

A NEW CRUSADE?

Are the European states and the United States at the start of a new Crusade? That is the question many people are asking today. Some are eager to get engaged while others wonder whether or not our governments know what they are doing. So here I will set out will set out what we all need to know about what is going on.

First, what are Muslim Fundamentalists doing? Are they attacking us or defending themselves? The difference between offense and defense is often hard to define. What looks to one side like an attack often seems to the other a defense. So how can we understand one another?

To get a clear answer we have to take note of a bit of history. For many centuries after the great Crusades, the Mediterranean was a generally peaceful route of trade. Of course, ships sailing from Barcelona, Cadiz, Lisbon, Marseilles, Genoa and Venice paid tolls just as merchants did on the roads of Europe, but it was rare that fighting broke out. Indeed, communities of Christian and Jewish merchants established themselves in the Muslim cities of North Africa and the Middle East. Trade was generally brisk and they were safe. A fragile balance between the Islamic world and Christian Europe was maintained for centuries.

Then, in the late Eighteenth century, the balance broke down. Europeans took what became a giant leap ahead in the industrial revolution while the Muslim societies fell behind. Muslim leaders began to feel themselves under attack from what has been called "the impact of the West." Their followers adopted Western styles, bought Western goods and took up Western habits. In reaction, the first great movements of Islamic fundamentalism began.

Today, similar fundamentalist movements are rising in many parts of Africa (from Mali through Tunisia to Somalia), the Middle East (from Egypt through Syria and Iraq to Iran) and Central Asia (from Georgia through Afghanistan to Sinkiang). Everywhere we look, there is turmoil. We see this as a threat to our beliefs and way of life while many of the natives of those areas see themselves under threat to their beliefs and ways of life.

One of the great questions of our times is how, if at all, we can get back to an acceptable balance.

But both sides are today moving in the opposite direction -- toward conflict. It could be ruinous for us all. Look at the record:

We and the Russians saw conflict in the most painful and expensive terms in Afghanistan. The first Afghan war was the biggest defeat the British suffered in the Nineteenth century; the second, that lasted from 1979 to 1989, virtually destroyed the Soviet Union, costing the Russians more than 15,000 dead and perhaps 55,000 grievously wounded; and; the third, from 2002 cost the Americans and their allies, including Spain, at least 3,466 casualties (including 97 Spaniards), scores of thousands of wounded and about \$1 *trillion* in treasure. The British, the Russians and we all lost.

The costs to the Afghan people of these wars have never been reckoned, but they have run into the hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded. Even the living will keep on paying a terrible price. About 300,000 Afghan children die each year from effects of the recent war while more than half of the children who live to the age of five are so undernourished that they are stunted and will never develop into full adulthood. The whole society has been so torn apart that it has been impossible to form a functioning government. There is little hope that as our troops withdraw they will leave behind the hope of peace and security. Most of us who have studied Afghanistan have concluded that it will remain in chaos for decades or even generations to come.

Obviously, our use of military force has not only failed but has involved unsustainable costs and has created wholly new problems.

So what is next?

The Western world is now beginning to fight a new "crusade" in Syria and Iraq. This time it is not against a country but against an ugly, determined, violent, radical sect of Islam. This is a kind of conflict that the world has not seen since the great Catholic-Protestant wars racked Europe four centuries ago. Those religious wars cost the death of about one in each five of our ancestors. And they ended only when both sides were exhausted. The best guess today -- held by most military and political strategists -- is that there will be no end to the current conflict unless or until everyone similarly is exhausted -- or dead.

The war has begun. The American government is expected to add over \$100 billion to its already huge military budget, but no one expects that this will result in any sort of "victory." More money and more soldiers will be needed each year. But history proves that military force won't work. So going down this path will make war permanently our way of life.

What is already evident is that the two great faiths and their societies are tearing one another apart and that, unless we find a way to stop, neither will have the money or the skilled people to cope with the overriding great issues of world poverty and hunger, protection of our fragile environment and maintenance of our domestic security. This is the danger that lies behind all the news reports we read in the daily press.

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THE BIOGRAPHY BELOW IS JUST FOR YOUR RECORDS:

William R. Polk, MA (Oxford) PhD (Harvard) was teaching at Harvard when President Kennedy invited him to become a Member of the Policy Planning Council, responsible for North Africa, the Middle East and West Asia. He served for 4 years under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. During that time he was a member of the three-men Crisis Management Committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis and head of the interdepartmental task force that helped to end the Franco-Algerian war. From 1965 he was Professor of History at the University of Chicago, founding director of the Middle Eastern Studies Center and Founder and President of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. At the request of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, he negotiated with President Gamal Abdul Nasser the cease fire that ended Israeli-Egyptian fighting on the Suez Canal in 1970. He is the author of some 17 books on world affairs, including *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace, the Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Understanding Iraq; Out of Iraq* (with Senator George McGovern); *Understanding Iran*; *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency and Terrorism*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs* and numerous articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic*, *Harpers*, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*. He has lectured at many universities and at the Council on Foreign Relations, Chatham House, Sciences Po, the Soviet Academy of Sciences and has appeared frequently on NPR, the BBC, CBS and other networks. His most recent books, both available on Amazon, are *Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change* and *Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times*.