

9/11 and The Principle of Unintended Consequences

In 1765, the British Parliament made a serious miscalculation. It passed what would become known as the Stamp Act. The aim, of course, was to raise revenues by taxing American colonists directly and to assert imperial control. But the act had several unintended consequences. The colonists refused assent. Instead, they formed committees of correspondence--a precursor Facebook protest--to share strategies of resistance. They called for an inter-colonial meeting, the Stamp Act Congress, which met significantly . . . in New York. Various protest groups coalesced, forming "The Sons of Liberty," best known for their tea party eight years later in Boston Harbor. And one of their best known members? Patrick "give me liberty or give me death" Henry. Most importantly, the Stamp Act was part of a series of events that lead to the crystallization of ideas from intellectual trends like Lockean liberalism, civic humanism, classical republicanism, English common law. To this we owe the miracle of 1776 and 1787: the articulation of ideas about human dignity, representative government, equality before law. And subsequently, America shared these ideas with the world.

Two weeks ago, Al-Jazeera shared dramatic footage of Syrian protestors braving government thugs to march in the streets in protest. Several protestors carried a banner that stretched almost the width of the street. Written in Arabic were the words, "Liberty or death."

The law of unintended consequences.

December 1941. The attack on Pearl Harbor evoked the same principle. America became, in fact, the "Arsenal of Democracy" for European allies of which President Roosevelt had spoken a year earlier. The war at last lifted America out of the Great Depression. And what followed the war was the largest and longest peacetime expansion of the American economy to date.

Unintended consequences.

Ten years ago today, Osama bin Ladin attacked the United States. That day is a horror that shows how impoverished our language can sometimes be. How describe the loss and the enduring pain? But even here there were profound, unintended consequences. We know now from other records that Osama miscalculated. His thought was that we'd leave the region, drawing the wrong parallel to the 1983 bombing of the Marines in Beirut when over 250 people were killed. Instead we stayed, and just less than 10 years later, Navy Seals would come to his door. But other things happened as well, for which he hadn't planned. Most prominently, an Arab Spring came, which has stunningly repudiated both tyrannical rule and his hoped-for caliphate. Arabs don't want a Taliban-like regime. They want we want: representative government, economic opportunity, dignity.

But the principle of unintended consequences came to Baylor University, as well. At the time of the attack, Baylor had one Arabic teacher and limited courses in the area. Immediately, the numbers of students in Arabic and Middle East Studies tripled, a level Baylor has since retained. Students have felt compelled to engage the region academically, and parse out its truths from Osama bin Ladin's monstrous distortions. Now they have gone forth, to Morocco, Libya, Egypt,

Iraq, and Afghanistan, committed to fulfilling Baylor's vision of preparing young men and women for lives of worldwide leadership and service. Some have gone in the military. Some have joined NGOs. Some have gone forth as teachers. Osama didn't intend that.

Perhaps you missed it yesterday, but the Islamic Caliphate of Afghanistan (the Taliban) issued its own statement about 9/11. In the statement, the Taliban boasted that they were ready for an extended fight, for they have been equipped with a special weapon, the weapon of faith. Against that, the Taliban have declared, America has nothing in its arsenal which can deter it.

But the Taliban, of course, like Osama bin Ladin, are wrong. Baylor is graduating students with hearts strengthened by faith and minds sharpened like steel. They want to engage the world, to do so courageously, compassionately, intelligently.

An hour before coming over, I opened an e-mail from a Baylor graduate, class of 2010. She and her new husband have recently arrived in the region. This young woman is brilliant, one of the most capable students I have ever had. But her heart, with her Aggie guy, is to serve in an area of great need. I opened the link in the e-mail to her blog. Here is what she wrote, newly arrived at a home halfway around the globe.

People are so important. I was sitting here tonight, thinking about the last few weeks. This is a hard country. It is hard to live here. In this place, the need for community, love, and relationship is desperately clear. We have had to adapt to difficult circumstances. When life is dusty and brown, only a little color is needed to drastically change the atmosphere. We have been fortunate to find several loving couples who think about others, not just themselves.

People who think of others. That is at the heart of Baylor's academic enterprise: equipping exceptionally well-educated students who go forth to other places, hard places, because they are thinking of others.

Not incidentally, this young woman and her new husband are serving in . . . Afghanistan. Osama bin Ladin didn't intend that.

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