

DO CRY WOLF!

As a historian and sometime policy planner, I often find stimulus and enlightenment in folk tales, and among the best interpreter of those is the Greek slave of the Romans, Æsop. Not much is known about him except that he commented astutely and with charm on the foibles of his own times and drew on even more ancient folk wisdom from India. He distills and casts into parables hundreds if not thousands of years of the human experience. In times of great confusion and danger, like today, he simplifies and clarifies what otherwise is often complex and obscure.

What Æsop wrote is, of course, an allegory. It had to be interpreted and modified to be fully appreciated. It conjured events and situations that were already only memories when he wrote. So, for our times, his parables can be only a stimulus to thought and a new means of interpreting issues we face, but it is also a delight to read. Here I happily plagiarize one of his best tales, the little boy who cried wolf.

Let me begin my version of what I think Æsop would have said about events of recent weeks by confessing my own failing, failings, which I am sure he would have lampooned.

No, on advice of counsel, let me first strike a plea bargain: I was wrong in what I wrote in recent essays, warning about the confrontation in Korea. Watching what I thought were the preliminaries to war over North Korea, I was sure that the “wolves” were nearly upon us. I called “wolf!” But, I weakly assert that my mistake was not really my fault. When I told you that there were packs of wolves hungrily eyeing one another on the frontiers of North Korea, I was right. But, when I said that they were about to act like wolves, I could not, after all, guess what was going to happen. They certainly acted like they were about to have a bloody fight.

I was wrong, but the idea that the pack leaders, the Alpha Males, would offer to meet to discuss their differences rather than eat one another -- and us -- did not seem very likely. I certainly did not expect it. Æsop would have been as astonished as I was. Wolves are not noted for powwows with their enemies. But, that is what happened, the Alpha Male wolves met on a far-away island, Singapore, to bask in the glow of world opinion.

By all odds, I should have been right. Alpha Males of packs on the verge of war -- don't normally behave like that. So, as we all know, even when the meeting happened, it sort of didn't. The pack leaders did not stop being wolves or at least leading their packs. They did not do much discussion. After all, they didn't have much to discuss -- eating one another (and us) or not eating, eating with salt or pepper, cooked or raw. Those things were better left unsaid. And they *were* almost completely left unsaid.

But, doing that little was actually a very big deal. And that was enough. At least for the moment, no one got eaten. The Alpha Males told their packs to stop displaying their teeth. The both Alpha Males just smiled wolf-smiles and let it go at that.

So you see, I was wrong, happily wrong. But now, with my reputation as a soothsayer shattered, is anyone likely to believe me? I mean, it is now clear that wolves won't attack. We are safe and....

...well, you know Æsop's story – after a second or third alarm, the little boy got eaten. The wolves were real and their teeth were still sharp and their instincts untamed.

Moral: maybe we don't know how the end of Æsop's story should be applied to our times.

So, let me now draw on Æsop to simplify the shenanigans that followed the Singapore "summit" as we have learned about them in the media. Æsop didn't pretend to be an oracle so let's keep the story as simple as possible. But, partly based on Æsop we can build a pattern that puts in place what we know and can help us to anticipate likely further events.

Today we are more "scientific" than Æsop. As you know, in a more elaborate form, what he was doing is more or less what the US National Intelligence Council does, or at least did, for our government. Æsop was smart enough to convey his message in parables or riddles and not drive them home or "apply" them, but the Council could not. It had to be explicit. So, some of its predictions have been wrong and some of their warnings seem just alarmist. That is sort of my plea bargain. I have often tried to do the same. Once in a while – of course I would claim it is rarely – I have made mistakes, as I did on the danger of war in Korea. But, since I have never been a member of the Intelligence apparatus, I could enjoy my irresponsible role as a private citizen, hoping on occasion at least to provoke thought and, at best, to suggest what we can do to move toward the peace and security we all want.

To profit from Æsop's story and put it to work in a context more like that of the National Intelligence Council, I have to reassign roles or at least designations. The little boy – who personifies you and me -- in Æsop's fable was frightened of wolves.

Luckily for him, he did not know that what he thought of as wolves – ferocious, hungry killing machines -- came in two varieties. We run them together, but they are really quite different, one from the other. One variety works and lives in a pack, usually under the control of a government, that is an Alpha Male. Think of that pack as a national military establishment.

The other variety form private armies, commercial warriors, for rent to anyone who pays them. In Machiavelli's time, Italians called them *condottierre*, "contract" soldiers. But their contracts rested lightly on them. When they saw opportunities, they put them aside to pillage those who had hired them. They dominated medieval Europe, and the British conquered their empire largely with such contract soldiers as the Gurkhas. We have them in far greater numbers today. In Afghanistan, for example, mercenaries from all over the world already make up over half the combatants on our side, and their employer wants them to run the entire Afghan war.

As the medieval Italians learned, they are dangerous both because they have "teeth" and also because they cannot ever be completely controlled. They operate outside the rule of warfare so if they commit crimes they are rarely held responsible and if they are killed no one cares. Perhaps we should think of them as "dogs of war." Once loosed, they can run amok more or less on their own volition and are not governed by the same rules and, particularly, by the same loyalties as soldiers.

Soldiers, the regular military establishment, are more like Æsop's wolves. Like wolves, they live in packs and pay allegiance to the same Alpha Males as we do. But our wolves share more characteristics with other packs – often go to the same war colleges, jointly take part in war games or actual combat and are motivated by the same *esprit de corps*. So, in some ways, they are more like one another than with us. Everywhere we look around the world we see other packs – we might call them “flourishes” of armed forces. Our world is literally, armed to the teeth.

Their “teeth” terrified our Founding Fathers as they also did Æsop's little boy. But, because our Founding Fathers are today almost as remote, as “mythical, as Æsop, few of us know about or pay any attention to their opinions. Even those opinions that are written out in the Constitution are today arcane or little known. But the frightening reality with which they struggled, living in societies where wolves often ranged alongside of us sheep has not left us. Indeed, it has multiplied. Just before the Constitution was written, our “wolves,” our total armed forces, numbered just 718. The framers of the Constitution were worried about even that number. The very idea of a standing army, even such a tiny one, was anathema. Founding Father James Madison spoke for probably most Americans and certainly for those who wrote the Constitution when, at the Constitutional Convention, he said:

A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defense against foreign danger have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people.

We generally don't pay much attention to the wise men who wrote our Constitution – few of us even know when it was written -- cried “wolf!” And it was not so much other packs, foreign wolves, that disturbed them. They were even more worried about “our” wolves, our pack. They warned us that no matter how much we pampered them, we had also to muzzle them, or at least keep them penned up. We had to do that because, as we should have learned from history, our own wolves, our military establishment, would develop a taste, not only for fights with other packs of wolves, but also for us or our civic institutions.

In the campaign Alexander Hamilton, John Jay (our first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) and Madison undertook to get the Constitution ratified, Madison reassured those who feared that the government they were creating would be too weak. In his essay, known as *Federalist 41*, he wrote “A wise nation...whilst it does not rashly preclude itself from any resource which may become essential to its safety, will exert all its prudence in diminishing both the necessity and danger of resorting to [the creation of a standing army] which may be inauspicious to its liberties.”

The Founding Fathers made their fear-driven policies explicit. Unlike Æsop, they spoke not in riddles or fables but in terms of laws and regulations. They mandated in the Constitution that soldiers had to obey civilians, could not live apart in segregated bases, could be given money for only two years at a time and they had to be “raise[d] and support[ed]” as well as governed by rules set by Congress, not the president. They set these terms because they were aware from their reading of history and current events, that a president might use the military, his “wolves,” to overthrow the civic order to make himself our despot.

Such a seizure of power and destruction of lawful government, they believed “could happen here” because generally, the public favors soldiers. As the great French philosopher on whom they drew constantly, Montesquieu warned them, the public will idolize soldiers and demean civilian leaders. Military leaders appear manly and brave, offer what appear to be simple solutions to complex problems and put on great displays. The fife and the drum have always enchanted not only warriors but also adoring civilian, as in the overthrow of Roman Republic to impose upon them a dictatorship.

“We,” civilian citizens, on whom the Founding Fathers reluctantly concluded that they had to depend to guard their new republic, usually behave like sheep. Most of us keep our heads down and munch away on the luscious grass produced in our verdant gardens. Some of us go much further: we taunt those who fear the wolves. That is what the little boy in Æsop’s fable was doing.

The first serious test of our system came under President Thomas Jefferson. His America was caught in the arms of a British and French vice, the Royal Navy and Napoleon’s army, and was being squeezed. More than being squeezed, its understanding of the nature of the carefully balanced system the Founding Fathers had created was being challenged. How could America be strong enough both to defend itself both against foreign attack and yet preserve its liberties? The debate over that question became bitter and has never since been resolved.

As the great American historian Henry Adams wrote,

In the Republican party [Jefferson’s party] any vote for a standing army had been hitherto considered a crime. The Federalists in 1801 had left a force of five thousand men; Jefferson reduced it to three thousand...The United States fort at Newport was garrisoned only by goats...War, which every other nation in history had looked upon as the first duty of a State, was in America a subject for dread, not so much because of possible defeat as of probable success.

Jefferson’s son-in-law, Congressman John W. Eppes, told his colleagues in the House of Representatives that

If we depend on regular troops alone, the liberty of the country must finally be destroyed by that army which is raised to defend it..It is by standing armies and very often by men raised in an emergency and professing virtuous feeling, but who eventually turned their arms against their country.”

Jefferson had always taken the same position, but, at the end of his Administration, fearing a British invasion more than “the risk of military despotism at home,” he asked Congress to authorize an additional enrollment of 6,000 soldiers. Put in terms Æsop would have understood, the danger of the wolf packs on distant hills was worse than the danger of living with them in our valley. And our soldiers, our wolves, were eager to take up the challenge. Conflict, after all, is where they can demonstrate their bravery, win approval and aspire to leadership of their packs.

Æsop didn't have to tell his little boy about their sharp teeth, bristly fur and commanding swagger. He knew about it from having watched others run in terror – or be eaten – during their fights. But, Æsop also introduced us to another beast, the fox.

Foxes make the most noise. And their clamor and their sly incitement of wolves makes them sometimes even more dangerous than wolves. They don't themselves have sharp teeth (by analogy a powerful weapons system) and they have little inclination to join the fray. But, their howling inflames the ardor of the animals with the teeth. Without their howls the powerful beasts, the wolves, would probably just “display,” showing what they could do. That is not what the foxes want. They want to have a real scrap, not just snarling and baring of teeth. Foxes enjoy a bloody fight, provided, of course, that they keep out of harm's way. Then they can snatch some of the spoils. So, done just right, everyone has a good time.

Or nearly everyone. The sheep, some of the shepherds and quite few of the wolves get slaughtered while the foxes watch from a safe distance.

People have been arguing over Æsop's fables for at least 2,000 years. They often have multiple meanings, but they often force us to think about complicated or obscure events in simple terms and so get closer to an understanding of where we are, what lies ahead, what options we have and what dangers we face. So, taking off from the fable about the little boy who cried wolf, I will try to use it to stimulate thinking about us today in a world of foxes, dogs of war, foxes, sheep and us.

I begin with North Korea. As I then thought, we were very close to a real war. I confess, I was the little boy who cried wolf. Looking back, I guess I mistook the yelping of the foxes for the howling of the wolves. The foxes were trying to egg on the leader of our pack, “Wolf Trump,” to attack the leader of the other pack, “Wolf Kim.” With the approval of our Alpha Male, or wolves were prowling, “displaying,” as ethologists say, to flaunt their power. Like animals do with displays, they sought to overawe our adversaries. The North Koreans didn't have quite as many, as sharp and as big teeth to display, but they showed off what they had. Wolf Kim, was baring his teeth and snarling. It may have been only display, but we knew enough to realize that he too had sharp enough teeth to inflict a lot of pain if he got into a fight. He might not be able to reach our happy valley far across the Ocean, but he could obliterate the capital of our ally, South Korea, killing perhaps a million Koreans and upwards of a hundred thousand American servicemen and their families.

Despite the urging of our foxes for a preemptive attack, it seems that the message got through to the leader of our pack that an attack would lead to a terrible war which we might not win or win at such a cost that would be a disaster. Perhaps he had heard about the earlier war in Korea which we almost lost and in which we were close to using nuclear weapons. So, remarkably, he suggested a meeting with the leader of the other pack, Wolf Kim. No one knew what, if anything, was to be said at the meeting. Indeed, there was not much that could be meaningfully discussed. Neither pack leader could afford to consider having his “teeth” pulled. That idea apparently did not even occur to our leader and the leader of the other pack must have known that without his teeth he would be eaten alive. But, a remarkable thing then happened: when our Alpha Male decided to sit down with their Alpha Male, our foxes momentarily stopped yapping and the wolves in our pack stopped some of their prowling. Nothing was settled but a moment of relative calm ensued.

Everyone was astonished. Could our pack leader, Wolf Trump, who was not usually thought of as a peace-seeker, have really changed? Or had he, as Æsop would have put it, just put on sheep's clothing? And their pack leader? What was he doing there? What, indeed, were either of them doing sitting down together? The answer for both was "not much." But, at least our Alpha Male calmed down his wolves and hushed up his foxes. We don't know whether or not Wolf Kim had any foxes or if he listened to the ones we thought he had, but he too made decidedly unwifelike noises.

Speaking for myself, I was delighted. "Peace in our times" had certainly not arrived, but a step away from war had been taken. And, when one considered the likely train of events that would have followed the first engagement, that was a great result. After all, we had learned when we first encountered the North Korean pack, even a "conventional" engagement would likely be horrible and might spill over into a non-conventional war or nuclear war with unpredictable but certainly catastrophic results.

That first step away from war was a godsend even if no one could predict the likelihood of a second step. I thought both Alpha Males deserved our gratitude.

The foxes didn't agree. They had been urging Wolf Trump to attack and were looking forward to a feast of blood and gore. Then suddenly the party was over. Worse, most of us sheep seemed delighted. So the foxes rushed to point out that nothing had really happened. It was all smoke and mirrors.

Truth to tell, they were right. But, like actors on the stage, which is of course what they are, both pack leaders basked in the momentary glow and us sheep, the audience, heaved or should have heaved a great sigh of relief. I don't know whether or why, and I don't believe anyone else does either, but somehow our leader heard or felt the sigh and, liking what he heard, decided to take another step away from war.

And, having found in Singapore that it was possible to meet, get the applause of the world's sheep (and at least some of the leaders of other packs) without actually doing anything, he rushed off to meet with the leader of the far-greater pack that ranged across the vast steppes of Asia, the Russian Alpha Male, "Wolf Putin," so that they could howl at the moon together.

But, this time, the meeting was not so simple as before. Wolf Putin was widely believed to have been playing hanky-panky on our turf. So doing anything less than nipping at his heels raised questions, particularly among the foxes but also among our would-be Alpha Males. Was our leader really quite as *Alpha* as he claimed to be. That is, as some of the foxes brayed, yipped, chortled, screamed – depending on which of the media they were using -- was he leading us the way he should be doing toward war or had he, as the great imperialist Kipling who also knew a thing or two about wolves called it, "missed his kill?" Was Wolf Trump becoming a lap-dog? Or, even worse, as some began to whisper, "was he secretly one of theirs?" Other, would-be Alpha Males smelled blood, *his*. And our leader, being a very experienced leader indeed, smelled danger. He began to see rivals circling around his den on Pennsylvania Avenue. Some even managed to crawl inside, and although he got rid of those he caught or suspected, others kept coming.

His first step was one practiced time out of mind of man and beast – he scorned his rivals, snarled in the modern patois of growled tweets and gathered the foxes around him. He

petted and loved some of them, giving them affectionate new titles, making them part of his inner pack and even designating a few of them honorary wolves.

But those steps did not satisfy the foxes: foxes are very clever beasts. Just being called by new names – being designated as “almost wolves” -- was pleasing and they rushed to flaunt themselves everywhere they could, but they wanted something to howl about.

Our leader understood. He liked to howl himself. Perhaps, he told himself, he could be both an Alpha Male wolf and run with the foxes. Then, he apparently thought, everyone – his rivals, his enemies and even his sheep -- would have to stop questioning his sincerity, and plotting against him. If he adopted fox-talk and growled loudly enough, his rivals and critics would recognize him for the Super Alpha Male leader he really was.

He had come close to capturing the adulation of the world with talk about peace, but talk didn't seem to satisfy anyone – the foxes hated it, the wolves were restive and the sheep paid little attention. He decided to do what he did best, reverse his stands on attacking other packs and thus throw everyone into confusion. So he dropped the laurels of peace and picked up the banner of war.

And right at hand was just the right opportunity: another pack from across the deserts and mountains displayed itself. Indeed, he could not have invented a better enemy. It had the pride of the ancient Persians, the anger of recent and ugly revolution and the fervor of religious belief. And, put in Æsop's terms, unlike the North Koreans it didn't have sharp teeth, a big, modern military establishment; it didn't have a potential victim, a Seoul, “in the bag,” and it had no nuclear weapons. It appeared to the newly rehabilitated foxes, to most of the wolves and to their Alpha Male to be the perfect enemy, small, weak and far away. Better yet, it conjured no history of painful war, as did Korea, or ultimate danger, as did Russia. The foxes screamed with delight. And so did Wolf Trump. He tore up the deal his predecessor had made and made it difficult for them to feed themselves. What he needed, and what Fox Bolton was maneuvering to provide was an excuse to sic Trump's wolves on the Iranian wolves. They did their best to help by dressing themselves in the Iranian version of sheep's clothing, turbans and gowns. To Fox Bolton and Wolf Trump, they seemed not to fit anywhere in the animal kingdom. Æsop himself would not have known what to make of them.

Æsop could afford to speak in parables. We are accustomed to less ambiguous talk. So, while I empathize with the boy in Æsop's tale, I want to be very clear. I now lay out what taking up the banner of war would entail if Wolf Trump listens to Fox Bolton and his kin or if, fearing for his own hide, to prove his own grasp of leadership and to fend off rivals and enemies, he sics his wolves on the Persian wolves. Here I will regretfully cast aside Æsop, from whose account I have stolen what I could. I will now speak in more prosaic terms.

To engage in war with Iran, Mr. Trump would need an excuse. He would need to show that Iran is a mortal threat to America, but, at the same time, he and his military establishment need to show that Iran, unlike North Korea and Russia, would be quickly and easily overcome. After all, no one can sell us a war we don't need. So, first, we should ask, “is Iran a serious danger to the United States?” Simply put, do we *need* a war?

Without going into excessive detail, the bottom line is “no.” Iran has little ability to project force outside its immediate neighborhood. It has no capacity to reach the United

States with any conventional arms, and it has no nuclear weapons. It poses no threat to what the American military term “CONUS,” the Continental United States.

If Iran were attacked, however, it probably could interdict one of the major routes of oil exportation, through the Strait of Hormuz. This would be disruptive to some American overseas interests since about a third of the world’s energy is carried by tankers through the Strait, but it would be disruptive mainly for other countries, not for the United States, since about 85% of the oil and gas goes to Asian markets.

The current activities that the American administration regards as threatening are Iran’s intervention in the war in Syria. There it has supported the Syrian government and has provided various forms of aid, including military equipment, to the forces of its co-religionists in the Hizbollah movement that also supports the Syrian government. While the United States has wavered in its policy, it has generally opposed the Assad regime and has often sought to overthrow it directly with its own forces and indirectly through both Israel and various Syrian resistance movements. Thus, the foreign policies of the United States and Iran are in conflict. This conflict has been regarded by the Israeli government as a danger both to its domestic security and to the more aggressive aspects of its foreign policy. Israel has sought with great success to convince each American administrations that its national policy is the same as that of the United States so that a danger to Israel is to be taken as a danger to the United States: American security is dependent upon Israeli security and Israeli security is always in danger.

Short of full-scale war, the reality is quite different. Israel has one of the dozen strongest military forces in the world and is unmatched in the Middle East. Mainly supplied and paid for by the United States, it far outclasses Iranian military capacity in all dimensions but one, the capacity for guerrilla warfare.

So the second question is how likely are we to win a war with Iran? That is, we are unlikely to buy an aggressive policy if we think we can’t win it on acceptable terms. So what would happen in an American attack on Iran?

The balance of forces seems clear: in the Iran has a large military force, originally trained and equipped by the United States with some help from Israel. But much of its equipment is antiquated. For example, its principal fighter plane is the Northrop F-5 which was designed in the 1950s and went into service, mainly in Third World countries, in the 1960s. More broadly, I think it would be likely that at least the equipment and probably also the command and control apparatus of the Iranian army would be demolished in an American assault.

Obviously, the Iranian military establishment knows this. Ever since the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, Iranian strategists have regarded the formal military structure, the Revolutionary Guards (the *Pasdaran-e Enghelab*), as only their first line of defense. Like other revolutionary regimes, they sought to build a “peoples’ army.” Their *Sazeman-e Basijs* can potentially draw upon virtually the entire adult male population. At least a million, and perhaps several times that many, Iranians have been trained, equipped and deployed for guerrilla war. What is also remarkable is that the Iranian military has applied the concept and structure of guerrilla warfare at sea. While the Iranian navy would, like the army, probably be wiped out almost immediately by massive American naval forces, Iran is thought to be able to deploy hundreds of missile-armed speedboats in more than 700 bases along the

Persian Gulf. Many, probably most, would be sunk but at considerable, and probably unacceptable, cost.

Both at sea and on the land, the cost to Iran would be horrific. Millions of Iranians would be turned into refugees, wounded or killed; the expensively acquired infrastructure would be largely destroyed; civic institutions would be broken; cadres of workers in every field would be “decapitated” and, at best, Iran would be reduced to something like the level of Haiti or Somalia.

The costs to America would be less catastrophic but also painful and multiple. A decade ago in my little book *Understanding Iran*, I predicted that “a land invasion and occupation of Iran would cost America somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 casualties, a million seriously wounded and upwards of \$10 trillion.” At that time and despite the urging of Vice President Dick Cheney, President George Bush decided that an attack on Iran was “unacceptable.”

Since that time, the United States has been almost continuously engaged in Afghanistan with mounting casualties, wasted fortune and no “victory” in sight. To borrow an expression from our earlier attempt to defeat guerrillas, in Vietnam, the “light we see at the end of the tunnel may be the headlight of an oncoming train.” A war in Iran would probably be less damaging to America than Vietnam, but it is unlikely to be less damaging than Afghanistan was to the Russians and has been to us. A high-tech beginning would almost inevitably turn into a low-tech guerrilla war.

In such a war, we would of course seek to divide the Iranians and win the “hearts and minds” of a significant number. But, in the context of a brutal guerrilla war it would be hard for any Iranians, even those who hate the current regime, to support us. I don’t see even the *mojahedin-e khalq* playing a South Vietnam-like or Kabul-like role. We would quickly find ourselves alone. The Israelis would give only token support; the British might help but they could not do much; the Europeans would distance themselves; and the Russians and Chinese would see our entrapment in the war as a major opportunity.

The result: I predict a very long guerrilla war, far into the future, worse even than Afghanistan, and costing huge casualties on both sides, and ultimately costing us about four or five times as much as the Iraq-Afghan wars, perhaps as much as \$20 trillion. So severe would be the dislocation to the international system that it is at least possible that warfare in Iran would spill over into other conflicts. Finally, even worse might be the impact on our increasingly brittle social-political-legal system. The attack on Afghanistan destroyed the Soviet Union. Is it impossible that an attack on Iran could destroy the essence of our democratic civil culture?

I hope we won’t try to answer that question.

William R. Polk
September 7, 2018