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What to do about Pakistan?

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 5, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Do you remember the television ad Hillary Clinton ran during the 2008 primaries in which dark music played in the background and a phone rings, and the voiceover says it is the middle of the night and asks who you want to pick up that phone? It was a good ad, even if it involved a bit of marketing hyperbole. For starters, no matter who took the call, the most likely first question they would ask is: ?What do you recommend?? So, it was just as, if not more, important to know who was placing the call as who was taking it, and the person placing the call would be the National Security Advisor. The current incumbent in that post, Tom Donilon, would be as likely to hold that job in a Clinton administration as in an Obama one. So, the ad raised a false contrast between Clinton and Obama.

There is one other thing we know about that ad. No matter who is taking the call, no matter who is placing the call, the call that keeps all of Washington?s leading officials worried about is a call about Pakistan. There is no country on the planet capable of destabilizing the rest of the planet as Pakistan is so capable. Its intelligence and military services contain Islamic extremists, or allies of Islamic extremists, who sniff at Western concerns. Its civilian leadership has always been weak. Its borders with Afghanistan and India are constant sources of anxiety and strife. And, unlike Iraq, and unlike Al-Qaeda, and unlike the Taliban, Pakistan has nuclear bombs. This is the stuff of nightmares.

Churchill famously said of Russia, ?It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.? Unfortunately, in Pakistan, this insight does not pertain. The challenges facing Pakistan, and therefore the world, are not mysterious in the least. Religious fundamentalism is many things but mysterious is not among them. The problem of economic development in the Third World, and the shifting cultural norms such development entails, are complicated, sometimes difficult and arduous, but they are not really enigmatic. And, if Churchill, correctly it turned out, saw Russian national interest as the key to explaining Soviet intentions and behavior, no such key exists in understanding Pakistan. Communism pretended to be a transnational, workers? movement when it was, in fact, a dictatorship of the few or the one. Islamic fundamentalism actually is a transnational, believers? movement with adherents more devoted to their religious cause then they are to any national state. What to do about it is the question and the hard reality is that there are no good answers.

The assassination of Governor Salman Taseer yesterday bodes ill. He was killed by one of his own bodyguards who was offended by Taseer?s blunt and outspoken opposition to the nation?s anti-blasphemy laws. In short, Taseer was the kind of politician Pakistan desperately needs, someone who understands the danger of religious fanaticism and who possesses the courage to speak against the danger. His funeral will be today. Will he take with him into the grave the last best hopes for a humane and civilized Pakistan? Will his assassination, like that of John F. Kennedy, achieve a rallying around the causes for which Taseer fought, the way Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a kind of tribute to Kennedy?s memory but it is highly doubtful the bill would have passed had Kennedy never gone to Dallas? Or, will the assassination touch off another round of violence with ineffectual government crackdowns against extremists, more attacks by extremists, etc.?

If there is any hope, it is in the hope that the waves of religious fervor eventually will reach the shore and then go back out to sea. I do not know if this will happen in Pakistan and the rest of the Muslim world. Will their version of a ?Great Awakening? peter out or will it continue? Certainly, here in the West, there were alternate loci of power and influence in the culture to help the wave of religious fervor come to a timely end. The fact that awakenings keep happening shows that they correspond to some basic human need that can be repressed for a while but will break forth again. The fact that they do not tend to last indicates the difficulty in passing on a sense of religious revolution to one?s children. But, as I say, that is how these episodes of religious fervor played out in America and who knows how they will play out in Pakistan. One thing we do know: It is the issue that keeps Obama up at night.

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