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# The government's responsibility to promote the common good

Robert Christian | Aug. 28, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

*Editor's note: Michael Sean Winters is on vacation this week. Filling in for him is Robert Christian, editor of* Millennial [1], *a journal featuring the writing of millennial Catholics. He is a doctoral candidate in politics at The Catholic University of America and a graduate fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. Winters will be back next week.*

Citizens are rarely formed in a historical void. Certain historical events and figures inevitably shape the way we come to see the world and the role of government. They shape the most important lessons we draw from a long, complex historical record and help us prioritize and synthesize the different goals of politics.

The civil rights movement has had a profound effect on my view of the federal government and its capacity to build a more just society. And so, today, on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for jobs and freedom and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech, I think back to those wonderful moments of inspiration and uplift, the incredible bravery and courage displayed in the face of brutality and hatred, and the countless other acts that helped set the federal government down the path of taking on the evil of segregation.

King's speech hangs on a large poster by my desk, and its presence reflects its immense importance in shaping my worldview. In the past, I have written [2] about Dr. King's personalist communitarian thinking, something that aligns his thought with Catholic teaching and my own approach to politics. King's vision of politics is rooted in brotherhood, solidarity, hope and service. It rejects selfishness and utilitarianism. Dr. King knew the federal government could not eradicate racism from the hearts of all people, but he also knew the federal government had a crucial role in breaking the evil of segregation and securing the basic freedom all deserve. He understood that real freedom is not about minimizing the influence of government but securing the conditions that allow for human flourishing.

I also deeply admire his commitment to nonviolent resistance, even if I also subscribe to just war theory (and not the contemporary variant that creeps closer and closer to practical pacifism). I strongly believe that certain scenarios not only allow for, but demand the use of force to protect the innocent from brutal repression and mass murder. At the same time, there are scenarios where nonviolence is the morally superior and more efficacious choice. This may not be true with mass murderers like Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, but it is most often true when a government is failing to live up to the ideals it espouses. Nonviolent resistance can illuminate that disconnect between cherished principles and the lived reality of injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. will forever be linked to this type of resistance, given his leadership of one of the most important movements in American history, his eloquence, and his courage.

Unlike many progressives who trust the government to do so much good at home but inflict only evil abroad, I believe in the power of government to benefit the common good in both spheres. This is undoubtedly shaped by the other historical events that have influenced me as much as the civil rights movement: World War II and the Holocaust, the Great Depression, and the abolition of slavery. Rwanda, Srebrenica, Kosovo, 9/11 and the Great Recession, events that took place in my own lifetime, reinforced these lessons. In all these cases, strong actions

by the federal government were necessary to promote the common good, and where such actions were absent, death, destruction and despair took their place. The key lesson to be learned was that government is sometimes the only force that has the capacity and/or will to end grave injustice. These real-life examples taught me this before I had read a papal encyclical, before I read Emmanuel Mounier's *Personalism*, Jacques Maritain's *The Person and the Common Good*, or any of the other works that have shaped my thinking on faithful citizenship. An unabashed antiauthoritarian, I nevertheless do not find antigovernment libertarian rhetoric appealing.

What concerns me today is that the lessons many have drawn from the 2003 War in Iraq are drowning out the other lessons of history, including the most important lessons. I fear this is particularly true among my fellow millennials. Some of the valuable lessons of the Iraq War include: the need for caution, particularly when using ground forces and/or when one thinks they are acting pre-emptively; the difficulty of building democratic norms and institutions; the importance of sincere efforts to build greater international consensus and cooperation in matters of collective security; the need for a quality post-war plan; the peril of reading intelligence in a way that confirms one's existing preferences; the danger of overhyping the imminence of threats to claim the use of force is a last resort; the need to adhere to international laws and norms in the treatment of prisoners; and the need to avoid a premature pullout, the costs of which are being seen today as Iraq returns to 2008 levels of violence.

Yet many critics of the war, in their hubris, have failed to learn some of these important lessons and overstate the importance of others to boost their anti-interventionist agenda. They assume everything that occurred in Iraq confirms what they already believed. Numerous opponents of the war triumphantly boast of their opposition, even if they failed to offer a plausible alternative to dealing with the deceptive, brutal tyrant; never understood the complexity of balancing containment, sanctions, regime change, and human rights and welfare in Iraq; and pretend that the terrible mistakes made by the grossly incompetent Bush administration (such as having no plan to nation-build and using a small fraction of the necessary troops) were inevitable. Many attack the intentions and integrity of those who supported the war in broad, sweeping ways and tout their own intellectual and moral superiority, behavior that often resembles the condescending treatment they received prior to the war, which they found deplorable at the time. They would be wise to view Iraq in a larger historical context, one that does not reinforce their ideological blinders. Contemporary conflicts are often exceptionally complex and nonpragmatic devotion to one's worldview -- whether assertive nationalism, liberal anti-interventionism, or any other -- can be dangerous.

I fear we are already seeing the results in widespread indifference to the butcher Assad's mass murder in Syria. Even most liberal interventionists cautiously avoided calling for direct intervention early on, when Assad started murdering peaceful protesters and innocent civilians. Overlearning the lessons of Iraq has led to paralysis as millions fled their homes, the rebels became radicalized (making a tolerable solution less feasible), and more than 100,000 people were killed. And now it looks as though the worst chemical weapon attack in decades has occurred. Many supposed proponents of international law and norms would like to look the other way as they are grossly violated. President Barack Obama's feckless foreign policy in the region has allowed counterrevolutionary forces to do everything in their power to destroy the Arab Spring. Perhaps this egregious act will shake him out of his stupor and he will finally act against the perpetrators of these crimes against humanity. But I'm afraid we may see only cautious half-measures rather than a real strategy that would give Syria some hope for escaping from this hell on earth.

Martin Luther King Jr. would almost certainly disagree with my conclusions on Syria and my support for using force to end mass murder (provided it meets just war criteria), but he would agree with the key beliefs underpinning my thinking: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." A foreign policy of indifference will not only eventually threaten American lives, but is in and of itself deeply immoral, incompatible with solidarity a---nd respect for the worth of all. The international community will not act everywhere there is grave injustice and the U.S.

cannot, but there are times when it is just and necessary to stop mass atrocities. Our response cannot be based on indifference or antigovernment paranoia; it must be grounded in the recognition that government can promote the common good and protect the most vulnerable.

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