

Stephen R. Soukup Publisher
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

Mark L. Melcher Editor
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Because our moral senses are at origin parochial and easily blunted by even trivial differences between what we think of as familiar and what we define as strange, it is not hard to explain why there is so much misery in the world, and it is also easy to understand why so many people deny the existence of a moral sense at all. How can there be a moral sense if everywhere we find cruelty and combat, sometimes on a monstrous scale?

“What Is Moral, and How do We Know It?” James Q. Wilson, *Commentary*, June 1993. (Adapted from his book, *The Moral Sense*, Free Press, 1993.)

In this Issue

Of Korans and Moral Futility.

Is April the Cruellest Month,
as per T.S. Eliot?

OF KORANS AND MORAL FUTILITY.

A great deal has been made over the past couple of days about the incident in Florida in which a nutty religious creep burned some Korans, which served as an excuse for some other nutty religious creeps in Afghanistan to slaughter some innocent people working for the United Nations. The latter of these two incidents was, to say the least, a horrific attack on people doing their best to best to bring a little cheer to a miserable place, a little light to darkness, a little hope to despair. And vicious murder is how they were repaid.

The New York Times, enemy-coddling, morally obtuse, anti-American, vicious rag that it is, followed the stupid and futile Koran burning by taking the barbarians' side in the dispute, headlining its Saturday story on the incident “Afghans Avenue Koran Burning, Killing 12.” You catch that? The murderers couldn't help themselves. They had to “avenge” the destruction of their holy book. The barbarians get it. The *Times* gets it too. Stupid Koran burners caused all this trouble. Oh dear.

On the Sunday morning talk shows, the “leaders” of the American Senate proclaimed that they would set about to right this wrong and ensure that such a thing never happened again. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid lamented that “Ten to 20 people have been killed,” and promised that “we'll take a look at this of course.” His Republican colleague, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, was even more adamant, declaring that “I wish we could find some way to hold people accountable.”

Unfortunately, these morally insipid and pusillanimous jackasses weren't talking about looking into the murders in Afghanistan or holding the killers accountable. They were talking about getting tough with ol' Pastor Terry Jones, who apparently had pushed them too far by having the unmitigated gall to exercise his First Amendment right to be a complete and utter buffoon, and a religious one at that.

All of this, naturally, prompted a backlash, with prominent law professors and bloggers Glenn Reynolds and Ann Althouse suggesting that a boob like Graham is “unfit for office” after such comments and the inimitable columnist Mark Steyn suggesting that Graham would have little to fear from a terrorist reprisal himself since “there’s no need for the excitable lads of Mazar e-Sharif to chop his head off because he’s already walking around with nothing up there.”

This made for good drama, and certainly the debate over the importance of the First Amendment, even in war time, is an important one; as is the related debate over cultural confidence and the ridiculousness of political “leaders” like Graham, who not only think that *we* should watch what *we* say so as not to anger the enemy, but also apparently believe that Muslims are incapable of controlling their baser instincts and are thus compelled by the stupidity of white-trash preachers in Florida to set about killing innocents.

Still, though, we think that this focus on free speech, on the free exercise of religion, and on the relationship of these two freedoms to our cowardly congress-critters and to the war “over there” misses a broader cultural point. That being that this isn’t just about what one can or cannot do, or how our actions impact other people. This is, more broadly, about the inability of the Western ruling class to distinguish between varying levels of turpitude.

As we have noted countless times in these pages, the great contribution made by the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre involves our understanding of the collapse of the moral framework in the wake of the Enlightenment. MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment mission of destroying the traditional, religiously based moral scheme and replacing it with one based exclusively on reason was doomed from its inception and left the very notion of morality shattered.

Without a teleological framework, MacIntyre argued, “the whole project of morality becomes unintelligible,” and moral philosophy becomes nothing

more than an arena for competing notions that have no basis other than “logic,” which is, of course, subjective.

The ultimate end of all of this, MacIntyre writes, is a civil order in which the traditional moral order has been eroded but has been replaced by nothing of any substance or meaning, which, in turn, breeds moral chaos. The modern, liberal society, in turn, is one in which the meanings of such words as right, wrong, moral, immoral, truth, lie, justice and injustice are entirely capricious and contextual. In such a society, MacIntyre notes, the statement “This is good” comes to mean nothing more than “Hurrah for this!”

Now, in practice, this has helped to advance a society that is incapable of recognizing or asserting moral absolutes. Everything is relative. Everything is situational. And everything has at least two sides. Nothing can be declared good or bad without first being placed properly in context. All moral judgments are, as MacIntyre put it, emotive.

What you end up with in such a society is the “newspaper of record” alleging that Afghans might feel the need to “avenge” the burning of their holy book by slaughtering people. After all, if good and evil are relative and dependent not on eternal truths or standards but on the whimsy of power, will, and situation, then certainly the immorality of wanton murder can be dependent on white trash book burning.

The bottom line here is that MacIntyre put all of this into a theoretical framework for us, while the slaughter over the weekend in Afghanistan and the Western ruling class’s reaction to it have, once again, helped to put it into concrete example.

Also over the weekend, General David Petraeus noted that acts like the Koran burning make his job more difficult, which is undoubtedly true. He also noted that the burning of the Korans was “hateful, extremely disrespectful and enormously intolerant,” which is also undoubtedly true. But so what? What does that

have to do with anything? What does that have to do with General Petraeus or his job in Afghanistan? And if even he thinks that Koran burning and murder can be somehow related, so much so that he would feel it necessary for the “security” of the troops under his command, then is there any possible hope that America has the moral capacity to accomplish the ends it has set for itself in Afghanistan?

The United States went to Afghanistan in order to kill the barbarians. It stayed in order to teach the barbarians how to behave in civil society. But is there any point at all in staying if the leadership of the United States, up to and including the man who leads its forces in Afghanistan, is unable any longer to hold the barbarians accountable for their barbarism without first noting the extenuating circumstances of the “hateful, extremely disrespectful and enormously intolerant,” petty act of some imbecile elsewhere? Is there any chance that we can possibly impose civil society if we’re unwilling even to demand it? And if we can’t and won’t is there any reason at all to have our young men and women dying any longer to do so?

Now, this is not, we should note, a uniquely American problem. Indeed the United States is not even the most severely affected nation, as difficult as that may be to believe.

As you may or may not recall, in the wake of Israel’s mini-war with Hamas in Gaza in January, 2009, the United Nations Human Rights Commission issued a report authored principally by Richard Goldstone, a former South African Supreme Court Justice. The report was “balanced,” accused both Israel and Hamas of war crimes, and suggested that the crimes committed by the terrorists, i.e. Hamas, were mitigated by the crimes committed by the aggressors, i.e. the Israelis.

For the Israel-haters of the world, it was long-awaited justice. For the Israel-defenders of the world, it was a disaster. And as we now know, it was also pure horsehockey, the fevered imaginings of a morally bankrupt institution and a hopelessly confused and morally obtuse investigator and author.

And how do we know this? Well, from an op-ed piece published over the weekend in the *Washington Post* and authored by none other than . . . Richard Goldstone. To wit:

We know a lot more today about what happened in the Gaza war of 2008-09 than we did when I chaired the fact-finding mission appointed by the U.N. Human Rights Council that produced what has come to be known as the Goldstone Report. If I had known then what I know now, the Goldstone Report would have been a different document.

The final report by the U.N. committee of independent experts — chaired by former New York judge Mary McGowan Davis — that followed up on the recommendations of the Goldstone Report has found that “Israel has dedicated significant resources to investigate over 400 allegations of operational misconduct in Gaza” while “the de facto authorities (i.e., Hamas) have not conducted any investigations into the launching of rocket and mortar attacks against Israel”

. . . .

The allegations of intentionality by Israel were based on the deaths of and injuries to civilians in situations where our fact-finding mission had no evidence on which to draw any other reasonable conclusion. While the investigations published by the Israeli military and recognized in the U.N. committee’s report have established the validity of some incidents that we investigated in cases involving individual soldiers, they also indicate that civilians were not intentionally targeted as a matter of policy. . . .

Although the Israeli evidence that has emerged since publication of our report doesn't negate the tragic loss of civilian life, I regret that our fact-finding mission did not have such evidence explaining the circumstances in which we said civilians in Gaza were targeted, because it probably would have influenced our findings about intentionality and war crimes . . .

Some have suggested that it was absurd to expect Hamas, an organization that has a policy to destroy the state of Israel, to investigate what we said were serious war crimes. It was my hope, even if unrealistic, that Hamas would do so, especially if Israel conducted its own investigations. At minimum I hoped that in the face of a clear finding that its members were committing serious war crimes, Hamas would curtail its attacks. Sadly, that has not been the case.

This self-admission of stupidity would be remarkable and captivating were it not for the fact that it is so pathetic and far too little, far too late. The damage done by the Goldstone Report was enormous. And this sad, embarrassing walk-back is hardly even an adequate beginning of an apology. Thanks to Goldstone's original work, the very legitimacy of the state of Israel has been challenged. More to the point, this notion if Israel's illegitimacy has been given sanction by the very international institutions that the President of the United States, among others, deems the highest moral authority in the global community. And it is all based on the morally corrupt notion that there are no absolutes, no eternal truths, and two sides to every conflict. This is garbage. And worse yet, it is dangerous garbage.

John Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* and a columnist for the *New York Post*, notes that even in his act of contrition, Goldstone can't help but insist on MacIntyre-esque moral equivalence:

He [Goldstone] was then, and is now, an entirely despicable public figure—and so is his op-ed, by the way, which continues to act as though it is appropriate to draw parallel inferences about Hamas and the state of Israel. It would be right for world Jewry that his name be hereafter summoned as we summon Benedict Arnold's, or Tokyo Rose's.

We have to say that we wouldn't go so far as to say the same thing about the likes of Harry Reid and Lindsey Graham. But we would say that they are damaging the cause of their country and of their people. Their mealy-mouthed, politically correct, self-righteous anger at the Koran burners may sound virtuous, but is anything but. It is, rather, completely devoid of virtue, completely devoid of any moral content whatsoever.

The general conservative reaction to our amoral scolds and their public rants has been interesting no doubt, but it misses the broader point: the world's two most steady and most productive democracies are under attack from outside by the forces of radical Islam and from inside, albeit unwittingly, by the forces of moral subjectivity. These nations are wasting their energy and resources waging wars against the outside enemy that simply cannot be won because of the inside enemy. Wars cannot be won without a determination of moral ends. And a society in moral collapse simply cannot agree on ends.

IS APRIL THE CRUELIEST MONTH, AS PER T.S. ELIOT?

The good news for Barack Obama is that Bob Shrum is nearly universally recognized as the worst political strategist in the business and therefore the man least likely to give relevant advice to an incipient presidential re-election effort; an effort like the one announced, say, just yesterday morning.

Shrum is the established "king of the losers" having worked on or run the presidential campaigns of such notables as George McGovern, Teddy Kennedy, Dick Gephardt, Michael Dukakis, Bob Kerrey, Al Gore, and

John Kerry. And you will note that one thing that all of these men have in common is the fact they were never president – thanks in part to the advice given them by Shrum. All of which is to say that a politician can probably get pretty far choosing to pretend that Shrum simply doesn't exist. Certainly, he's likely get farther than the poor fools who made the opposite mistake and listened to this idiot.

The bad news for Obama is that even the proverbial stopped clock is right twice a day, and of all the stopped clocks in the world, Bob Shrum is way overdue to be right just one time before he joins the "choir invisible," to borrow a phrase from George Eliot. Obama had better hope that it's just not right now.

You see, last week, Shrum suggested that April – this very month – may well be the month that decides the outcome of the Obama presidency and, by extension, the outcome of the aforementioned reelection effort. Libya, among the issues facing Obama this month, looms large, and, according to Shrum, will be the determining factor – or at least one of the major determining factors – in the remainder of the Obama presidency, including the campaign for a second term. Specifically, Shrum wrote:

April is the unforgiving month that will make or break the Obama presidency. It will be a fitting climactic for a half-term in power that has been an unremitting succession of crises. This month, from Moammar Gadhafi to the U.S. Capitol, Barack Obama will have to master events or see his credibility — and America's — degraded, and his political future — and his party's — imperiled.

Now, we would have included more of Shrum's commentary, but had we done so, you would likely have nodded off or become nauseated, and either way unable to finish reading our little essay, given the absolute preposterousness of Shrum's commentary ("In Libya, the President brilliantly passed the first test . . .") Like we said, Shrum is a perennial loser for a reason. But like we also said, Obama had better hope

that Shrum is equally preposterous in his assertion that the Libya crisis and its development over the next month will be critical to his re-election. Because if he is not, then the President's newly launched campaign is already in serious jeopardy.

Why? Because if Shrum is right, Barry is in deep doo-doo, to borrow a phrase from George Bush frère. You see, as things stand today, only a handful of outcomes are even possible, and none of them are especially good for Barrack Obama.

At the current moment, the outcome that looks increasingly likely in the short-term is a stalemate between Gadhafi and the "rebels," and we use this latter term advisedly. Turns out that "the most thoughtful human who ever lived" didn't give a whole lot of thought to the rebellion he was choosing to support when he chose to get himself – and this nation – involved in Libya. You see, the "rebellion" isn't much of a rebellion at all, being rather, more of a mess than anything else. Without American air support and al Qaeda ground support, the rebellion likely wouldn't exist at all, at least not any more. And in any case, even with American air support, it is hardly strong enough to depose Gadhafi. And you don't just have to take our word for it. Even the Obama administration itself thinks so. As the *Washington Post* reported over the weekend:

U.S. officials are becoming increasingly resigned to the possibility of a protracted stalemate in Libya, with rebels retaining control of the eastern half of the divided country but lacking the muscle to drive Moammar Gaddafi from power.

Such a deadlock — perhaps backed by a formal cease-fire agreement — could help ensure the safety of Libyan civilians caught in the crossfire between the warring sides. But it could also dramatically expand the financial and military commitments by the United States and allied countries that have

intervened in the six-week-old conflict, according to U.S. officials familiar with planning for the Libyan operation.

New evidence of a possible impasse emerged Friday as an opposition spokesman called publicly for a cease-fire that would halt the fighting and essentially freeze the battle lines. The Libyan government rejected the proposal, saying it would not “withdraw from our own cities.”

This, of course, would be a disaster for Obama, who promised that the Libya adventure would be over in a matter of “days not weeks.” And, if worse came to worse, weeks, not months. The idea of a protracted struggle – and protracted American involvement – is unthinkable at this point, especially given that the administration has, as of yet, given no explanation whatsoever as to why it thought this exercise was ever in the national interest.

Of course, as disastrous as such an outcome would be for Obama, it would be exponentially more disastrous for Obama’s allies, his “leaders,” i.e., the wise men of Europe. We can’t say for certain why the nice Mr. Sarkozy and the even nicer Mr. Cameron decided to make their respective stands at Tripoli, but we suspect that it had a great deal to do with the notion that an all-out assault by Gadhafi on the “rebel” stronghold of Benghazi would have sent a flood of Libyan refugees across the Mediterranean and into Europe, where Muslim refugees already live in overwhelming numbers.

In order to avoid this objectionable fate, though, Sarkozy, Cameron, et al. risked one even more objectionable; that is, Gadhafi’s survival, and survival as a “mad dog,” re-angered, and with his anger directed squarely at them. *Et voila*, as Sarko might say.

Now the architects of this international war on Gadhafi are faced with his and his regime’s survival, which is to say that they are faced with the survival of the man who brought down PanAm Flight 103 over

Lockerbie, and who killed 2 American servicemen (and one Turkish woman) and injured more than 200 others (including more than 50 American soldiers) at a discotheque bombing in Berlin. They are also faced with the survival of an angered version of the man who, prior to their “unfriendliness” towards him, exported somewhere in the neighborhood of 70% of his massive oil reserves to Europe. One would hardly be surprised to see him rethink his export arrangements, perhaps favoring the Chinese who are active in neighboring Sudan.

Whatever the case, this “stalemate” option is likely to be considered unacceptable by all parties involved, which means that they will likely push to ensure that it turns out differently. And that presents a whole new set of problems and potential disasters for Obama.

Already, Obama has caused a great many of his erstwhile “antiwar” supporters’ heads to explode. We’re not sure why it’s taken them until now to become upset, what with the reversals on Guantanamo, warrantless wiretaps, military tribunals, rendition, indefinite detention, the Afghanistan surge, and the rest of the Bush administration war policy. But apparently some of these “rubes” were still under the impression that their guy wouldn’t go bombing random Muslim countries without a reason. They were wrong, of course.

And now they’re unhappy about it. If Obama escalates and extends his great Libyan adventure, they’re going to be considerably unhappier. And having your core, diehard supporters angry at you is not a good way to start out a re-election campaign.

More to the point, to what end would Obama agree to escalate this war? He has already said repeatedly that “regime change” is not his plan. Will he amend that statement? Has he ever amended any statement? If there is a change in regime, who will replace Gadhafi? Will Obama, Sarkozy, and Cameron agree to Gadhafi the Younger? Will the rebels? Will al Qaeda?

And speaking of al Qaeda, given that the most organized, best armed, best funded, and most dedicated elements of the rebellion have al Qaeda ties

and have fought against Americans on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, does Obama really want to be responsible for pushing Gadhafi out of power so that bona fide, American-killing jihadists can take power in a large, oil-rich state in North Africa?

Or would it be more accurate to ask whether Obama wants to be responsible for pushing out the reigning rulers of two large, dark-continent countries, and thus leading directly to the creation of one large, oil-rich, Islamist super-state in North Africa? The reason we ask is because the Muslim Brotherhood is already flexing its muscle in Egypt, in conjunction with the newly empowered military government there; and because Egyptian troops have been reported for weeks on the ground in war-torn Libya; and because Egypt historically considers Libya not to be an independent country, but a *province of Egypt*.

Could Egypt and Libya unite to form an oil-rich, population-dense, Islamist mega-state? Who knows? And while it sounds absurd, it's no more absurd than the idea of going to war on behalf of a group of rebels about whom you know next to nothing and who, it turns out, have significant connections to America's avowed enemies.

Another Obama option is neither to escalate nor to accept stalemate, but to simply bide his time with the intention of fashioning a coherent and responsible opposition to Gadhafi during the current, seeming stalemate. Indeed, some are suggesting that this has been Obama's "plan" all along. Writing in *The New Republic* this weekend, for example, Steven Metz, put it this way:

Critics of U.S. involvement with the rebels base their case on how little is known about them and on their military weakness. There is no doubt that the rebel movement is a loose, almost chaotic *mélange* of local factions with limited military ability. But almost every insurgency and rebel movement in history started this way, even ones that eventually succeeded, such as the

Vietnamese and Chinese. While the Libyan rebels cannot decisively defeat Qaddafi at this point, neither can he defeat them, at least so long as NATO airpower is in play. Preventing an enemy from attaining victory is always easier than defeating an enemy outright. The Taliban shows that even a rag tag force can sometimes stave off defeat. This applies to Libya as well.

That sounds just really super neat . . . except for one problem. This "strategy" – if that's what you want to call it – manages to combine the worst aspects of both the other two. It extends both the conflict and America's commitment. It leaves Gadhafi in power for a time. And then it attempts to put the opposition in power, irrespective of said opposition's ties to Islamist elements. This is stupid, to say the very least. But, needless to say, that doesn't mean it's not what Obama has in mind. Indeed, the stupidity of the idea may be the selling point for America's intrepid president. Whatever the case, it's mind-numbingly stupid.

One final possible outcome in all of this would be for Team Obama to decide simply to walk away. This would seem highly improbable, but then, why should that mean anything where this administration is concerned? This would practically destroy Obama's relationship with Sarkozy, who only just brought his nation back into NATO's military alliance. It would also give Sarkozy free rein in North Africa to do whatever he sees fit, which, as we see today from the reports in the Ivory Coast, is probably quite a great deal more than anyone suspected. And while it's one thing for the broke Americans to go adventuring around the globe, the idea of the broke French doing the same strikes us a little more problematic. And we suspect that it would strike Frau Merkel as a little more problematic as well.

Such an outcome would also all but certainly sink Obama's re-election chances as well. He might be able to do something with any of the other outcomes. What he could do with them, we don't know. But he's

a clever guy and he's surrounded himself with clever people. Still, starting a war and then running away from it would be too much even for him to explain. It would be too stereotypical, too standard liberal, too much of what the American people have come to expect from Democrats since Vietnam. People might wonder how they could trust him to get the end games in Iraq and Afghanistan right if he can't even be trusted to stick with the one he himself started.

Of course, all of the outcomes mentioned here would be disastrous, to one extent or another, for Obama and for the nation. But this last one would probably be the worst. Fortunately it's also the one we would term the least likely. Unfortunately, it's not impossible. As with Bob Shrum, there's always the chance that these folks will do something really stupid.

The bottom line here, we guess, is that there is likely no good outcome in Libya; at least not one that is apparent today. But, of course, that is a fairly predictable outcome when a president decides, against the advice of the one sane member of his cabinet and against all precedent, to commit American troops to a mission that has no apparent purpose.

All we can say at this point is that Obama had better hope that Bob Shrum is wrong and that the disposition of the Libyan adventure at the end of this month doesn't determine the fate of his presidency. Because if it does, then "regime change" will, indeed, be the outcome of the adventure. Only it will be Obama's regime, not the Maddog's.

Copyright 2011. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.