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History, Syria & Obama's Speech

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I posited the belief that the current debate over what to do in Syria illustrates the degree to which different political actors have learned certain lessons from history, good lessons and bad lessons. And, we began examining some of those lessons, starting with Munich and Vietnam. Today, we look at the lessons of Iraq and Bosnia and use those to examine the President?s speech last night.

There are many bad lessons drawn from the second Iraq War. A deep distrust of government has infected many Americans. They felt lied to in the run up to the Iraq War and while ?lie? may be too strong a word, for I think President Bush and his confreres were utterly sincere, their sincerity was of that variety which comes from being the first to believe your own propaganda. Another bad lesson from Iraq is that the Mideast is a quagmire, with deeply rooted, ancient hatreds that are opaque to us Americans, a place we had best ignore. A final bad lesson is that the use of military force can only make things worse. None of these bad lessons bear scrutiny.

The right lesson to be drawn from Iraq is that you cannot fly in Jeffersonian democracy as easily as you can fly in the 101st Airborne. There really are deep and ancient hatreds that are more important to people in Iraq than any abstract conception of human rights. Building a political culture takes time, as well as force. Building a political culture takes patience, as well as determination. And, no one can build a political culture overnight in conditions of stark social instability.

The missing lesson from Iraq is that while, as liberals, we believe there is a universal yearning for freedom, to live without the chains of others, any people will far prefer the chains of their own to the chains of a foreign power. People who hated Saddam Hussein ended up hating the U.S. more.

The arguments surrounding the U.S. intervention in Bosnia and later in Kosovo had some similarities to the arguments we hear today about Syria and that we heard ten years ago about Iraq. We were told that the Balkans was filled with ancient animosities, that its soldiers were so fierce, Hitler had needed thirty divisions to keep the Balkans secure and even then his troops were constantly attacked by partisans. We were told that it was a quagmire. None of that proved to be true. The Serb forces wilted in the face of an air assault. The people of Sarajevo wanted nothing more than to return to the easy tolerance of different ethnicities and religions, a task made more difficult by the war to be sure.

The wrong lesson to be drawn from Bosnia is that the U.S. should only seek to mount a humanitarian intervention when there are no U.S. interests involved. Bless the Bosnians, they had no oil and they did not border Israel. The fact that our use of force was perpetrated in defense of disinterred values was clear. But, the dead of Homs are as precious in the eyes of God as the dead at Srebrenica.

The right lesson to be drawn from Bosnia is that, at times, the application of force can facilitate a political settlement that would not otherwise be possible. Coincidentally, the other night, the History Channel or the Military Channel, I do not recall which, had a show about Bosnia. The late, and greatly missed, Dick Holbrooke

recalled being in negotiations with the Serbs when their forces killed two score civilians at a market in Sarajevo. He urged President Clinton to mount an air assault on the Serb forces besieging Sarajevo, Clinton did so, and the Serb negotiators quickly changed their tune, and reached a settlement. As the President suggested last night, the Syria offer to turn its chemical weapons over to international control would not have materialized had it not been for the credible threat of force.

The missing lesson of Bosnia is that the targeted application of force can make a huge difference. Our choices are not war or no war. U.S. policymakers have a range of options to affect the battlefield and, just so, the political calculations of those who are perpetrating crimes against their own people or their neighbors. I think the President may have learned this lesson, even if many of the histrionic comments from opponents of Syrian intervention have not. In his speech last night, the President correctly pointed out that the U.S. military does not deliver pinpricks. If Assad were to see a few cruise missiles headed towards his home, headed towards his command and control centers, he may be more likely to reach a settlement with the rebels.

Others will disagree with the lessons I see in these historical episodes. But, the key thing is that history yields many lessons, not just one, and the key is for policy makers to determine which situations they face today are more or less like previous situations, how they differ, what worked in the past in a similar moment, etc. This grounding in history is not apparent in Mr. Obama. He is a policy wonk, through and through. But, an examination of policy tends to be abstract and, consequently, leaves out the human factor. You can bet that before he sat down to negotiate with Slobodan Milosevic, Holbrooke had taken the measure of the man, not just a measurement of his troop allocations. I have said before that in the 20th century, the President who may have been most prepared for the crushing decisions he had to face was Harry Truman, precisely because he was deeply read in history. He took the reins of power having been kept in the dark by FDR about many things. Truman was the only President in the 20th century to never have graduated from college. But, he had a sense of history and his judgments reflected that. When I studied diplomatic history in college, I recall our professor saying that any foreign policy that lasts ten years can be considered a success. Truman?s policy of containment lasted for forty years, and it achieved what appeared in the late 40?s to be almost impossible, stopping the expansion of Soviet influence while preventing a Third World War.

Last night, watching Obama, I was missing Harry Truman. The President made his case more forcefully than he had in the past, to be sure. Clearly, he was deeply moved by the images of children being gassed and, with his great oratorical gifts, gave voice to his horror. But, I could not shake the feeling that the only thing he really wants is to get out of this mess with as much political capital as he can, that the man was not up to the moment, that our policy wonk-in-chief still does not understand the nature of political leadership. I could not shake the feeling that Mr. Putin looks at Obama as someone to be manipulated. The devil may be in the details, but political leadership is not. I could not for my life describe Obama?s foreign policy in a paragraph. Nor could he. And that does not bode well for Syria. It does not bode well for the United States either.

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