

The Road to Damascus

Written by Walter Fields

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One of the most enduring Biblical stories I recall from my childhood is the conversion of Saul to the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. The power of the story is in the transformation of a notorious persecutor of Christians into one of God's great messengers. While traveling the danger filled road to what is now the capital of Syria, Saul has an encounter with God in the form of a blinding light that leaves him sightless. It is the final stage of a rehabilitation of Saul that is completed when God instructs Ananias to heal the man Christians loathed and he is baptized and from that point leads a converted life as Paul.

The central theme in the story of Saul is that through divine intervention, the worst of humanity can be used for Godly purposes. The essence of the story though is that God can use anybody and use them in a way that transcends human understanding but aligns with a divine purpose. And anybody means anybody, from a murderer to a brutal despot, the power of conversion is that it overrides the intent of man and changes motives and motivations.

I am remembering my Sunday school lesson as I wish, better yet, pray for a similar conversion of our President as he finds himself on the road to Damascus. Though without the underlying flaws of Saul President Obama is faced with a similar dilemma as he considers whether to unleash the weapons of warfare on Syria. He can follow the example of a predecessor who invaded a sovereign nation based upon a lie, and cost the lives of thousands of American soldiers and thousands more of innocent civilians and trillions of dollars, or the President can consider pursuing a vastly different long-term strategy that avoids death and destruction. It seems to me that America must decide if we are a nation of war or the purveyors of peace through diplomacy and demonstrative democracy.

President Obama seems determined to launch a military strike against key targets in Syria in response to the Assad government's alleged use of chemical weapons against its own people. I use the word "alleged" because the certainty of the State Department on the deployment of

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chemical agents is eerily reminiscent of the confidence exuded by the Bush White House on the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. For me the suspect nature of U.S. intelligence gathering raises more questions about Secretary of State John Kerry's insistence that we are certain of Assad's transgressions. Likewise when I hear the President speak of "limited" strikes it reminds me of President George W. Bush selling the invasion of Iraq as a short term moment of "shock and awe." When the government of the United States deploys its weaponry on foreign soil it is never a "limited" engagement no matter the duration of the actual use of force. We are getting ready to involve ourselves in a way that has serious repercussions abroad and at home.

I am opposed to our government deploying weapons in Syria for many of the same reasons that I early on opposed the invasion of Iraq. Yes, if President Assad has committed an atrocity of the nature of which he is accused it is a grievous act of modern day barbarism. Still, if we look across the globe we see many crimes against humanity that go unchallenged and do not elicit the outrage we are hearing in regard to Syria. Our selective outrage toward the world's atrocities is growing thin and increasingly suspect. We cannot police the world nor do we have any authority to do so. The diminished public opinion of our nation internationally derives from the perception of America as a nation too eager to impose its mores on the world but unwilling to cast out its own demons. We are conflicted and the world community, not governments, but the people who share this planet with us are no longer willing to accede to the will of the United States.

The moment of conversion for this President could be if Congress opposed U.S. military intervention in Syria, though that is apparently not the outcome we are likely to see. However, if by chance that were to occur, President Obama could turn to the world and declare the opposition of Congress to be a powerful testament to the brilliance of the American democratic experiment. He could tell Syrians that despite his concern for their welfare that the chosen representatives of the American people have instructed him to pursue other means to come to their aid. Such a scenario would allow our government to show the world that even a President can be opposed by the will of the people. Such a moment of "conversion" for this President as he travels to Damascus would, like the Apostle Paul, send a message of deliverance to the world; deliverance from the destructive power of war and from the arrogance of man to think he has dominion over things of which he does not understand.

There is still time. The real question is whether there is an Ananias in Congress who can give the President sight?

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