

A secular Good Friday came a week early

by Conrad Black



The reaction to the cruise missile attack on Syria has been highly encouraging for President Trump. First, Democrats have generally acknowledged that it was a justified action in response to the brazen atrocity of murdering civilians and particularly children with sarin gas. Second, it has attracted some criticism from the isolationist right, which makes it harder for the president's opponents to attack him for being an isolationist. Third, although the Russians were advised to remove their personnel from the target area, it clearly debunks the theory that Trump is in dishonorable cooperation with Russian leader Putin.

Trump has therefore managed to cover all the bases with a simple military exercise that put no Americans at risk.

Putin, who has been made to look strong by the pandemic of feebleness in Western leaders in recent years, especially the infamous fiasco of the Obama-Biden-Clinton "reset," (though George W. Bush's nonsense about "Vladimir" rescuing his rosary from his burning dacha should not go unremembered), is now on notice that Russia will pay a price if its protégés are guilty of such unpardonable barbarity as gassing children en masse. This is not a provocation of the Russian bear, as it was warned to avoid casualties (a warning it seems not to have shared with its host and ally); it is a proportionate slap on the bear's nose with a plank.

Domestically, the sane Democrats, who have not scrambled their brains chasing the itinerant party base to the left in hot pursuit of Bernie Sanders, recognize that it was a well-measured and unimpetuous gesture to deal with a moral outrage. It was, in its way, the most faultless intervention in the Middle East since President Eisenhower's magnificent intervention in Lebanon in 1958, when he inserted 14,000 troops for a few months without suffering a single casualty. It was also the first use of American military force above a Navy seal detachment size (the bin Laden elimination), since the successful surge in Iraq ten years ago. America and the world had begun to wonder if there were any practical use, or resolve to use, the vast human and military resources of the U.S. armed forces.

The most benign consequence may be in the Kremlin, where, despite snuffling and grumbling, a salutary insight may have occurred. There is little direct intersection or abrasion between US and Russian strategic interests, and there is certainly little left of the apparent parity between the Super Powers in the piping days of the Soviet Union and its world-wide Communist apparatus. American goodwill should be made more useful to Russia than is its shabby and mischievous alliance with Iran. It would be unwise to over-challenge and embarrass Putin, as that would have the undesirable effect of

driving him into the arms of China and strengthening his ties to Iran. It should be possible to accept Russia, with Turkey and the US, (Western Europe is hopeless), as an overseeing power in a Syria cleansed of ISIS, where Assad can rule the Alawites and some other parts of the country as long as he doesn't affront the moral sensibilities of the world, and the western-sponsored and long-suffering moderate secular Muslims are autonomous in other zones, and the four million refugees are resettled. Turkey would displace Iranian influence and the conduit of arms and personnel from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to Hamas in Gaza would stop. The Russians would keep their Mediterranean naval base in Syria.

At the same time, Crimea could be conceded to Russia, which only allocated it to Ukraine in 1955, and sanctions against Russia could be ended if Russia joined NATO in guarantying the integrity of Ukraine's borders, stopped trying to destabilize its fragile and generally unsuccessful government, and it was understood that NATO would not be further expanded in Eastern Europe. Ukraine could be 'Finlandized' and incentivized by the European Union (assuming it doesn't disintegrate), to clean up its economic house. A European security agreement between NATO (which the Trump administration is starting to revitalize) and Russia could follow, and the Syrian arrangements could be a template for Iraq. (It is more obvious than ever what a terrible mistake it was to evict Turkey from Syria and Iraq in 1918.) These are legitimate prospects, and more, rather than less so because of last week's cruise missile action. (Putin's dispatch of a single frigate to monitor the Sixth Fleet was a ludicrous counter, emphasizing the real correlation of forces between Russia and the US if the chief occupant of the White House has any concept of America's strength and disposition to use it in moderation.)

But an added, and not easily foreseeable bonus was the defection of the Rand Paul-Pat Buchanan loopy paleo-right. Pat was a good speech-writer for Richard Nixon, (though he and

Bill Safire turned Spiro Agnew into a parody), and was the best witness who appeared before the Sam Ervin kangaroo Watergate Committee. He loyally served Ronald Reagan, but began to drink his own bathwater when he challenged George Bush I for the presidency, showing the way for Ross Perot and helping to bring on the Clintons. But Pat has gone steadily farther into the shadows, opposing NATO expansion, retroactively attacking US participation in World War II, and blaming the prolongation of that war on Winston Churchill. He is becoming a reincarnation of Harold Stassen, a Norman Thomas of the right. His attack on the cruise missile action in Syria, along with the unfeasible Rand Paul's, put valuable distance between the president and the quacks in his party, reassuring the sane Democrats, and making life harder for the Maxine Waters school of impeach-Trump-for-a-cause-to-be-named-later, and the investigate the investigators of the investigators school of Adam Schiff, congressman for the world-leading infestation of politically useless idiots in Hollywood.

It was a tour de force for Donald Trump, sending Assad a message, meeting the Chinese president, and confirming Judge Gorsuch on the same day. In the secular calendar, Good Friday came a week early.

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