

An Ancient Line in the Sand

To the Editor:

As our nation continues to evaluate President Obama's case for a punitive military strike against the al-Assad regime in retaliation for its use of chemical weapons, we may want to consider the example of a "line in the sand" drawn against a much earlier Syrian autocrat. In 168 BCE, the army of Antiochus IV—the Greek-speaking ruler of the Seleucid dynasty that had been in control of Syria since the break-up of Alexander the Great's empire in 301 BCE—invaded Egypt, controlled by the Greek-speaking Ptolemaic dynasty. Rome, just emerging as the dominant power in the Mediterranean, became alarmed at this Syrian aggression and sent an envoy, Popilius Laenas, to order Antiochus to withdraw. When Antiochus asked for time to consider the request, Popilius drew a ring in the dirt around the Syrian king, commanding him to answer yes or no before stepping out of the circle. Not wishing to risk war with Rome, Antiochus wisely agreed to withdraw.

The generally negative response to the proposed military action against Syria suggests that our country no longer has the will to continue to be the hegemonic enforcer of a *pax americana*.

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