

“Global citizens” and U.S. politics

A Canadian friend recently alerted me to an international petition being organized by Avaaz.org, a “community of global citizens who take action on the major issues facing the world today.” (According to the organization’s polyglots, “‘avaaz’...means ‘voice’ or ‘song’ in...Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Nepalese, Dari, Turkish, and Bosnian.”) The petition asks “global citizens” around the world to participate in the 2008 U.S. presidential election by signing a petition to the remaining American presidential candidates, urging them to repudiate recent American foreign policy, which has “devastated the world’s respect for the United States as a global leader.”

Truth to tell, casting the U.S. as the Evil Empire of the early 21st century (with George W. Bush as wicked Emperor Palpatine) has been made easier by American incompetence in public diplomacy: explaining what it is America is doing, and why, to people around the world who must otherwise depend on the distortions of the BBC and CNN for international news. This incompetence has had a cumulative effect since 9/11; the most lurid (and false) tales of American beastliness are now taken-as-read around the world, as are the most draconian analyses of American intentions. Yet the problem is not simply media-driven; it’s worse.

In December, I spent two days with German social democrats, discussing how assertive religious conviction shapes great world issues today. It soon became clear that my German colleagues and I were looking at the same thing but seeing something quite different. At the end, I felt obliged to tell my hosts a hard truth: “Everything you’ve deplored in this conference will be on the desk of the next president of the United States when he or she walks into the Oval Office for the first time in January 2009. That’s not a hangover from the Bush administration; that’s reality. History has put some unavoidable problems on the global agenda, whether we acknowledge them or not. And if we don’t acknowledge them, we’re in serious trouble.”

What problems?

The problem, for example, of jihadists who strap explosives onto women with Down syndrome and then, from a safe distance, create mass murder by detonating the

explosives (and the women) in two Baghdad markets. Americans and Europeans who see the world through a post-Freudian fog imagine that people who perpetrate such atrocities have bizarre personality dysfunctions, exacerbated by American foreign policy. That instinctive reach for the psychiatric ignores the fact that, by their own testimony, jihadists do what they do because they believe God commands them to advance God's cause by any means – even detonating retarded women. The marriage of a stringent, politicized Islam to a nihilistic cult of death poses a grave threat, both to Muslims with a different idea of their faith's demands and to the rest of us. That fact (which I try to explain in *Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism*) isn't going to change when the American presidency changes hands.

Classic Catholic thought on world politics was resolutely realistic: it asked statesmen to see things as they are, even as it insisted that things need not remain what they are. Indeed, a classic Catholic optic on world politics would insist that the only way to move the world in a more humane direction is to describe the obstacles to that progress accurately. The 20th century ought to have reinforced this basic truth of international public life; Nazism and communism, after all, were not defeated because some people hid behind the soothingly therapeutic notion that Hitler and Stalin could be appeased.

There is, I fear, a sad moral shallowness to Avaaz.org and similar enterprises: a politics of noble intentions detached from the politics of responsibility. Avowed commitments to peace and human rights, however heartfelt, give no one a pass from reality. And they certainly do not confer a claim to the moral high ground. In a world in which the wicked try to impose their will by terror and claim God's blessing in doing so, naming threats correctly and understanding their origins is the beginning of wisdom, prudence, the defense of decency, and the pursuit of peace.

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