. Prepared statements often were the result of careful staff discussions and thus generally provided a better sense of the actual policies of an administration. Of course, talking points at news conferences can also be the result of staff discussions, but they may not always be delivered correctly.

Indeed, the New York Times [later reported](#) that Obama had stunned his aides with his “unscripted” language. The Times said that his comments were made “to the surprise of some of the advisers who had attended the weekend meetings and wondered where the ‘red line’ came from. With such an evocative phrase, the president had defined his policy in a way some advisers wish they could take back.”

But aides did not walk it back. The very next day, when [asked](#) about the “red line,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said:

“As the President said yesterday in terms of Syria, we're watching very closely the stockpile of Syrian chemical weapons; that any use or proliferation of efforts related to those chemical weapons is something that would be very serious and it would be a grave mistake.

“There are important international obligations that the Syrian regime must live up to in terms of the handling of their chemical weapons. And the officials who have that responsibility will be held accountable for their actions and will be held accountable for living up to those international obligations.”

So the red line, for better or worse, was in place.

The April 2013 reiteration

In April, in a [letter sent to lawmakers](#) saying there was evidence that chemical weapons had been used in Syria, White House legislative affairs director Miguel E. Rodriguez asserted:

“Because of our concern about the deteriorating situation in Syria, the president has made it

clear that the use of chemical weapons — or transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups — is a red line for the United States of America. The Obama administration has communicated that message publicly and privately to governments around the world, including the Assad regime.”

This claim of ownership of the “red line” was also restated in [a conference call](#) that White House officials held with reporters when the letter was made public:

“We go on to reaffirm that the President has set a clear red line as it relates to the United States that the use of chemical weapons or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups is a red line that is not acceptable to us, nor should it be to the international community. It’s precisely because we take this red line so seriously that we believe there is an obligation to fully investigate any and all evidence of chemical weapons use within Syria.”

Oddly, at [a news conference a few days later](#), the president was asked about the red line again and he tried to minimize it as “not a surprise:”

“What I’ve also said is that the use of chemical weapons would be a game-changer not simply for the United States but for the international community. And the reason for that is that we have established international law and international norms that say when you use these kinds of weapons, you have the potential of killing massive numbers of people in the most inhumane way possible, and the proliferation risks are so significant that we don’t want that genie out of the bottle. So when I said that the use of chemical weapons would be a game-changer, that wasn’t unique to — that wasn’t a position unique to the United States and it shouldn’t have been a surprise.”

The September 2013 congressional debate

When the administration unexpectedly decided to seek congressional approval for a military strike, officials clearly faced a conundrum. The president needs the votes of Republicans in order to win approval, but given the partisan distrust of his leadership, the White House apparently decided it would not be helpful to ask for support for an Obama “red line.” So the rhetoric shifted — it was now the world’s red line.

This new language was first introduced by Secretary of State John F. Kerry when he testified before the Senate on Tuesday — the day before the president made his remarks in Sweden. Kerry even brought up the long-forgotten [Syrian Accountability Act of 2003](#), which included a few lines about Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile in its preamble. However, the “sense of Congress” barely mentions the issue; the bill was mostly about the regime’s support of terrorist organizations and de facto control of Lebanon.

“Some have tried to suggest that the debate we’re having today is about President Obama’s red

line. I could not more forcefully state that is just plain and simply wrong. This debate is about the world's red line. It's about humanity's red line. And it's a red line that anyone with a conscience ought to draw.

“This debate is also about Congress's own red line. You, the United States Congress, agreed to the chemical weapons convention. You, the United States Congress, passed the Syria Accountability Act, which says Syria's chemical weapons are — quote, ‘threaten the security of the Middle East and the national security interests of the United States.’ ”

Kerry reiterated the point later in the hearing: “This really is not President Obama's red line. The president drew a line that anyone should draw with respect to this convention that we have signed up to, and which has been in place since the horrors of World War I.”

White House aide Antony J. Blinken used similar language on Thursday when CNN asked about the president's contradictory remarks: “There's an international red line that goes back almost 100 years. There's a congressional red line that goes back well over a decade.”

The Pinocchio Test

To sum up, the president made an ill-considered rhetorical statement a year ago, without consulting his aides. But the White House staff decided they could not take it back and even considered it a useful example of firm presidential leadership when they needed to inform Congress of evidence of chemical weapons use by Syria.

But the president apparently was never comfortable with his own words. So when new talking points were crafted to make this line seem less like an “Obama red line” and more like a world-backed red line, the president bungled the language again. He made it appear as if he was denying he had called it a red line, when that was obviously not the case.

If he had used Kerry's language, it would not have been as much of an issue: “The line I drew is the same one that the world has had for nearly 100 years.” Or something like that.

Of course, he didn't say that. So is a bungled talking point worthy of Pinocchios? We don't try to play gotcha here at The Fact Checker, so we are inclined to leave this question to our readers. Some may find the president's apparent discomfort with his own words more meaningful than any potential misstatement.

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President of the United States

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"I didn't set a red line. The world set a red line."

The Washington Post

in a news conference, Stockholm – Wednesday, September 4, 2013

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Glenn Kessler

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