

Late Ambassador Chris Stevens and his family an example of selfless foreign service

Douglas W. Kmiec | Feb. 13, 2013

Several years ago in Cairo, President Barack Obama spoke to an overflow crowd at Al-Azhar University.

"So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, and who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity," he said. "This cycle of suspicion and discord must end."

The time to end the cycle of suspicion between Islam and the West is now. The recent actions of the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria, Mali and of course Benghazi suggest the renewed risk to civil order unless we act to promote interfaith understanding guided by those translations of the Quran that echo Christ's instruction in Matthew to meet hatred with love, to love our enemies.

In this context, let us consider former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's testimony on Benghazi as well as her worldwide people-to-people diplomacy over the last four years. Clinton's patience was tested by members of the Senate whose inquiries unfortunately were only as deep as the interim "talking points" on a Sunday talk show.

It was unjust to kill the messenger, to penalize UN Ambassador Susan Rice. The intelligence had yet to totally separate the terror attack in Benghazi from the balance of the manifold threats to our diplomatic safety in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere that were occurring almost simultaneously.

It is unjust to Chris Stevens, Sean Smith, Ty Woods and Glen Doherty because it distracts from carrying forward their final mission. It is unjust because it obscures what needs to be done today in Libya to secure the rule of law, religious freedom and democracy.

Most of all, it is unjust to the families of the fallen. By their sacrifice, they are true exemplars of the American ethic of service to others. It is perhaps not well known that the purpose of Chris Stevens' visit to Benghazi in September was in large part to begin a U.S.-to-Libya medical assistance program. It would be understandable if the fatal and grievous wound prompted allowing the idea to lapse. But, says the Lord, it is easy to love one's friends, those who praise you; it is, however, the sign of perfect love to extend the same to your enemies.

Anne Stevens, Chris' sister, will soon announce the J. Christopher Stevens Initiative on Health Education across Libya for Children. Involving Seattle Children's Hospital, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Benghazi Medical Center, the aim of the initiative is to improve the health of Libyan families by providing training and strategic support. Presently, medical care in Libya is dismal. It is especially deficient for children, lacking even basic emergency room care. Because of the Stevens initiative, Libyans will have access to training, resources and expertise from two of the finest health centers in the U.S.

Think about it: Rather than stewing over talking points or grieving, the Stevens family has said, "You have taken our best and our brightest. May we offer you more? May we care for your children so that they do not suffer a premature death?"

"Les Miserables" is a popular play and film for the selflessness of the main character, Jean Valjean. The selfless gift of the Stevens family is not fiction, but loving and remarkable fact.

America has taken on a new Secretary of State, John Kerry, whose foreign affairs wisdom long ago found anchor in the courage to oppose senseless military involvement, giving emphasis to diplomacy and determination over destruction and despair. The promise of the Arab Spring is faltering, but it will most assuredly fail unless Kerry is able to engage the necessary diplomatic personnel in the region to seize the opportunities to encourage through investment and insight the democratic institutions so long suppressed by a truly ruthless Moammar Gadhafi.

We must not show diplomatic weakness. Considerable economic investment and positive cultural involvement by the church awaits our response. Having worked with Stevens, having rescued (on a catamaran no less) the staff of Stevens' embassy in Tripoli at the start of the war in February 2011, there are uncertainties in the prospects for the rule of law, religious pluralism and gender equality. The host government is not yet able to meet its Vienna Convention obligations. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or its local variant is well-armed and a threat.

Loving one's enemy is not easy. Despite the lack of an apt or comparable verse in the most popular Quran translations, anyone who has spent time in the region, as I have, quickly learns that the Libyan people are not our enemy, and the enemy that threatens their freedom threatens ours. As the 2013 inaugural poet, Richard Blanco, said so well: It is under "one sky" we live.

Other nations see northern Africa with resource designs far less likely to be of benefit to the local population. America cares about economic prosperity, but not solely for our own enrichment. The prosperity we seek is one that yields a stable civil order with the chance of stemming a costly and hurtful migratory flow into Europe that prompts its own suspicion and animus.

The selfless actions of the Stevens family deserve more than our gratitude. The dedication of Stevens could merit nothing less, for while I know translations differ, the words in the Quran that "He is oft forgiving and full of love" still beckon Christian, Jew, and Muslim upon the common ground of peace.

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