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The Left's Myths About Syria

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 3, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The prospect of war should concentrate the mind. Unfortunately, the ongoing civil war in Syria seems to have precisely the opposite effect, especially on some segments of the Catholic left.

First, a word about Republicans, specifically former members of the Bush administration. It is beyond rich to see them castigating the president for not being more forceful. The reason the president feels unable to do more in Syria surely is the result of the Bush administration's failure to level with the American people about the justification for the Iraq War, the thoroughly inept prosecution of that war and, most especially, the pre-war predictions that we would be greeted as liberators, that the war would be over in a matter of months if not weeks, that cost estimates of $100 billion were excessive, and that the intelligence available proved Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Lies, one and all. That, more than anything else, has created a popular reluctance to do the right thing in Syria, a reluctance within which politicians must craft policy.

Speaking of intelligence, we come to the first myth abroad in the land, the idea that the public has a right to know all about our intelligence findings. The public today has no more right to know about the content of our intelligence, still less how it was achieved, than the public in 1944 had a right to know about the First U.S. Army. In the winter and spring of 1944, the First Army formed in the many villages of Kent. Boats were assembled at Dover. Tanks were seen across the hillsides. Gen. George Patton, in command of the First Army, was gearing up for a frontal assault on the Pas de Calais and the liberation of Europe. Except that there was no First Army. The tanks were inflatable dummies. The boats were decoys. Patton was still out of favor with Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. And the assault was destined for the beaches of Normandy, not the Pas de Calais. The ruse worked, keeping critical German Panzer divisions many miles from the decisive landing in Normandy for days. By the time it became clear to the Germans that the Normandy landing was not a feint, that there would be no landing in the Pas de Calais, it was too late. The Allied beachheads had linked up and the breakout was in preparation. In the case of Syria, we have been told that our intelligence came from the Israelis. Perhaps they have a source on the inside, perhaps not. But, no one, repeat no one, should fail to see the value of such a source, not claim the right to expose it.

The second myth found in certain quarters is the idea that we should simply give peace a chance. I actually heard those words on television this weekend on, if memory serves, a CNN show. It took all of Wolf Blitzer's reserve to keep from replying, "Thank you, Miss New Jersey." The fallacy here is simple. There is no peace in Syria. There has not been peace in Syria for some time. Even before the outbreak of civil war, the darkly oppressive regime of Bashar Assad should not be confused with peace.

The third myth found its way into the *NCR* editorial on the subject [1] published last week. Our editors wrote:

It would perhaps be well to note, disturbing as it is, that we knew Iraq used chemical weapons, including mustard gas and sarin, to get an advantage in its eight-year war with Iran. It also used chemical weapons -- and, again, we knew it -- against the Kurds.

To which I reply, So what? We were wrong to ignore the Iraqi use of chemical weapons then, but that failure

should not blind us anew and forever. This is like saying that because the United States once countenanced slavery, we have no business confronting the scourge of human trafficking today. Indeed, precisely because we once countenance slavery, our obligation to oppose it now is greater. The same holds for looking the other way when chemical weapons are deployed.

The fourth myth, that the U.S. can only act with the backing of the international community, also made it into the *NCR* editorial. The editors wrote:

Even those who advocate intervention know it cannot be a unilateral undertaking. With Britain's reluctance to join a military venture, Italy's opposition and the U.N. vote against intervention, it appears the options are limited. Perhaps another harsh reality of this era is that civil wars of this sort must run their course before the international community has any leverage to effect change.

Appeals to the "international community" should ring hollow because they are hollow. International law is a fiction. Law presumes a sovereign that not only makes the law but enforces it. There are plenty of international laws on the books -- and, yes, the use of chemical weapons is deemed a crime against humanity -- but there is no sovereign to enforce them. This was apparent already at Yalta and beyond obvious by Potsdam. Everyone wishes the U.S. was not the world's policeman, but power brings responsibility. The fact that the Brits have developed cold feet does not absolve us of our responsibility. At the very least, those who now counsel inaction should be barred from ever saying "Never again" at Holocaust remembrance services.

Perhaps the most morally disturbing myth is that the conflict in Syria and the use of chemical weapons there is not our problem. This attitude does not make for a good neighbor, to be sure. I do believe that if you hear your neighbor's wife screaming because he is beating her, you have a responsibility to intervene. This not-our-problem attitude cloaks itself in prudence, and it is not as offensive as Sarah Palin's suggestion that we should "let Allah sort it out." But it is no more morally serious than Palin's vulgarity.

The most disturbing thing about the *NCR* editorial was its failure to mention the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P. This line of moral analysis regarding international relations became prominent during the conflict in Darfur. It was a centerpiece of Hillary Rodham Clinton's public diplomacy. It is the most interesting development within the tradition of just war thinking in centuries. Surely, if we have the power to alleviate the suffering of the long-suffering Syrian people, we have an obligation to try and help. I understand there are limits. When the Hungarians rose in 1956, and the Czechs rose in 1968, any effort to assist them in their struggle against their Soviet overlords risked a Third World War. But, the differences between the Assad regime and the old Soviet regime are significant enough to question the analogy. Assad does not govern a superpower. He also is the kind of dictator with whom there is obviously no negotiating: The Soviets, for all the evil they perpetrated, by 1956, were motivated by concerns of stability in ways the mad man in Damascus is not.

I will grant that the president was wrong to announce a "red line" unless he was clear, at least in his own mind, with how he intended to react. Indeed, I think he chose the wrong red line: He should have drawn the line around the use of air power to target civilian populations. This is easy to verify when it occurs. The use of air power against civilians is typically an asset that a tyrant has and his opponents do not, so removing that asset levels the playing field. Enforcing a no-fly zone is not easy, not as easy as a "shot across the bow," but it is completely doable and sustainable. And enforcing a no-fly zone would alter the balance of power.

The horror of World War II was that both sides made civilians the frequent target of what was considered "strategic bombing." The objective was to weaken the will of the people being bombed to fight. It had almost the opposite effect. It is curious to recall that of all the horrors of World War II, from Katyn to Auschwitz to Hiroshima, the use of chemical weapons was the one evil that was not perpetrated by anyone. There is a unique horror to chemical weapons, but the real issue is the use of civilians as target practice. This is what must stop.

A final word about the understandable concern of Christians in the United States about their co-religionists in the Middle East. It is true that the Christians in Syria might fare worse under any regime that might replace Assad. Assad has cultivated the Syrian Christian community not out of any love in his heart, but because his minority Alawite community needed allies wherever it could find them. He would exterminate them in an instant if it served his purposes. Our concern for the fate of these ancient Christian communities, however, cannot result in giving Assad a pass on the use of chemical weapons. I pray for the Christian communities in Syria, but I pray for the Muslim communities too.

The situation in Syria is a mess. It has been well said that the president failed to act a year ago when there were good options and now has only bad options left. But make no mistake: When Congress votes next week on the authorization of force, if they do not support President Obama they are, de facto, supporting President Assad. There may be a convincing case that the U.S. should not punish this evil man for using chemical weapons. But, I have not heard it yet.

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