

# Standing in an Adversary's Shoes

Americans are notoriously disinterested in history, preferring to focus on the present and often reacting to the latest crisis. But the past can teach important lessons including the need to understand an adversary's perspective and to avoid unnecessary conflicts, as ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk explains.

By William R. Polk

Months before the Cuban Missile Crisis was upon us, I made a tour of Turkey. There I visited a U.S. Air Force base where 12 fighter-bombers were on "ready alert." Of those two were always on "hair trigger alert," with engines running and with the pilots sitting in the cockpits. Poised for take-off, each was armed with a one-megaton bomb and programmed for a target in the Soviet Union.

Nearby, on the Black Sea at Samsun, I watched on radar planes from an RAF squadron probing Soviet air defenses in the Crimea. And elsewhere in Anatolia, in supposedly secret locations, a group of American "Jupiter" missiles was aimed, armed and ready to be fired.

Were these weapons defensive or offensive? That is, were they a threat to the Soviet Union or a defense of the "Free World." My colleagues in the American government thought they were defensive. They were part of our "deterrent." We had put them there to protect ourselves, not to threaten the Russians.

The Russians thought otherwise. So, in response, they decided to station some of their missiles in Cuba. Their strategists believed that in balancing ours on their frontier, theirs on our frontier also were defensive. We thought otherwise. We regarded their move as unquestionably offensive and nearly went to war to get them to remove their missiles.

At a "few minutes to midnight," we both came to our senses: we stood down our Jupiters and the Russians removed their weapons from Cuba.

The first lesson to be learned in this near catastrophe was *try to understand the opponent's point of view*. Knowing what the other person thinks is always sensible – as we know and act in daily life – even if one does not believe that the other person is right or even if one does not intend to be guided by what he discovers. Unfortunately, as history teaches us, this is a lesson rarely applied in foreign affairs.

As I pointed out in the months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Russians had a point: the missiles we had in Turkey were obsolescent. They were to be

propelled by liquid fuel. That form of fuel required several minutes to be ignited. If they were to be used, they had to take off before Soviet missiles or aircraft could destroy them on the ground. That, in turn, meant that they could only be "first strike" weapons. By definition, a first strike is "offensive."

I urged that we get them out of Turkey. We did not do so. Our military considered them an integral part of our strategic defense. We left them there until the Russians put their missiles into Cuba. Then, we took them out. We got rid of ours only when they got rid of theirs. So, in a sense, the Missile Crisis was tit-for-tat. I thought that was a very foolish way to endanger the world!

### **Another Lesson**

There was another lesson to be learned from the Missile Crisis. Our strategy and the Soviet strategy both assumed that the leaders of each state were not only fully informed but also rational. Being *rational*, they would not actually do what they *knew* would completely destroy the world.

Neither we nor the Russians accurately then pin-pointed how a confrontation was likely to happen. We both just assumed that "the delicate balance of terror" would be maintained short of actual combat. That was the ultimate gamble. Was the gamble sensible?

I was convinced that it was not. What it did, I thought, was to confuse two very different motivations. This was and may again be crucial to our survival so let me make it clear.

Obviously, both we and the Russians were in part motivated by "interest of state." That is, neither side wanted its country to be destroyed. Our strategy of mutual deterrence aimed to protect our country; that was the aim of even the most bellicose of the nuclear hawks.

While they sneered at the slogan "better Red than Dead," they secretly were influenced by it and assumed that its opposite form influenced the Russians. They were right. Their counterparts in the Soviet system, as I learned during later meetings with my Russian counterparts at the Soviet Academy of Science, shared the basic motivation.

The Russians may not have had a catchy slogan to sum it up, but like us, they realized that both the United States and the Soviet Union would have been ruined in a nuclear exchange.

Those of us, both Americans and Russians, who were informed about nuclear weapons knew the meaning of that statement. You probably have heard it before, but allow me to remind you:

In a nuclear exchange, at least 100 million people would have been immediately incinerated; perhaps five times that many would have been so badly wounded, burned or radiated that they would shortly die; most of the world's cities would become just contaminated ruins; the whole Earth would have been covered in a thick layer of smoke impenetrable to the sun so that temperatures would fall and the ground would be frozen to a depth of about three feet; there would be no available liquid drinking water. Since graves could not be dug in the frozen ground by the (few) starving and emaciated survivors, the whole Earth would be covered by rotting corpses.

Therefore, sensible men, both Americans and Russians, would do all we could to avoid it. That was the basis of the theory of mutual deterrence.

But, when "interest of government" was factored into the equation, the equation lost coherence. That is because it is, after all, not *countries* but *governments* that make the decisions of war or peace. Once the personal motivations of rulers had to be considered, our strategy made far less sense. Consider why this is so.

The governments of both the United States and the Soviet Union – like all governments – ultimately rest on the perception by their supporters that they are acceptable. Often this means just "patriotic." And, as we know, the definition of patriotism varies widely. What seems sensible and patriotic to one person or group may seem like cowardice or treason to another.

### **Killing 'Weak' Leaders**

If rulers egregiously flaunt their incapacity, corruption or lack of patriotism, they build resentments that can, and often do, result in breakdowns, *coups d'État* or even revolutions. In the course of these actions not only governments, in the abstract, but rulers as individuals are often killed.

So, quite separate from the "interest of state," leaders have strong reasons to protect themselves. And almost always the best – sometimes the only – way to do this is to be "tough," to "stand tall," to force the other fellow to "blink." Being a "peacenik" even in times of peace is dangerous; in a crisis it can be lethal.

This divided interest between what was required in the national interest and what political leaders might have to do to stay in power or even to stay alive became evident both in the Missile Crisis itself and was made even more clear in a "war game," what the German General Staff called a *kriegspiel* or simulated combat, that was conducted in the Pentagon shortly thereafter.

The Kennedy Administration organized the war game to extend the Missile Crisis into a scenario of what might have happened next. Briefly put, the game posed

the possibility that the Russians had not removed their missiles from Cuba or had otherwise provoked the United States and that the United States had decided to take action.

In the game, "Blue Team" – the United States – "took out" a Russian city with nuclear weapons. So, those of us on "Red Team" were required to face the question of how we would respond. We were trying to think like our Russian counterparts and were given access to all the information our intelligence services had amassed on them and what we thought they knew of American capabilities.

We and our principals took our roles very seriously. At the most senior level of our government, we were charged with coping with what amounted to a second missile crisis. To illustrate what might happen, we were provoked to make fateful decisions. And we had to do so "in real time."

Between the Blue Team attack and Red Team's response could be only a few minutes. Otherwise, Blue Team might have fired other missiles to wipe out "ours." Our team decided that there were four possible responses:

First, we could, at least theoretically, do nothing. Chairman Nikita Khrushchev would announce to his people that he was sorry for the damage and the loss of a hundred thousand or so fellow Russians, but that there was nothing he could do. If he ordered a counterattack, it would bring upon Russia unimaginable devastation. So, he had decided to just accept the humiliation and the pain.

Was this realistic? The members of our team, who were among the most experienced and best-informed men in our government, decided that such a move would have caused Khrushchev to be shot in an immediate *coup d'État* and that whoever took his place would unquestionably have fired the Soviet missiles anyway.

So inaction or even a long delay was impossible. Regardless of "interest of state," the "interest of government" – just staying alive – would have prevented it. The chairman of our team, the admiral who was the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, agreed that he would have been among the coup leaders if he were Russian.

### **Losing a City**

The second possible answer was tit-for-tat. The Russians could have launched a retaliatory missile to "take out" a comparable American city, say Dallas or Cleveland or Boston. That would have incinerated an equivalent number of Americans, a few hundred thousand or so, and pulverized the city.

We had to imagine what then would have happened. We tried to picture President

Kennedy going before the television cameras to inform the American public that the crisis was ended: we destroyed one of their cities and they destroyed one of ours. So we were even.

“Sadly,” he would have had to go on, “if any of you had relatives in Dallas (or Cleveland or Boston), you just don’t have them any longer. They have been evaporated. Let us now go on with our lives and forget the unfortunate events of the last few days.” It is not hard to imagine what would have happened to him and his Administration.

Alternatively, in a third option, the President could have then moved a step forward into hostilities by knocking out a second Russian city. The Russians could have similarly responded by destroying a second American city. Was this possible or likely?

We quickly saw the flaws in this course of action: First, the much touted military advantages of a first or unexpected strike would have been lost. Each side had been roused to fury, but neither would have been incapacitated.

Second, once “escalation” had begun, there would be no stopping point. The second city would be followed by third, fourth and others. In my experience even with the crisis in which no missiles were fired, I was sure no one could have withstood the strain.

Toward the end of that week, we were all utterly exhausted. And, speaking for myself at least I was not sure any longer of my judgment. It seemed clear to us on Red Team that within days or even hours, the exchanges would have escalated into general war. We found no justification for step-by-step retaliation. That left only the fourth option.

The fourth option was general war. Our team concluded that a massive attack on the country of “Blue Team” was inevitable. Immediate and all-out nuclear bombardment of the United States offered the only hope that the Russians could disable the American forces before they could do massive damage to Russia. Unanimously, we signaled our decision.

The game master, Professor Thomas Schelling of MIT and author of *The Strategy of Conflict*, told us that we had “misplayed” the game. He did not believe we had correctly predicted the Russian reaction. But to find out, he asked us to assemble the next morning to discuss our action.

When we and most of the senior officials of our government gathered in the War Room of the Pentagon, Schelling said that, if he thought there was any justification for our decision, he would have to give up the theory of deterrence. We replied that the theory had been proven to be flawed by the very

game he had designed. Simply put, it was that *rulers* not *nations* decided man's fate.

Beyond the game, what actually happened was both crucial, perhaps even vital, but little considered. In real life, America did not "take out" a Russian or even a Cuban city. *We found a way for both of our governments to avoid losing face or being overthrown and to do what we needed to have happen so that the Earth was not destroyed.*

We stood down our missiles and they stood down theirs. Castro was furious. Mao was dismissive. But Kennedy, against the advice of the hawks and with the help of Adlai Stevenson, opened a way that Chairman Khrushchev could accept ... and stay alive.

Wisely, he stepped back from the brink. He could afford to do so – probably just barely – because of Kennedy's decision to remove the Jupiters. His hawks did not overthrow or murder him. But, for his wise action, they never forgave him. As a sign of their disgust, they got their revenge after his death: his body was not buried with full honors in the Kremlin Wall like the other Soviet leaders' bodies had been but was relegated to distant and "unpatriotic" obscurity.

Lesson: if the aim of strategy was to stay alive it was safer to avoid combat. Wise diplomacy was more effective than the battle ax.

### **Virtually Automatic**

The Cuban Missile Crisis was long ago and the issues were complex so let me dredge up a more recent and simpler case to illustrate perceptions of attack and defense and to show that the decisions on what to do about them can be taken without grand strategic judgments, ideology or even anger but can be virtually automatic. That is especially true if they are taken too late. I turn to piracy in the Indian Ocean.

Surely, we believed, the Somali pirates gave us a clear case of aggression against which we must defend ourselves. As we saw them, they were an ugly, brutal bunch of terrorists. And since they had taken up arms, so must we. Indeed, by the time we recognized that there was a problem, arms seemed to be the only possible answer.

A frequent saying in government circles is "never mind the cause; we have to act with what we see on the ground today." Often, by that time, there is little scope. So without further ado, we shoot from the hip. But pause a moment to consider how the problem arose and how the Somalis saw it.

Somalia was one of those countries that never became a nation-state.

Traditionally, it was a collection of societies – like indigenous peoples in the Americas, the rest of Africa and much of Asia. (So understanding it may be of value to us elsewhere.)

Then in the late Nineteenth Century, France, Britain and Italy invaded the country and set up colonies which they euphemistically termed “protectorates” and began to challenge or replace local institutions, rulers and alliances. (As also happened in much of the “Third World.”) In the aftermath of the Second World War, we foreigners turned most of the area into a UN “trust” under Italian control. After 15 years, parts of it were recognized as an independent nation-state.

“Nation=statehood” was a concept that had grown over several centuries in Europe. It was wholly alien to the Somalis. They were not a *nation* but lived in collections of extended families which were only sporadically and vaguely related to one another, and none of their leaders had any experience in forming or managing the apparatus of a *state*.

Indeed, given the generations of foreign rule, none of them had any experience in government. And being poor and “underdeveloped,” their societies lacked the minimal organizations we take for granted in nation-states.

So, like many African and Asian countries, Somalia went through a series of coups. Those leaders who survived and came to the fore were often the most violent and unprincipled. They enriched themselves and their gangs while the general population survived in chronic poverty and even hunger. Indeed, in 1974 and 1975, a severe drought led to widespread starvation. Somalia’s one great asset was the sea and its most productive inhabitants were fishermen.

Then beginning in about 1990, huge “factory” ships from several Western nations and Japan began to arrive along the coast. Violating international agreements and using sonar and radar to locate fish and huge nets to catch them, they virtually “fished out” the previously rich waters. It has been estimated that they took billions of dollars worth of tuna and other edible fish and killed or otherwise disposed of every other kind of sea life.

Worse, they plowed up the underwater formations where the fish bred and dumped overboard thousands of tons of toxic and even nuclear waste. Soon, the sea and beaches of Somalia were just lifeless extensions of the inland deserts. The Somalis again began to starve. It did not take long for the fishermen, who after all were sailors, to turn into pirates.

We were outraged. Piracy is a heinous crime. We knew that because we have all grown up on stories of Captain Kidd and Blue Beard. Soon the press was filled

with lurid accounts of the seizure of yachts and even of big ships and the kidnapping of their crews. Ransoms were paid, but European and American governments came under pressure "to do something."

So we began to patrol the Indian Ocean with our navies. Military action seemed to be the only possible response. The Somalis were committing a vile form of aggression. They were terrorists. That was perfectly clear. At least to us. Very few officials, businessmen or even journalists asked why the Somalis were acting in such an outrageous fashion.

Of course, the answer was simple: the fishermen were desperate. And, inevitably, the more desperate or more determined among them turned to violence. Warlords in Somalia as in Afghanistan soon took command. Well before "Blackhawk Down," we were killing Somalis and they were killing one another. Violence bred violence.

To our military, the Somalis were the bad guys. So the only answer seemed to be force. But force did not work there any more than it did in Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq. Faced with the choice of starving or stealing, the Somalis chose as you or I would have done in their place.

Perhaps some attempt to *anticipate* the problem raised by illegal destruction of their main natural resource might have been "a stitch in time..." Knowing the *sequence* of events and attempting to understand why the Somalis became our adversaries might have saved thousands of lives and billions of treasure. But we paid little or no attention to their view of aggression and defense. At least, one could argue, until too late.

### **Other Applications**

From little Somalia, there are at least three lessons of wide application to American foreign policy. While we, the rich and powerful, can sometimes work our will on the poor and weak, our actions have consequences. The consequences will often be costly to us and painful to them. Worse, they may radiate throughout their societies for generations. Or even spill over into wider areas.

Leave aside the costs we, the British and the Russians incurred in another far-off land, Afghanistan about which I have often written. Consider instead the more pervasive but subtle issues that we see in much of Africa, some of Asia and even parts of Europe and Latin America.

The turmoil we see in all those areas, I argue, is largely a result of the forced transition from *society* to *state*. Forcing societies to become states and so to fit our definition of how they should organize themselves and how they can interface with us often does not work and even more often leads to the very results we had sought to avoid.



Looking at the “failed states” in anger or despair, we forget our own past. We should remember that it took our ancestors generations to begin to create the skills, cadres of dedicated people and public institutions that made nation-states possible.

Thomas Hobbes told us how expensive the task was in England while in France, Germany and Italy it took centuries longer and cost much more. In the Balkans, it is still incomplete. Indeed, to the degree it was accomplished, it was the result of periodic and ghastly wars. Obviously, it hardly started in much of the world.

We Westerners have made up the rules for the world in which both we and the “underdeveloped” live. The rules presume a world of nation-states. But the Somalis are not and never have been a nation-state, so they did not have the *mechanisms* that meshed into the gears of the modern, Western-inspired international system.

They could not, for example, access the world court to enforce the laws on fishing in their waters. They could not organize a government that could overpower the warlords or the pirates. (When they tried to do so with their traditional means, Islamic brotherhoods, we prevented them because we saw those organizations as dangerous terrorists.) We had trouble even identifying who or what they were by legal, political and diplomatic criteria.

And, like most African societies, Somalia was “post-colonial:” that is, its experience for generations had been *being ruled* rather than *ruling itself*. In short, it was thrust into a situation to which European nation-states had adapted only after generations and only then imperfectly. It was asked to act like a nation-state when it lacked the experience, the people and the will to do so.

And, despite what the neoconservatives have preached, we lacked the knowledge, the means or the acceptability to do the job for them. Inevitably, more went down in our attempt to impose our will upon them than our “Black Hawk.”

### **The Islamists**

I turn now to the most complex and most urgent of our problems, our conflict with the Islamic *Salafi* movement and various mainly Muslim states. The *urgency* is obvious as we are on the brink of yet another war.

The *complexity* arises from several causes: first, to understand them requires some appreciation of a coherent but to most of us an alien way of life, belief and organization. Few people in our governments or even in our universities have taken the time or made the effort to comprehend that system.

Second, relations with that other way of life stretch back over centuries and widely over a vast area of the Earth; so there is great variety. And, third, our lives have been in part conditioned by the same factors that I mentioned in Somalia – our power, wealth and dynamism and their weakness, poverty and relative lethargy.

Even a motivated and intelligent reader would find little help in the media or in the deluge of “quickie” books to see a sequence in may appear to be random events or to understand the point of view of our adversaries among the one billion Muslims.

So each time we run into opposition, we face the question: “do we shoot?? People who seek simple answer usually say “yes.” If you have a gun and you think you are in danger, the obvious thing to do is to use it. We have done so, or threatened to do so, just in recent years, in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Balkans and Libya and have been complicit in the acts by others in Palestine, Indonesia and various other parts of Africa.

All of these are Muslim or Muslim-related conflicts. Several of our intrusions were multiple so that, overall and often, we have convinced many Muslims that it is not only their *politics* but their *faith* that we have identified as our enemy.

This view of our relationship has a long history, dating back to long before the Crusades, and it has been periodically reinforced over the centuries. I will be short and will hit only the main points:

Throughout most of the last thousand years, both in Europe and in Africa and most of Asia, there was relatively little movement inside and among societies. More people catch the train from Washington to New York in a single day than traveled that far in the 500 or so years of the Middle Ages.

Most people, both in the West and throughout Africa and Asia, were, by our standards, almost unimaginably poor. Many lived on the edge of hunger. Few had even what we would call rudimentary skills. The economy was at the subsistence level. Money hardly existed. Tools and even clothes were handed down generation to generation.

There was little trade beyond the distance a person could walk in a day except along rivers and along the seacoast. And that was minimal. We get a sense of this life by the story of one exotic food: sugar was such a luxury that Columbus’s patron, the great Queen Isabella of Spain, gave one of her children a sugar cone as a grand Christmas present.

Then just on the eve of the Renaissance, Europe began a commercial transformation. Borrowing from the practices of Muslim East, first the Italians

and then the Dutch set up banks, adopted the practice of letters of credit and learned how to spread risks through multiple ownership and insurance. In a variety of activities the latent energy of the Europeans was released.

Each successful experiment led to the next. Boats became stronger so the acquisition of more Atlantic fish, particularly the cod, to overcome European famines, taking of African slaves to work the new sugar plantations and (after 1492) importing silver for coinage became possible.

The first true factories were set up to make rope for sailing ships. Piece by piece, step by step, Europeans forged ahead. By the Eighteenth Century, Europeans mastered a source of energy in coal and embarked upon the Industrial Revolution.

### **Muslim Worries**

Even before the effects of this revolution were pervasive, perceptive Muslim leaders felt the ground slipping under their feet. They had reason. Napoleon had begun the wave of Western conquest when he conquered Egypt in 1798. He destroyed its then government and tried to convert the Egyptians to the ideas of the French Revolution. He did not succeed in planting those ideas, but he played havoc with the existing institutions.

Quite suddenly in the years around the turn of the Eighteenth into the Nineteen Century, the balance between Europe and the Middle East was overturned. What has been called "the impact of the West" began to overwhelm Muslim societies, undermine their economies and alter their customs. In a study I did at the start of my academic career, I found that in Lebanon when industrial Europe came into contact with the cottage industry of the East in the 1830s, the Middle East reeled under the blow.

In the one year of 1833 an estimated 10,000 workers were forced into idleness in Damascus and Aleppo; by 1838, urban men were wearing fezzes imported from France and drinking from glass made in Bohemia; by a few years later, even the Bedouin's headdress was made in Birmingham. New ideas from the West changed clothing styles so that the key luxury import from the further East, the Cashmiri shawl, went out of fashion.

By mid-century, the old Baghdad-Damascus caravan was finished. By 1854, the French and Austrian steamers, plying the coastal Levant towns, had, in the words of the British consul, "annihilated the local carrying trade." Routes of trade were forgotten or even reversed: Aleppo traditionally got its coffee from Yemen and then began to get it from Santo Domingo via France; pepper which had come to Beirut from the East via Baghdad was, after the advent of steam, sent to

Baghdad via Beirut.

Meanwhile in India, the British were chipping away the foundations and territory of the great Mughal Empire. Starting in Bengal, they began a march across the subcontinent and, as they went, they sometimes replaced and often modified laws, customs, governmental procedures and relationships among Muslims and Hindus and between both of them and Europeans.

Tremors of the “impact of the West” radiated through the Islamic world. In response, the first great movements of *salafiyah* began to be organized.

I have elsewhere defined *salafiyah* but briefly put, it was the Muslim version of the Protestant movements within Christianity in northern Europe and New England. Protestant reformers in Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries Europe thought that it was necessary to “purify” their societies by going back to origins in order to create a solid basis from which to advance.

That concept sparked the great commercial and intellectual revolution in Holland, Belgium and North Germany that laid the basis for modern Europe. Muslim *Salafis* similarly sought to go back to original beliefs, clearing away innovations, to establish a firm basis on which a “pure” order could be reestablished and the future secured. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Understanding Islamic Fundamentalism.”](#)]

### **Recapturing Dignity**

The *Salafis* were not so interested in commerce as the Lutherans, Calvinists and their various offshoots; their underlying objective was to recapture the power and dignity of the days when Islam was a world leader. They believed that by stripping away the shroud of dark ages and returning to “purity,” that is, to the original, Quran-inspired religious belief and social practice, they could advance toward a dignified, powerful and Divinely-ordained future.

Several of these early *Salafis* created vast, enduring and far-flung societies – virtual religious empires – that were the most vigorous and popular movements of their times.

Among their leaders were the Arabian Ahmad ibn Abdul Wahhab (the founder of Wahhabism); the Algerian/Libyan Muhammad bin Ali as-Sanusi (the founder of the North African Sanusi Brotherhood); the Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi (the founder of the African Mahdiah movement); the Iranian Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (who inspired movements throughout the Ottoman-Turkish, Qajar-Iranian and Mughal-Indian empires); and the Egyptian theologian Muhammad Abduh (whose students taught millions of young Muslims all over Asia and Africa).

Until fairly recently, we in the West have known little of these men and their movements, but they were as influential among their peoples as Luther and Calvin were among Westerners. And, as we see, their influence is growing among today's 1 billion Muslims.

The early Muslim movements did not stop the "impact of the West" nor did they appeal to the Christian and Jewish populations of their areas. The Christians and the Jews eagerly accepted the Western intrusion and generally profited materially, intellectually and politically from it.

However, toward the end of the Nineteenth Century a few, mainly Lebanese Christian, members of the western-educated elite began to try to define a political doctrine that could overcome religious difference. Their purpose remained essentially the same as in earlier *salafiyah* – protection against Western intrusion – but they focused more sharply on the political and military challenge.

They thought that, if they dropped or at least obscured the criteria of religion and focused on something they all could share, the desire for liberty, they could gather together and become strong. The philosophical or emotional answer, they thought, was the same one that was then rallying Christians in Italy, Germany and France and beginning to affect the Jewish peoples of central and eastern Europe – *nationalism*.

Nationalism, as understood by the Arabs, was at first a geographically limited concept. The word adopted to encapsulate "nation" also meant "dwelling" or by extension "village" (Arabic: *watan*). Ironically, it is a reasonable Arabic translation of the word "national home" used by the early Zionists (Hebrew: *heimsta'at*).

The Zionists used "national home," as they said, to avoid frightening the British by admitting that they aimed to create a nation-state in Palestine. That was not the intent of the Arabs. They wanted to frighten the British and French into leaving their lands. For that purpose they had to devise a different concept and use a different word (Arabic: *qawmiyah*).

Their efforts led them over the past century through other definitions of nationalism including pan-Arabism and a sort of socialism. All of these efforts came up short. None accomplished what the people sought, an acceptable degree of parity with the West (including Israel). All that was left was what they had started with, religion.

### **Self-Defeating Outrage**

So we see today a return to *Salafiyah*. And again the parallels with the rise of

European Protestantism are suggestive. Europe in the age of Luther and Calvin was violent, bitterly divided and intolerant. Horrible crimes were committed by all parties in the name of religion in the Thirty Years War. Then and later hundreds of thousands died before passions cooled.

No outside force the only ones close enough and powerful enough being the Catholic Church and the Spanish empire ameliorated or possibly could have ameliorated the process or calmed the tempers. When the Church and/or Catholic states used force as they did, for example, in the Netherlands, parts of Germany and the British isles, their efforts further inflamed the furies.

Today, when religious beliefs are also intertwined with post-colonial angers, thwarted ambitions and relative deprivation, passions are perhaps even more sensitive than they were in the Thirty Years War. If, as I believe, this is true or even if it is only a part of the whole story, the ability of outsiders to affect the course of events is similarly restricted.

Worse, it is likely to be even self-defeating. The more we intervene, the more intense and long-lasting is likely to be the reaction. The more violent our intervention the more long-term damage we are likely to do.

The record of the past few years is compelling. The numbers of displaced, wounded, killed, of stunted children, of widespread misery, of the loss of civic decency and the rise of terror among the survivors, of the set-back to the feeble growth of legal, social, cultural and political institutions, of blasted infrastructure which took decades to develop, of the enormous wastage of financial and human resources desperately needed throughout the world and of the often alarming and dangerous impact on fragile ecosystems all of these make evident the dangers of intervention in situations in which we lack the knowledge, the tools and the acceptability that we often think we have.

As the terrifying "joke" of the Vietnam war put it, "we destroyed the village in order to save it." And even when we did so to stop the ugliness and viciousness of "the bad guys," we often resorted to tools and practices that were hardly more humane: like many Americans I carry in my memory the picture of the little Vietnamese girl running down a street on fire from napalm.

We used napalm later also in Iraq. Was it more humane than poison gas or cutting off peoples' heads? Decapitation is surely barbaric. But let us not forget that the French did that publicly until the eve of the Second World War; the Saudis still do it and the Iraqis actually decapitated Saddam Husain with a rope rather than a sword.

If I had to choose my form of execution, I believe I would find decapitation

preferable to being burned alive. Is carpet bombing which kills the bystanders or chemical defoliation which can induce cancer and birth defects less horrible than suicide bombing? Were Saddam Hussein's or Gaddafi's prisons more cruel than Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo? If any of those comparisons redound to our credit, they surely are very narrow calls.

### **Another Problem: Ourselves**

And they raise another problem: what they do or did to those of us who were involved in doing them. It isn't only the victims but is also the perpetrators who are harmed by violence. The pilot who pushes the release button does not see what his bomb does; so maybe he is protected from a sense of horror or guilt by ignorance, but the sniper can sometimes see the head of his victim explode.

The Special Forces or Green Beret soldier apparently, in the words I have heard them say, positively delight in their power to inflict pain and death. What is the long-term effect of such experiences on our own society and culture? Surely, they cannot be beneficial.

Thus, for our own sakes as well as for the sake of the people we assert our ability to guide, I strongly believe that we would be well advised to stay out of conflicts we should by this time have learned that we cannot solve but which we know we have the ability to make far worse.

This is not, of course, to suggest that we wash our hands of the world's problems or that we stop trying to help the victims. We can and should help. Better, my experience teaches me, it would be to help at arms' length through the UN, regional associations, foundations and NGOs, but all of these need the money and talent we have so often wasted in military ventures. Think what the \$4 trillion or \$5 trillion we threw away in Iraq and Afghanistan could have done!

We are spending less today in fighting the Islamic State but, even without "boots on the ground," our activities there are costing over \$1 million a day. As the months stretch into years, so will the millions become billions.

The sorrows and tribulations of the people in the world's trouble spots should be our concern. But we must not "destroy the village to save it." We must put aside the gun. That is the first step. Then we must allow the healing and *restraining* processes to take effect within troubled societies – as history teaches us they are likely to do.

How soon that will happen depends in part on how much pressure we apply. The more we intervene militarily the longer it is likely to take. The "mission accomplished," as we now see, was never accomplished despite years of combat. It is still not accomplished. Surely, we have learned that lesson in Afghanistan

and Iraq. Or have we?

As hard as it will be for us and our political leaders to accept, we must recognize that there are no shortcuts. What we hope to see happening is more likely to happen if we allow the troubled peoples to set their own course. Then, to the degree that they have scope to act without being accused of being unreligious or unpatriotic, the more intelligent, less violent and more constructive of their leaders are more likely to be able to restrain the more destructive; our actions, by threatening to pin upon them the label of weakness, incapacity and treason are apt to make their efforts impossible. Or get them killed. That is, the same process is active here that we saw in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Also, as we saw in that crisis, we should be constrained to working within the same parameters we set for other nations. The bottom line is avoiding aggression. Of course, we must defend ourselves. But, as recent history makes clear, defense and aggression often are hard to distinguish. What is defense to one is often aggression to the other.

Mutual respect and mutual forbearance should be our objective. This is not, as Mrs. Thatcher would have said, to "go wobbly," to appease, to pussyfoot or to be just weak-willed liberals. It may be a matter of life or death and certainly can help us avoid catastrophes.

But, we should realize that adopting a strategy of avoiding conflict will often be difficult. Public angers are far easier to whip up than to dispel. Demagogues multiply like rabbits and sometimes we follow them like lemmings. All the polls tell us how ignorant we are as a people. And, looking around us, we must ask ourselves where we can find today the wise leaders we need to guide our actions. I confess that I cannot identify them.

So it is not surprising that today we are moving away from coherent, well-reasoned and effective *strategy* and indulging in scattered, short-sighted and unsuccessful *tactics*. We jump from one crisis to the next with little thought on how we keep repeating our mistakes.

There is truth in the old saying that when one is in a hole, his first step ought to be to stop digging. We need to pause and take our bearings. We need to do this for our sakes as much as for "theirs."

I end on a very personal demonstration of a proof for what I have written: when many years ago I was first visiting such Asian and African lands as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, both Sudans, Libya and Algeria, I was welcomed – as an American – with open arms. Today, I would be in danger of being shot.



William R. Polk was a member of the Policy Planning Council, responsible for North Africa, the Middle East and West Asia, for four years under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, He was a member of the three-men Crisis Management Committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis. During those years he wrote two proposed peace treaties for the American government and negotiated one major ceasefire between Israel and Egypt. Later he was Professor of History at the University of Chicago, founding director of the Middle Eastern Studies Center and President of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. He is the author of some 17 books on world affairs, including *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace, the Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Understanding Iraq*; *Understanding Iran*; *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency and Terrorism*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs* and numerous articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic*, *Harpers*, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and *Le Monde Diplomatique* . He has lectured at many universities and at the Council on Foreign Relations, Chatham House, Sciences Po, the Soviet Academy of Sciences and has appeared frequently on NPR, the BBC, CBS and other networks. His most recent books, both available on Amazon, are *Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change* and *Blind Man's Buff, a Novel*.

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