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Syria, War & Words That Lie

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 16, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

My Dad sends me clippings from the local Connecticut papers each week. Last week, he sent an editorial cartoon that had the caption: ?The American people say that they are war weary.? The drawing above the caption showed a Syrian family walking away from a village that had been bombed, the smoke rising into the sky. This weekend, Americans breathed a sigh of relief when Secretary of State John Kerry negotiated a settlement regarding chemical weapons in Syria with his Russian counterpart. But, there were no sighs of relief in Syria. 1,000 people were killed in that country last week by non-chemical weapons. We are not war weary the way the Syrians are war weary.

We Americans today are also no war weary the way my parents? generation was war weary. World War II lasted for six years in total and the U.S. was engaged for four of those years. Hundreds of thousands of men were drafted and sent to fight, first in North Africa and the Pacific, then Italy, then France and Germany. Few towns did not experience a neighbor who was killed.

Yet, in the years after World War II, facing a new threat from our former ally, the Soviet Union, the American people girded themselves for yet more struggle. Fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, and less than eight after the truce in Korea, John F. Kennedy could famously intone, without contradiction: ?Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge ? and more.?

Now, of course, we pledge much less. There are many prices we shall not pay and burdens we will not bear. In part, this is an achievement, a reality check. Vietnam taught us that there are some struggles in which none of what we are willing to pay will matter, the circumstances on the ground are not amenable to the application of U.S. price paying and burden bearing. Still, we have lost something since JFK said those words, and it is something noble that was lost, no matter the fact that the means employed to achieve that noble goal were often ignoble or worse.

We Americans are also not war weary the way our parents? generation was war weary because of the ambivalence of that ?we.? In what meaningful sense do ?we? go to war anymore? There is no draft, and even of there were, the rich kids get college deferments. Congressman Charlie Rangel has proposed that any congressional authorization for military deployment should include a provision to reactivate the draft. This would be impractical, of course, but Rangel is onto something. For those families with a tradition of military service, or those families who, for the first time, see one of their own march off to war, they have a right to be weary in a way that I do not. The planned strike in Syria would not have involved ground troops, the way the war in Iraq did, so talk of a draft seems ridiculous. But, what was demanded of the American people during the Iraq War, when boots did hit the ground? Remember when President Bush encouraged the rest of us to go shopping to boost the economy? That was the price we were expected to pay. I know that our all-volunteer army, and its high tech capabilities, result in fewer U.S. casualties and that is a good thing to be sure. But there

were no shortage of casualties in Iraq, as there is no shortage of casualties in Syria.

Other words have been invoked in ways that should make all blush. There was Vladimir Putin invoking international law in his op-ed in the New York Times, conveniently ignoring the parts of international law that were inconvenient for his strategic ends. It can be said of Putin what Mary McCarthy famously said of Lillian Hellman: ?Every word she writes is a lie including ?and? and ?the.?? But, President Obama also has been cavalier in his invocation of international law, invoking its norms against the use of chemical weapons but proposing to ignore its prohibition of the use of force without Security Council authorization. It cannot be said too often: There are very few international laws that are rightly considered law, and not just in the area of security interests: Commercial treaties are violated by hackers while governments turn a blind eye.

This misuse of language serves a purpose, it has a goal. That goal is to obfuscate the moral calculus required to determine right action. Listening to almost everyone in this debate about U.S. intervention in Syria, I am reminded of what Daniel Callahan wrote in the pages of Commonweal after the Roe v. Wade decision:

"I am willing - no, well prepared - to grant her that right [to an abortion] under law. I only ask that the society that grants this right be prepared to look with unblinking eye at just what it is doing, not deceiving itself for one moment about even one aspect of what a granting of that right does...[I predict] in the best 1984 tradition, a reconstruction of history. This is done by creating a highly charged mythology of male repression, or religious persecution, or puritanical fanaticism (i.e., whichever cue serves best at the moment to induce popular frenzy)...and, not incidentally, values are reconstructed by making the value of a potential human life being dependent upon being wanted by its mother."

Something like this will happen in the days ahead ? it is indeed already happening. The White House breathed a sigh of relief when it essentially caved to the Russians? plans: Why go all the way to Geneva just to capitulate? Removing the chemical weapons arsenal in Syria is a good thing and I hope it proves a precedent for the Iranian nuclear arsenal. But, as noted, 1,000 people were killed in Syria last week. The suffering continues even if we in the United States can get back to Monday Night Football.

For my friends on the left who have been so vocal in opposing U.S. military intervention, I ask them to listen to themselves and then ask if they could repeat their words in front of a Syrian family? To my friends on the right who have been so vocal in supporting military intervention, could they speak with such confidence if they were speaking to an Iraqi family? It has been said often in the past two weeks that there are no good options in Syria, and that is undoubtedly true. There may also be no good answers to this immediate manifestation of human evil, nor to the perennial questions of the existence of such inhumane evil. But, let us be honest about that and not use language as a tool to avert our eyes from the evil in our midst.

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