Opinion
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April 12, 2018
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In 2002, Samantha Power published her monumental book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide.* That was nine years before civil war in Syria broke out, a war in which the Assad government has demonstrated its willingness to commit genocide in order to stay in power, a war that has caused an estimated 400,000 deaths and five million refugees who have fled the country and another 6 million who are refugees within Syria. The country's self-inflicted tortures are a problem from the deepest reaches of hell.

Now, the Assad regime has deployed chemical weapons against the civilian population, killing women and children, and not for the first time. The Arms Control Association has a thorough timeline of Syria's use of these horrific weapons and of the mostly failed responses to this breach of various treaties banning the use of chemical weapons. Again, no one should be surprised. Assad is not a religious fanatic. His evil is simply about power. He thinks nothing of killing innocents or violating long-standing international norms if doing so increases his hold on power.

President Trump has promised some form of retaliation, and even cancelled a planned trip to Latin America in order to oversee the U.S. response. (I am guessing it does not take much in the way of arm twisting to get this president to cancel a trip to Latin America where he will not be met with adulation!) Last year, after a chemical weapons' attack, Trump hurled 59 Tomahawk missiles into a Syrian airfield that had been emptied in advance. The pavement on one runway and maybe a squirrel were the only casualties. Assad, and his Russian and Iranian allies, were undeterred.

As I write these words, we do not know what that response will be this time, but the character of the response will not resolve the moral conundrum the Syrian situation poses in the first place. Traditional just war theory posits criteria for whether or not to fight a war. And it is far from clear that intervening meets those criteria.

In an important essay published this week at America, my colleague at Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, Professor Maryann Cusimano Love, writes:

> *If the United States further escalates its military intervention in Syria, would it make a difference? Would it stop Mr. Assad from killing his own people, end the Syrian civil war and bring better governance to the Syrian people? Catholic tradition on peace and war holds that any action must build a more robust and sustainable peace. Will bombing or putting American "boots on the ground" bring peace to Syria?*

Cusimano Love goes on to examine the history of insurgencies and argues that this one against Assad is unlikely to prevail. As one of the classic requirements for a just war is that the war be winnable, she argues against U.S. military intervention.

Additionally, the intervention of American forces, either in a limited way or full-on as in Afghanistan, is not the "solution" it was in the two great world wars of the 20th century. When the Yanks intervened in those wars, the tide was turned. But, in Korea, the prospect of nuclear war set a clear limit on the value of victory for American forces and in Vietnam we learned a different kind of limit, one imposed by national pride and determined opposition to our efforts. Afghanistan and Iraq have done nothing to convince us that U.S. military intervention has the kind of

determinative force for good or even for resolution it once had.

But, I would submit there are moral arguments that work against the decision to *not* intervene. After all, the war is already on, there are innocent people being killed who cannot protect themselves, neither the Russians nor the Iranians are likely to escalate a conflict directly, nor would the war likely spill over into neighboring countries which face different problems. For years, our presidents have trekked to Auschwitz and uttered the words of categorical, moral force: Never again! Our inaction in the face of Assad's atrocities gives the lie to that pledge.

Those skeptical of the use of force look to the achievements of diplomacy, but those achievements are also imperiled by inaction. The conventions against the use of chemical weapons was honored even by the evil regime of the Nazis, at least insofar as battlefield deployment was concerned. The conventions against genocide today look as ridiculous as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. That agreement outlawed war. Mssrs. Mussolini, Hitler and Tojo did not honor it.

In an appearance on CNN, former national security advisor Tom Donilon made an argument for a more forceful military strike than the one launched last year, and also for an aggressive effort to build a war crimes case against Assad. The U.S. intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo is the one that worked, and the leaders of the genocide there – Slobodan Milosevic, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic – were all tried at the Hague, the first of the troika of evildoers escaping jail only by a premature death, the latter two convicted and sentenced to 40 years and life in prison, respectively. I do not know if the prospect of trial and jail is enough to deter evil men like Assad. It is at least a symbol of civilizational rejection of their evil, which is not nothing, but is little comfort to the victims. Of greater import than the trials is the fact that something resembling peace has returned to the Balkans.

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On Sept. 6, 1943, Winston Churchill spoke at Harvard University, which had given him an honorary degree. "We must go on," the prime minister told his audience. "It must be world anarchy or world order." This was wartime hyperbole. He was wise enough to know that the future, like the past, would entail a comingling of anarchy and order. A year later, the torture of Warsaw would demonstrate that commingling in the most painful way. There are no clear cut and final solutions to the problems

posed by evil regimes. None of us has enough information to presume to know what should be done from a strategic standpoint, but we know enough about the moral calculi to know that doing something, and not doing something, are both morally fraught.

After the killings in Parkland, Florida, young people began to mock the way politicians would extend their "thoughts and prayers" to the victims of gun violence, while opposing any legislation that might make future such incidents less likely. The students were right to expose the hypocrisy of the politicians. In the case of Syria, however, the relationship of morality to policy is enormously complex. And, with a president whose decision making process appears dominated by concerns about appearing tough and light on policy analysis, I hope everyone is praying and praying hard. Maybe, some day, prayer will point to a more obvious moral path, which might lead to a more satisfactory framing of the issues. As it is, I am feeling very Augustinian: We have no good options, only bad and worse, and it is well nigh impossible to tell the difference.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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