

The Lessons of History & Syria, Part I

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 10, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

History yields many lessons, but the formation of foreign policy in a democracy seems cursed to learn the wrong lessons as easily as the correct ones, and to forget that the lessons of history are plural. When we learn, or mis-learn, only one lesson, our views become distorted. The debate over what to do in Syria has demonstrated this phenomenon in spades.

For thirty some years, America lived in the shadow of Munich. There, in 1938, the British and French governments capitulated to Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland, parts of Czechoslovakia with large German-speaking populations. ?Appeasement? became a dirty word.

The wrong lesson to be drawn from Munich is that appeasement is always wrong, that every struggle with a dictator is a struggle of epic proportions in which no negotiation is possible, no adjustment of conflicting interests advisable, every line is a red line. The right lesson to be drawn from Munich is that there really are some political actors who are so evil, they cannot be appeased and when those same evil political actors lead large and powerful nations, it is better to stop them sooner rather than later.

There is also a missing lesson from Munich. The tug of democracy is happily averse to war. Certainly that was the case in the 1930s, with the memories of Passchendaele and the Somme still fresh in the minds of most Europeans, but it is always the case for democracies. Men and women quite rightly do not wish to send their young men and women to war unless it is absolutely necessary. That said, political leaders in a democracy must be willing to stand against the tide when necessary. In 1936, The British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin gave a speech about the difficulty of rearmament in the House of Commons, a speech both Baldwin and his nemesis Winston Churchill rightly characterized as a speech of ?appalling frankness.? In that speech, Baldwin said:

My position as the leader of a great party was not altogether a comfortable one. I asked myself what chance was there ? when this feeling that was given expression to in Fulham [where the government had just lost a by-election] was common throughout the country ? what chance was there within the next year or two of that feeling being so changed that the country would give a mandate for rearmament? Supposing I had gone to the country and said that Germany was rearming, and that we must rearm, does anybody think that this pacific democracy would have rallied to that cry at that moment? I cannot think of anything that would have made the loss of the election from my point of view more certain.

Churchill comments on this speech: ?This was indeed appalling frankness. It carried naked truth about his motives into indecency. That a Prime Minister should avow that he had not done his duty in regard to national safety because he was afraid of losing the election was an incident without parallel in our parliamentary history.? Mr. Obama has the added advantage of a sophisticated polling system that Mr. Baldwin lacked. Nor can I say that the civil war in Syria is a threat to the U.S. as the rearmament of Germany was a threat to Great Britain in the 1930s. Still, leaders must lead, and I sense no leadership from the Obama White House.

Vietnam yielded two wrong lessons. The first was that government can never be trusted. Watergate had more than a little to do with enshrining this self-destructive ideal which, sadly, one still sees in the often bizarre defenses offered for the criminal actions of Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden. I am no fan of Mr. Obama for many reasons, but I do think it matters that his Vice President is not a former CEO of Halliburton. His obvious reluctance to do anything in Syria gives him an oddly won, but no less obvious, moral authority when he now bestirs us to consider military intervention.

The second wrong lesson from Vietnam continues to plague our military chiefs. They believe that Vietnam taught us that the U.S. government should never contemplate a military engagement unless we are committed to the use of overwhelming military power, if there is a clearly definable military objective that would constitute victory, and if there is an equally clearly defined exit strategy. This misunderstands the nature of war. Not for nothing has the phrase "the fortunes of war" entered our lexicon. Battles are unpredictable things. Napoleon, when considering the promotion of an officer, used to examine the man's credentials but also always ask if the man was lucky. In the debate over Syria, the administration has been at pains to say that any military strike will be limited and precise, that there is no danger of becoming more involved in a quagmire like Vietnam, but then they have a hard time answering the appropriate question: What will Assad do and how might we respond to that? Yes, a targeted military action might appear clean and neat on paper and in advance, but does anyone doubt that if Assad responded to a precise and limited attack with a disproportionate attack on the U.S., say, sinking a ship or bombing our embassy in Tel Aviv, this would not serve as a further provocation leading to deeper involvement. One cannot know in advance that there will never be a time when boots on the ground will be needed. The administration's unwillingness to confront this shibboleth of Vietnam has, more than anything else, contributed to the confused nature of their policy statements and, consequently, their inability to convince Congress and the American people that the course of action they recommend is advisable.

The right lesson to be drawn from Vietnam is that we in the West cannot overlay our ideological conceptions on a set of complicated facts when that overlay distorts the facts rather than organizes them. Ideology has become a bad word, like appeasement, but the organization of information into an ideologically coherent whole is as natural to humankind as breathing. And, if done well, it serves a democracy which, unlike a dictatorship, must give an account of its motives and actions. In Vietnam, we applied a Cold War lens to a very complicated civil war, and misunderstood the resolve of our enemies, the capacity of our friends, and the nature of the conflict itself.

The missing lesson of Vietnam, and one that seems very apt today, is this. George Patton famously observed that war is an ugly thing but that it is not the ugliest of things. That is true. But, in Vietnam, we got the ugliness of war and took a bad situation and made it worse. We got the ugly and the uglier.

Tomorrow: The lessons of Iraq and Bosnia.

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