

Misreading History into Wars

Official Washington's "tough-guy-ism" often cites historical precedents, like Hitler at Munich or the Rwanda genocide, as simplistic justifications for new wars. President Obama's two new national security appointees Susan Rice and Samantha Power seem prone to that mistake, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

President Barack Obama's appointments of Susan Rice and Samantha Power certainly have caused a stir. Without adding to the pile of overall judgments about these choices, something more can be said about how these appointments raise an issue concerning the correct and incorrect ways to draw lessons from history.

Both appointees are identified with *ex post facto* anguish over the international response to the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and a determination not to let a similar event happen again. Rice is quoted by Power, in the latter's later writing about this event, as saying that "I swore to myself that if I ever faced such a crisis again, I would come down on the side of dramatic action, going down in flames if that was required."

The extraction of lessons from salient (and especially unpleasant) historical episodes should go beyond a simple determination that a piece of policy was good or bad and instead examine in detail exactly why and how a policy didn't work or an initiative went sour.

Such a careful approach recognizes that: most policies are not entirely good or entirely bad; some aspects of an initiative can be executed well while other aspects of the same initiative are executed poorly; the right policy may be pursued for the wrong reasons, or the wrong policy for noble reasons; and multiple national interests are typically at stake, some of which are better served by a particular policy than are others.

Extraction of lessons, for example, from the Iraq War, one of the most salient, unpleasant and costly episodes in recent American history, should take this kind of careful, fine-grained form. It should not be a simple matter of declaring that the war stank and this means the United States should not intervene militarily again in the Middle East.

The latter, simplistic approach is what some advocates of intervention in Syria depict as the frame of mind that they are battling against, warning Americans that they should not be afraid of intervening in Syria just because they got traumatized in Iraq. No doubt some Americans do have that frame of mind, as

reflected in what is usually described as war weariness of the American public. But as far as serious debate among policy elites is concerned, the depicted frame of mind is a straw man.

Many important lessons can be, and have been, drawn from the Iraq War and the decision to launch it, lessons that *should* be applied to possible interventions elsewhere, Syria included. Substantively, for example, there are lessons about foreign perceptions of U.S. troop involvement, the importance of ethnic and sectarian rivalries, and the inability to inject a liberal democratic culture through the barrel of a gun.

The procedural lessons are just as important, including ones about failing to plan sufficiently for later phases of an occupation, rejecting expert judgment about the challenges likely to be encountered in those phases, and failing to have any policy process leading to the decision to undertake such a major expedition.

A contrast to such careful lesson-drawing is the never-again, I'll-go-down-in-flames way of reacting to a past episode. If we are to take Rice and Power at their word, this approach is not a straw man. And it is a really bad way to apply history to current policy issues.

It ignores or discounts the aforementioned complexities about mixtures of good and bad and the trade-offs among different interests. It overstates the similarity between the historical episode that has had the searing effect and whatever is the policy problem of today.

Swearing in advance to take a particular side in a future policy debate without knowing the details of the problem that will be debated is a very bad way to make policy. To the extent that emotion and guilt over some past horror come into play, this gets even farther away from careful examination of policy options and makes bad policy even more likely.

This approach already has damaged U.S. interests. Excessive and simplistic application of the granddaddy of all international policy wonks' guilt trips, the response to the rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, has been a major factor in such damage, including that resulting from the U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam in the 1960s. As for the Iraq War, Paul Wolfowitz was especially fond of telling us that Saddam Hussein was a latter-day equivalent of Adolf Hitler.

The no-more-Rwandas version of this approach also has caused damage, less severe than that of the wars in either Vietnam or Iraq but harm that is still in the process of being incurred and tallied. Of particular note in this regard is the intervention in Libya two years ago, an action that Rice and Power reportedly

supported strongly.

The notion that this intervention was wise appears to rest on the idea that the target was a dictator nobody particularly liked and that in the civil war that was then ongoing people were getting hurt, as is always the case in civil wars. The notion also rested on the myth, unsupported by evidence to this day, that Gaddafi was planning some sort of genocidal bloodbath in eastern Libya and that failure to intervene would mean Rwanda all over again.

The dictator was swept aside with U.S. and Western help, at minimal material cost to the United States, and so the episode gets casually put in the win column. The actual balance sheet on Libya is far more extensive than that.

The disliked dictator had already, through an enforceable agreement with the United States and Britain, given up his unconventional weapons programs and gotten out of international terrorism. He was still a quixotically inconvenient and sometimes disagreeable cuss, but he was not a threat.

What we have had since he was ousted is extremist-infested disorder in Libya that has given rise to a flow of arms to radicals in the Sahel and incidents like the fatal encounter at a U.S. compound in Benghazi. (If Rice were being nominated for a position requiring Senate confirmation, this is the aspect of the Benghazi incident she ought to be grilled about, not some manufactured silliness about talking points.)

We also have sent a very unhelpful message to the likes of the Iranians and North Koreans and have perversely affected their motivations regarding the possibility of reaching their own agreements with the United States. It is remarkable that the Libyan intervention is so often considered a success.

Let us hope that in the future when lessons are drawn from this episode, by either advocates or opponents of some future intervention, they will be drawn carefully, rather than in the simplistic manner that seems to have become respectable even among presidential appointees.

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