

FOR POLITICS AND BUSINESS “THERE IS NO MORAL COMPASS APP”

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The other day my wife and I were walking home after a visit to the public library in San Francisco's civic center. On a corner near one of the many government office buildings, three well dressed young business persons were huddled around their wheeled suitcases. All three, oblivious to pedestrian traffic, were planted squarely in the middle of the sidewalk. Each of them, with hypnotically rapt attention, was staring down at the compact electronic devices that had seemingly planted roots into their well manicured fingers. They were clearly lost in San Francisco's urban forest and had no belief other than the path to grandmother's house glowed in their hot little hands.

My wife and I, long-time San Franciscans, paused to offer directions to the young trio. After several moments one of them finally looked up, and I started to say “Can we help you find....” But dismissively, if not arrogantly, his gaze returned to whatever was living in his palm. How could anybody with gray hair assist a chosen one riding so high on the wave of technological innovation? Those two AARP-types interrupting his online map session would have no understanding of the GPS complexities involved in locating a hotel a block-and- a-half away.

Continuing our afternoon walk up Polk Street, as we paused at the next intersection, I could not help but see a billboard highlighted by the waning afternoon sun. In large but rather graceful script an advertisement proclaimed “There is No Moral Compass App”. It was followed by a brief statement indicating the message was coming from the University of San Francisco.

Pointing to the billboard, I turned to my wife and said, “Rather interesting statement up there by the folks at USF.”

“Especially in view of our experience a block back,” she added.

I started to reply that, literally by God, it might be appropriate that “the Jesuits at USF should be the ones to shake our society out of its ethical and materialistic quagmire.” Sensing full well that my speech would soon be lapsing into what she good naturedly calls Rantish, my wife suggested I think about this issue a bit more, and by the way “what should we have for dinner?”.

So, after our evening meal and for quite a while longer, I pondered our recent autumn walk up Polk Street. Initially I thought, well, I'm no longer young, and today's younger generation just solve their problems and conduct business differently than the way I did forty years ago. But, the image of three young professionals unable to look up from their iPhones -- and to see down the street the marquee of the hotel they were looking for -- remained a troubling one. Somehow, it seemed to imply that we have spawned a generation of young people who largely believe that objective reality blinks at them from

the palms of their hands, and -- whether they are physically, intellectually, or morally lost -- they can find their way out of the woods by simply clicking on a digital icon.

Beyond its naiveté, the truly disturbing part of this worldview is that it is not limited to reducing the existential angst of locating a hotel room. In a far more pernicious manner *it disassociates thought from action*. Setting aside what we intend to do once we arrive, most of us will agree that the moral consequences of using a GPS compass app to find a hotel room are relatively trivial. However, consider a GPS-driven computer application of somewhat greater consequences.

On August 31, 2013 U. S. President Barack Obama announced his intention to use military force against the government of Syria. In a national address on September 10 he intoned that, if it were to occur, such a strike would be limited:

I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria. I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan. I will not pursue a prolonged air campaign like Libya or Kosovo. This would be a targeted strike to achieve a clear objective: deterring the use of chemical weapons, and degrading Assad's capabilities.

(Ref: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>)

Presumably, from the President's words, if action against Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime were to take place – and it did not involve “boots on the ground” nor a “prolonged air campaign” – then, it would most likely assume the form of a “targeted” or so-called surgically clean drone strike. The relative hygiene of drone strikes, however, pales somewhat in view of the fact that - if we are to believe the remarks of Senator (Republican) Lindsey Graham from South Carolina – over 4,700 civilians have been killed as a result of United States military action involving remotely controlled drone missiles (Ref.: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/remote-control-warfare-some-sixty-us-drone-bases-around-the-world/5330325>).

Of course, it is certain to be argued by the information technology apostlehood that the world of computer applications is always surgically clean – i.e., if something isn't glowing on that omnisciently bright display in front of us, it doesn't exist does it? And, by this reasoning a Tomahawk missile becomes merely a part of a wonderful virtual game which some happy little person learned to play as soon as he/she was old enough to manipulate a Xbox 360 gamepad. Except the gamepad is no longer in front of the living room television. It is linked to a control panel on an aircraft carrier, or in a bunker somewhere out in the middle of the Nevada desert where there probably are at least a few well polished boots on the ground.

Nonetheless, the United States' President is quick to admonish us that his decision to take limited military action against Syria is based on fundamentally moral grounds: In concluding his address of September 10 he said:

America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That's what makes America

different. That's what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth. (Ref: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>)

The President's concluding remarks suggest not a small confusion over the distinction between institutional values and military action. Specifically, the statement "let us never lose sight of that essential truth" might have been more appropriate if the American commander-in-chief had employed the term *value* rather than *truth* – to say nothing of the phrase "That's what makes us exceptional". It is little wonder that Russian President Vladimir Putin could not help but rise in dissent with the following observations in the September 11 issue of the *New York Times*:

And I would rather disagree with a case he [President Obama] made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is "what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional." It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal. (Ref: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

And so, as I read these verbal exchanges between two major heads of state, my thoughts returned to moral compasses and their applications in a world long tired of political and military strife. Both President Obama and President Putin place their remarks in a normative framework. Probably I am not alone in finding some irony in the fact that the President of the United States opts for taking military action in Syria because his country's "exceptional" values, while his Russian counterpart, a former lieutenant colonel in the KGB, finds theological grounds for not. I guess, regardless of nationality, the leopard can change its spots, for in their earlier political incarnations both gentlemen would have taken a serious pause before publicly phrasing their positions in the manner they did. Nonetheless, the issue remains that President Obama justifies military action based on a suspect set of ideological values. Contrarily, President Putin warns him that quite possibly another more appropriate set of institutional norms suggests that this action should not be taken.

But such is the world of modern politics and business – a world which sadly seems unable to distinguish between normative priorities and empirical realities – the requisitely separate domains of what *should* be and what *is*. Thankfully, our Jesuit friends at USF and the Russian President, indeed an incongruous fellowship, remind us that the same compass will not help us navigate these alien domains. The regions of values, ethics and morality are not subject to GPS coordinates.

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Because of the diverse conditions of humans, it happens that some acts are virtuous to some people, as appropriate and suitable to them, while the same acts are immoral for others, as inappropriate to them. – Thomas Aquinas