

Our Soldiers & Vets: MSW Bites The Hand That Feeds

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

When NCR gets it right, we tend to get it really right. And, when we get it wrong, we tend to get it really wrong. This thought came to me when I surveyed the recent print edition which could be described as NCR's "Screw the Military" issue. On this Veteran's Day, I wish to dissent from NCR's stance.

[Mark Scabilia-Carver's essay](#) [1] takes a complicated issue and seeks to rob it of those complications. It is simplistic in the extreme, setting forth a binary choice, militarism or pacifism, which would be fine if the world in which we live was simply a world of black and white. But the world in which we live is filled with grey. The United States really does face enemies. There are evil actors in the world who really do kill innocents. The simple choice between militarism and pacifism becomes not simple, but simplistic, in such a world.

Scabilia-Carver writes:

Despite its growing influence in the bishops' conference, the very existence of the military archdiocese hangs by the thread of the possibility of the existence of a just war. Amazingly, even when the bishops admitted the war with Iraq was unjust before the 2003 invasion, they did not cut that thread of just war.

I hope that thread is never cut. Not every war is just, to be sure. The 2003 invasion of Iraq failed the test, I will grant. But, the possibility of a just war persists as long as there are vulnerable people to protect from evil aggressors. It remains a scandal that the Assad regime in Syria continues to kill its own people, while diplomats in the West congratulate themselves that the Assad regime may, repeat may, be cooperating with weapons inspectors to destroy their chemical weapons. I understand why the use of chemical weapons is deemed especially atrocious. But, I wonder if it matters to a Syrian mother, whether she watches her child die from a chemical weapon or a sniper's bullet.

[In a recent essay at the New Republic](#) [2], Leon Weiseltier commented upon the absurdity of U.S. policy in Syria, and President Obama's incoherent speech to the United Nations. Typically, Weiseltier does not resort to simplistic renderings of complicated facts but searches for the moral lessons history yields. He writes:

*I do not wish to say that Assad is Hitler. It was Obama who brought it up. But it is useful that he did, because a few words about the pertinence of Auschwitz to the purposes of American power are always in order. I admit that my own hectoring about the duty to rescue is owed in some measure (but not entirely: I am a thinking being) to the temperament-altering fact that my own family was not rescued. I am one of those Americans who, for reasons of descent, can imagine needing rescue, needing America. Generally Americans have no natural understanding of "atrociousness" and its attendant desperation, and a good thing, too. For this reason, the imagination of unhappiness must compensate for the happiness of experience, if moral action is to be possible. In 1998, Norman Geras, a Marxist political philosopher in Britain who rose bravely above the shibboleths of the British left, and who died a few weeks ago, wrote a memorable book called *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, in which he maintained that "the duty of aid" was the legacy of the Holocaust to all subsequent politics: "if you do not come to the aid of others who are under grave assault, in acute danger or crying need, you cannot reasonably expect others to come to your aid in similar emergency; you cannot consider them so obligated to you." The fine implication of Geras's argument is that evil does not have to be totalitarian, the action-inducing number does not have to be 6,000,000, to warrant a forceful and consequential response.*

Aleppo is not Auschwitz; it is sufficiently hideous that it is Aleppo. ?But the memory of Auschwitz, if it is anything more than rhetorical, is relevant to Aleppo, because the sensitivity is the same. Gassing children is a distinctly Hitlerian activity. And invoking Auschwitz to justify a policy of non-intervention, of going after the gas instead of the gasser, is grotesque.

That adjective, grotesque, applies with great force to the most pernicious sentence in Scabilia-Carver's article. He writes of the proposal to have a nationwide collection for the Archdiocese of the U.S. Military, ?The idea may have originated with George Weigel, who wrote about it in his Dec. 8, 2010, column ?The Catholic Difference.? Weigel was a charter signatory of the Project for the New American Century, which anticipated the need for something like 9/11 that would serve as another Pearl Harbor and galvanize the country behind the neoconservative agenda. ? Regular readers will know that I am not exactly considered a devotee of Mr. Weigel's writings. But, the suggestion that some people ?anticipated the need for something like 9/11? and the analogy to Pearl Harbor, is as grotesque as it is worthy of an Oliver Stone conspiracy theory. Anyone paying attention to the methods of Al-Qaeda could have ?anticipated? 9/11 without seeing that as a ?need.? America did not need 9/11.

[NCR's editors](#) [3] take Mr. Scabilia-Carver's editorial as their stepping off point for an editorial that suffers, in a similar fashion, from intellectual fuzziness. They write:

Long overdue in the American church is a reasoned and deep discussion of U.S. militarism, the proper use of force, the state's responsibility to protect and defend, and the role of people of faith in all of this. To this point, Catholic teaching has had little effect in distinguishing us from any other segment of society when it comes to participation in wars and militarism.

Actually, when the U.S. Bishops issued their pastoral letter ?The Challenge of Peace,? in 1983, they led U.S. Catholics in precisely such a ?reasoned and deep discussion.? Perhaps it is time for the bishops to revisit the issue. If they do so, they would be well advised not examine these complicated issues through the venerable lens of traditional just war theory. Otherwise, either the ?proper use of force? or the ?state's responsibility to protect and defend? will go by the wayside. No one can defend the Syrian people with wishes.

I grew up during the war when our nation did not honor its soldiers and veterans, but cast aspersions upon them that were more properly directed at the politicians that sent them to Vietnam, and, truly, the American people who demanded such policies from their politicians. The pendulum has certainly swung, and now there is virtually no national event at which veterans and members of the military are not given a prominent role, the recent World Series being only the most recent example. It may be excessive, but I would prefer excessive honor to these men and women than excessive dishonor. Perhaps my preference is rooted in an acute awareness that I myself could never do what they do. They are brave, even if the wars they fight are foolish or unjust. Let is not lay that charge at their feet nor breezily suggest that soldiers should be quick to question the judgments of their political leaders. Does anyone really want the military making policy decisions? Are not we all glad that Truman fired MacArthur?

There are reportedly 1.8 million Catholics serving in the U.S. military. Do they not need spiritual assistance, perhaps more than the rest of us? Should we just leave them to fend for themselves? Surely, this is not what the editors or Mr. Scabilia-Carver intend. But, that is the conclusion of the reasoning they employ. The argument about the purposes of American power is an argument our polity should have, not our military. The failure to make this most elementary distinction is, perhaps, the great flaw in both essays. Sober moral analysis is called for, not wishful thinking, still less any ?prophetic? expectations. And, the first step towards sobriety is to recognize that there are places in the world, and people in the world, that will be worse off if the U.S. is not involved and sometimes that involvement will have a military component. Those who think otherwise should make a visit to Rwanda, or to Srebrenica or to Auschwitz before broadcasting condemnations of U.S.

militarism. There are still people in the world for whom the words "The Yanks are coming" are words of hope.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/bishops-support-wars-underpins-collection-military-archdiocese>

[2] <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115534/washington-diarist-takes-obamas-syrian-stance>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/editorial-questioning-our-assent-militarism>