

The British Hilary: A Real Profile in Courage

On December 2, 2015, Mr. Hilary Benn, the 62-year-old British Labour Party shadow (opposition) foreign minister, delivered an extraordinary, impassioned, and moving speech in the House of Commons supporting the extension of British air strikes against ISIS from Iraq to Syria. The speech, a remarkable profile on courage, which has no counterpart among present similarly named American seekers of the presidency, was a dramatic rebuke to the left-wing leader of his party, Jeremy Corbyn, who had made the case against bombing and did not support British intervention, and the majority of the Labour Party members of Parliament.

The speech from a person usually viewed as moderate and understated – certainly when compared to his famous father Tony Benn, a charismatic left wing exuberant personality – was one of the most powerful delivered in recent years in Parliament and one that swayed some MPs who were undecided to vote for the extension of air strikes. The motion was carried by 397, including 66 Labour MPs, even 11 in the Labour Shadow Cabinet, to 223 against.

Unlike the Obama administration, which still does not appreciate the true dimensions of the evil to be fought, Benn argued that it is a moral and a practical duty to extend military action to Syria. It was essential to reply positively to the call of French president François Hollande for assistance in the fight against ISIS. That caliphate, directly or indirectly, had already killed 130 in Paris; 178 in suicide bombings in Beirut, Ankara, and Suruc; 30 British tourists in Tunisia; and 224 Russian holidaymakers in a plane.

Its members had beheaded the 82-year-old guardian of the antiquities in Palmyra and been responsible for the mass graves discovered in Sinjar.

Benn spoke to the House of Commons in terms we have not heard from the Obama administration. It is incomprehensible that Obama does not understand the clear and present danger in such a forthright manner. In his speech in Turkey on November 16, 2015, Obama did finally recognize the existence of ISIS and spoke of it as a network of killers, killers with fantasies of glory. Even more incomprehensible was his declaration on September 10, 2014 that ISIS is not Islamic. Obama saw the problem in a limited way, as a terrorist organization, pure and simple, and one that has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way.

In contrast to this weak evaluation, Benn made clear that ISIS holds the West, its values, and democracy in contempt. The West is faced not only with calculated brutality, but also with the ISIS belief that ISIS is superior to the West. In the same way as Western leftists had fought against General Franco in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and against Hitler and Mussolini in World War II, it is essential to fight the evil of ISIS today.

We have long been warned of Islamic evil. Bernard Lewis, in his book *The Assassins*, wrote of the radical Shiite sect in Iran in the 11th and 12th centuries, the first group to make systematic murder a political weapon. The parallel with the present is striking. The Assassins, and their parent sect the Ismailis, had an impact on Islamic thought and action. They were willing to die for their beliefs and created, as ISIS has done, what was virtually a territorial state.

Today it is the Sunni group of ISIS, a brutal territorial state, that is trying to impose its order on the Muslim world and on Western civilization. Benn recognized the parallel and urged solidarity with France.

France has taken up the charge, as both President Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls have declared in forthright fashion, which the Obama administration has not yet done.

Both the French leaders have said we are at war, and because we are at war, we will act, we will strike, and we will win. We will also expel the radicalized imams from our country. France is preparing to take away the nationality of those who scoff at what is the "French soul."

Valls acts in the spirit of predecessor socialist prime minister Guy Mollet, who in 1956, during the conflict in Algeria, gave special powers to the police and the army. In the same way as it was essential to ally with Stalin's Soviet Union to defeat Nazi Germany, it is necessary for France and other Western countries to ally with Russia to defeat and destroy ISIS completely. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States must be urged to join in this fight.

A diplomatic solution to end the conflict is highly desirable and must be sought, including discussion with Syrian president Bashar Assad on the terms of a political solution. But this does not prevent the action called for by Hilary Benn in his amazing, devastating speech or the arguments of the French leaders.

It is fallacious to argue that Western action would mobilize part of the Middle East against Europe and the United States. The enemy ISIS must be defeated. The real danger is inaction.

Benn has illustrated what courage can do.

First published in the