NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Poker in Geneva & Precedents in Syria

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 13, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The actions or inactions of the United States government in the coming days and weeks regarding Syria will set a precedent both for future presidents and for the international order. Assad violated an almost universally recognized norm of civilized behavior. The decision to do nothing is a decision to do something, it is a decision to give him a pass. Like poker players at a table, the decision to raise or to check will be closely watched by the other players.

I hope that Secretary John Kerry (and his chief) recognizes that he has the stronger hand at the poker game being played out in Geneva. The Russians did not propose the unilateral disarmament by Syria of its chemical weapons stockpile out of the goodness of their hearts. Putin desperately wants to avoid an American attack on Syria because he knows he could not respond. He cannot defend an ally if that ally is challenged by the United States. His pretensions to superpower status would be exposed and other client states would take note of that, and more willing to make nice with the U.S.

The Russian military footprint on the world stage is still larger than, say, their economic footprint, but Russia is a pale shadow of the superpower it once was. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there were yet no laptops. Their anemic economy has not allowed them to sustain the investments in military technology that their military forces need to keep up with the West. Putin knows this. He is playing on the perceived need for action by the ?international community? to increase his chances at the poker table: The one wild card he still possesses is a veto at the Security Council. Why that matters so much to others is something of a mystery to me, given the low regard in which I hold the United Nations. But, it matters, and Putin will bluff as long as he can on the strength of that card.

Assad knows that he, too, has no response to an American attack, which is why he has, so far, agreed to go along with the Russian proposal. Assad could not mount a response to the four prior attacks by Israel. If the U.S. were to strike, he would be consigned to watching the cruise missiles land and hoping they land as far away from him as possible.

Kerry, then, should drive a hard bargain. The timetable for relinquishing control of the chemical weapons is important, but it is less important than making sure that any Security Council resolution has teeth, that it grants the U.S. or NATO or someone the authority to enforce compliance. If the U.S. and the Russians get Assad to agree to turn over his chemical weapons, and it really happens, that will also be a precedent, and a spectacularly good one. Iran will wonder if the money it is spending on its centrifuges is still a good investment if its protector at the UN, Russia, was unable or unwilling to stand by Syria. Already, many Israelis are thinking this might turn out very nicely.

The removal of chemical weapons will do nothing to stop the bloodshed in Syria. There is something damning in the commentaries of many of my friends on the left who have been opposed to any U.S. military action. They warn that a U.S. attack could provoke a humanitarian crisis. How else could one describe the situation in Syria

today except as a humanitarian crisis? They warn that the conflict could become a regional conflict. It already is. It is true that we cannot intervene everywhere, or that every intervention will improve the lot of the people we seek to help. But, that is a caution. It should not be allowed to become an alibi.

I have noted previously that I think we should not only recall the lessons of Iraq, but also the lessons of Bosnia. There, a U.S. ?pinprick? strike, with no troops on the ground, forced a negotiated settlement that stopped the killing. When, eventually, we did put troops on the ground to enforce the separation of the warring parties, we were warned of the casualties that would come, the American soldiers who would die ? and for what? We had not strategic interest at stake. The Serb leaders were violent and they were repugnant, but they were not threat to the U.S. Of course, in the event, the leading cause of medical evacuations for U.S. troops out of Bosnia the first year of their deployment was for complications with pregnancy. You read that correctly. The minority of a minority of deployed U.S. troops in Bosnia who were pregnant accounted for the most serious medical situations faced by our forces.

There is a problem with the Bosnia analogy however. After a civil war, unless one side simply wins and subjects the losing side to its control, any negotiated settlement will entail some kind of cantonization, separating the warring parties along a geographic line. If you can?t live together, the peace keepers keep the peace by keeping you apart. Milosevic was able to return home and he had a home to which he could return. I do not know what any cantonization of Syria would look like. The borders in the Mideast are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Drawn by the Brits at the end of World War I when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the borders of Syria make more sense than the borders of Iraq or Jordan, but I do not think we should consider them as necessarily guiding a future settlement. Dividing Syria into several cantons, with Assad permitted an area in which he is allowed to die in his own bed, while other Syrians retain other areas where they, too, can hope to die in their own bed might be the best solution.

Another lesson from Bosnia is also promising. If a negotiated peace settlement is achieved, and the killing stops, Assad can always be indicted for war crimes as Milosevic was. Indeed, establishing a war crimes tribunal for Syria might also place a check on those radical elements in the rebel forces, and strengthen the hand of the more moderate rebels. In this morning?s Post, Rep. Chris Smith makes the case that we should not wait until hostilities cease to establish such a tribunal. If I were Susan Rice, I would make sure I have Cong. Smith over for a meeting today. His proposal has real promise. It took a long time to bring Milosevic to justice, and Sister Death got to him before his verdict, but whenever I see a picture of that tortured, evil man sitting in the Hague, I have hope for the future of the world.

I confess I detect a problem with my first paragraph. I spoke of ?international order.? In fact, now as always, there is as much disorder as order. We cannot solve all the world?s problems, to be sure. (How I wish this week I had the time to re-read Niebuhr?s ?Moral Man & Immoral Society? and don?t ya wish no one was permitted to comment on this mess in Syria until they prove they have read some Augustine!) But, I repeat the observation that a caution cannot become an alibi. Just because I cannot help everyone who has a heart attack does not absolve me from the obligation to help the person having a heart attack who is right in front of me. I yearn for the day when the Responsibility to Protect will be more widely practiced. President Obama can take a large step toward that day in the weeks ahead. Inaction, however, is a step away from that world. Morally serious people must grapple with the cost of inaction too.

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-06-29 10:09*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/poker-geneva-precedents-syria