

*Sunday September 8, 2013*

## **Beyond the old boys' club**

By Jim Taylor

Okay, I accept that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is a bad guy. The lives of his citizens matter less than retaining power.

That puts him in company with such other bad guys as Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Papa Doc Duvalier, and Josef Stalin. All gained power through some form of the democratic process; all refused to exit by the same process.

As I have written before, the real test of democracy is not how people get elected, but how they get unelected. In a democracy, the people can vote someone out – and perhaps more importantly, the person voted out accepts the people's decision. Dictators can only be removed by force.

But stopping a bad guy is not, in itself, sufficient justification for intervening in a civil war. Northern nations felt no need to intervene in Biafra, Uganda, and Rwanda.

Of course, those countries didn't use chemical weapons. Saddam Hussein did, twice – first against Iran, then against his own Kurdish minority. But American policy actually supported him until he invaded Kuwait and threatened U.S. oil supplies.

Which would suggest that Washington's antipathy to Bashar al-Assad is only partly about chemical weapons.

## **Elements of skepticism**

There's no question that the Syrian civil war is a humanitarian disaster. In such a crisis, as David Sirota of *Salon* magazine noted, our instinctive reaction is, "Do something! Anything!"

But like me, Sirota is not convinced that raining missiles from ships stationed in the Mediterranean will reduce the suffering. He asks, "When it comes to wars ostensibly waged in defense of human rights, will military action result in a net increase or decrease in human suffering?" The experience of both Iraq and Afghanistan suggests intervention will exacerbate an already chaotic conflict, lead to thousands of additional deaths, and produce millions more refugees.

Just to be clear about this, I normally support Obama's initiatives. I like him almost as much as I loathed G.W. Bush.

But I have read Obama's "red line" speeches with some skepticism. I can't help recalling the certainty with which those same U.S. intelligence sources affirmed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that threatened U.S. security.

At least one alternate news network, MintPress of Minneapolis, reported that Syrian rebels had admitted launching the attack, using chemicals supplied by Saudi Arabia.

## **What ethical code?**

In one speech, Obama argued that a failure to punish al-Assad "could lead to escalating use of chemical weapons, or their proliferation to terrorist groups who would do our people harm."

He seems to assume that a code of honour exists among terrorist groups that would cause them to voluntarily refrain from using chemical weapons on their enemies.

But it's precisely the absence of such a code of honour, of ethics, that makes them terrorists.

Most of us in our western culture are products of The Enlightenment – a European movement that flowered in the 1700s. It assumed that human behaviour could be influenced by reason, science, and intellectual interchange. The principles of the Enlightenment influenced Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, fostered the American Revolution, and shaped the American Constitution.

But the Enlightenment never penetrated more than our part of the world. (And it sometimes seems superficial even there.) The rest of the world continues to live in a tribal culture.

## **Only our tribe is right**

Tribal cultures have no middle grounds, no shades of grey. Everything is either black or white, right or wrong, us or them. Only the tribe matters. Or the family. (In America, substitute the college football team.) Certainly not any abstract principles of justice or universal ethics.

In tribal cultures, anyone who tarnishes the tribe's image must be punished. Hence the "honour killings" of women considered to have been defiled by rape. When an outsider wrongs the tribe, that individual's identity is irrelevant – the whole offending tribe is held responsible.

Obviously, then, no tribe will voluntarily submit to some other tribe's code of ethics. To do so admits the other tribe's dominance.

The whole Middle East is essentially a tribal conflict. In Syria, the warring tribes all happen to be factions of Islam, a much bigger tribe. But they are no more likely to submit to a set of outsider's standards than Americans are to adopt Sharia law.

In this context, punishing one tribe for crossing an imaginary "red line" will hardly cause other tribes to re-think their values. They're more likely, I suspect, to celebrate an enemy's misfortune without questioning their own behaviour.

I wonder if the tribal mindset also afflicts Washington. Obama portrays himself as speaking for the 189 nations who have endorsed the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Only five nations have refused to sign the Convention. One of them is Syria.

Since 1993, an estimated 70 per cent of the world's stockpiles of chemical weapons have been destroyed. Again, the primary exception is Syria, which has – apparently – increased its inventory.

All of which makes Bashar al-Assad an outsider, and justifies anything done to him. Regardless of reasons.

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## **YOUR TURN**

I think I had something important to say last week, but I got distracted....

On the subject of distractions, Jean Mosher wrote, "Why are people so stupid? Everyone knows that driving is an act that demands our total attention. Although I used to sometimes 'drive distracted' many years ago, traffic has become so dense and so erratic that I wonder that some people are able to finally get to their destination in one piece. I hope that this 'Edge' goes to everyone who ever put hands to wheel."

Cliff Boldt finds that single-minded concentration has both good and bad elements: "I have a satellite phone in my car. Hands free. When I talk on it, I feel distracted, so I haven't renewed my contract. I refuse to have ear buds for

anything -- even in my home. When I have a project on the go and my mind is full of it, I hear in the background my wife asking, "Did you hear what I said?" I didn't. Distracted. Crash, of sorts."

Isabel Gibson described "A friend who is a recovering alcoholic [who] says that for his mental health he tries 'to be in the same place as his body' -- and comments on how hard that can be! Just as it is easy to be doing two or three things at once, so it is easy to be in two times at once: fretting about the past, planning for the future. Meanwhile, we're not here, right now.

"As we get older, my husband and I are both more conscious of having to focus on doing one thing at a time -- whether that's completing an errand or going down a flight of stairs -- both for efficiency and for safety.

Charles Hill took a swipe at telephones in general: "I teach 'developmental' reading at a community (2-year) college which, by law, must admit everyone who can pay, or get a federal loan to pay, their tuition. These students couldn't pass an 8th grade reading test. The biggest battle is to get them to put away their electronics during class.

"I believe that the problem is that we have a society in which it is social suicide to not be instantly available to peers. Being liked trumps all else. With adults, workplaces increasingly demand 24/7 availability. Even pastors are demanded by parishioners to be instantly available 24/7. Alexander Graham Bell did not know what he wrought!"

Frank Martens noted that sometimes various physical handicaps can affect one's ability to concentrate: "One of the things you didn't mention as a problem with concentrating on one thing at a time, or anything, for that matter, is the health of an individual. Quite frequently a person who is physically handicapped or in pain will find it very hard to concentrate hard enough to learn something new or anything at all. Although I managed to get a couple of degrees I can't remember how many thousands of paragraphs I had to re-read because I lost my concentration. And, unlike the few people I knew who had photographic memory, mine was never that good even before I reached old age.

"My main handicap has been tinnitus, that debilitating whistle in the middle of your brain that seems to get louder with age as your hearing of outside sounds is reduced. From the time you awake in the morning (not counting power naps) until you go to sleep at night you hear, unless you have learned to concentrate very, very hard, a very high pitched single, constant note, interspersed with clicking noises, Morse Code, motor sounds (if you have been working with a lawn mower, for example, you might hear it for long after) and sometimes (you swear to God) voices. When it is at its worse, it becomes a cacophony of notes. I was lucky, if you can call it that, of having been born with this affliction, so I was used to it. I can't imagine how it must feel for some people to develop this at a later stage in life."

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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