

The Wrath of Islam

I read [a piece on Vox](#) recently (compliments of former roommate and exceptional human being Damien Spleeters) the point of which was to disabuse readers of “myths” surrounding the Islamic State. The piece had a useful goal: to educate readers about the Islamic State, presumably so the reader could make more reasonable decisions about whether or not to support military engagement, or how to help resolve the problem of the Islamic State. I read the piece, twice, and while I found it better than much of the analysis elsewhere in mainstream media, it failed to disrupt the broader myth of the Islamic State. I want to continue the dialogue here, by examining what we hope to accomplish, and why.

Fact number one: Americans love violence. We love it in our movies and literature. We buy it en masse. The best television dramas aren't just *full* of violence – they depend on it, without violence (and especially that most acceptable acts of violence – revenge, or retributive, or just violence) much of our entertainment would cease to make any kind of sense. This is true for American-made, American-written stories in a way that it is not for almost every other culture in the world, with the current exceptions of Chinese and Japanese cinema and literature, which are similarly saturated with violence, rape, and murder. Unsurprisingly, Japanese art has a large and enthusiastic following in America – unsurprisingly given our politics, Chinese art does not.

Fact number two: American love for violence extends into the political sphere. This is accomplished by adventurers who are wearied by peace, and bored by long-term projects to increase sustainability in communities, foreign and domestic. It is accomplished by cynical career politicians like Hillary Clinton and Karl Rove, both of whom understand that being seen as a powerful leader is part of what makes a good political candidate. And whereas there used to be a dominant

isolationist, business-oriented, violence-sublimated strain to American politics – the old Republican Party, the boring, sober, clear-eyed realists of American politics that largely went extinct in the 70s and 80s, replaced by the current group of wild-eyed missionaries and Kulture-zealots. The Democratic Party still benefits from the perception that its constituency helped end the Vietnam War – they did not, it was the old, extinct Republican Party, Democrats began and expanded our involvement in Vietnam – but utopians on the left have always been the biggest proponents of foreign intervention on a small and large scale. Only recently, again, have utopians on the right begun to appropriate that narrative for themselves. For personal and professional reasons, as well as owing to the fact that journalism is a profession like any other, and there is no licensing process for thinking or talking or writing, most of the media coverage of every international event will be slanted toward creating the perception that American intervention is absolutely necessary.

Fact Three: American military intervention in other countries' affairs usually makes things worse – occasionally much worse. Sometimes it doesn't make things awful. That's what we're playing for, in the real world. It's like that time on *The Simpsons* when Homer is asked to relate the particulars of some event – in his mind, he's a tall, buff man, talking with the President of the United States, while (for no good reason) he is surrounded by aliens. Marge is exasperated by this obviously impossible account of events, and shuts him down. Advocates for military intervention are *always* prone to being Homer. Marge doesn't exist. Let's glance over big-ticket American military interventions over the last century:

Spanish American War – we freed Cuba and Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spanish hegemony. That was such a staggering success for us and for our foreign policy that each of those three countries are... *oh, right*. Currently in shambles.

WWI – we beat the Germans, so the English and French could win

WWI, because we liked their uniforms better (or something – there is actually no good reason we became involved in WWI and anyone who wants to dispute that is welcome to do so in the comment section), and then Europe was peaceful forever after that. WWI kicker – intervention in Soviet Revolution, against Lenin. Huge win for U.S., made everything better.

China in the 30s and 40s – we helped the Chinese resist the Japanese, which was cool, by supporting a monomaniacal tyrant who was happy to exterminate large swaths of the Chinese population, which was confusing because Chiang Kai-shek could've looked like Tojo with glasses. What, they all look the same! Anyway, our support for the Chinese made everything better in China forever.

In **World War II**, we armed and equipped the Soviets and British to fight against Germany, then fought on the Allied side when Japan declared war on us. Defeating the Japanese actually did make things better over there – the Japanese may be the one place and time where our intervention actually helped. Our interest in doing so was tied to fear of the Soviets, who, despite our help during WWII, didn't like us very much, as anyone with half a brain could've predicted going in. Germany's life did not get better as a result of our intervention in WWII, they lost more of their territory, which made France and England happier, were split into two, and occupied. Sadly, everyone with some exposure to Soviet documents now understands that the Soviet Union was expecting us to attack them, and were never in any position to take over Europe, making the Cold War at least 50% our fault. Crazy when you think about it that way, but there you go.

Korea was a push – we made South Korea, run by a brutal dictator into the mid-eighties, look a lot like Japan. Life in North Korea after our military intervention did not improve – it actually got worse, to the point where it is actually a cliché that describes how awful life could be.

Iran – If you want a really sad, depressing accounting of how overseas, please read [the official account](#) of the Iran coup of 1953. Makes you feel bad for Iran, and bad about us. Eisenhower's weak link as a president was British, and despite history assigning the responsibility for this one to us, it really was a British screw-up.

Vietnam – the less said, the better. We intervened militarily and things got so much better, it hurts even to think about it. Excruciating irony kicker – after arming or allying with South Vietnamese to fight their North Vietnamese cousins in order to protect them against Chinese and Soviet communism, the newly-reunified Vietnam fought a bitter, vicious war with China just a year after we closed our embassy. How's that for gratitude – they could've at least pretended to be friends so as not to hurt our feelings. I mean, that's one insanely useless war!

Cambodia & Laos – I don't know much about these places, but am told that what happened after we intervened militarily helped their tourist industry. You're welcome, Cambodia and Laos. Can't wait to visit.

Africa – strongest continent on earth!

Iraq I – made things better for Kuwait, by keeping that territory out of Saddam Hussein's hands. Were it not for our actions, the one quarter to one half of Kuwait's population that's actually Kuwaiti, and not some kind of slave, would have had to call themselves Iraqi instead. And as everyone knows, being an Iraqi sucks.

Somalia – We did not improve Somalia.

Afghanistan – Has life gotten better since the Taliban left? Well – it hasn't gotten much worse. That's gotta be worth something.

Iraq II – Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator who terrorized

the Middle East until we deposed him. He massacred 30,000 Kurds, which is awful. Unfortunately, things didn't get better in Iraq while we were there, until we hired 20% of their population as security guards. Sort of disingenuously, Republicans and neo-conservatives have made it sound like it was having U.S. soldiers on the ground that was keeping Iraq safe. All I'm saying is, we had a lot of soldiers on the ground there while not paying off 20% of the population and we got attacked all the time. Had a lot of soldiers there while paying off 20% of the population and things got real quiet. In any case, shit's out of control there right now.

Libya – Don't bring up Libya. It's fucking horrible there right now. A nightmare in every sense of the word.

Iraq III and Syria – shipping arms to militant groups we like at the moment has a way of burning us. It's always the same story, too – they're heroes when they need weapons, and then they're awful, raping, human-rights-violating criminals afterward. Putting boots on the ground will not lead to a long-term deterioration in security, it will do so at the expense of American lives. Airstrikes are worse than useless, although they seem to make us feel better about ourselves. The Islamic State is a group that is using Western-style propaganda videos, and speaking to us, and encouraging us to become involved in Iraq and the Middle East right when it looks like we've extricated ourselves. Why? Because they know that our involvement in the Middle East will make things better for their cause! *Why can't we see this? Why do so many believe, against all visible proof to the contrary, that involvement in Iraq or Syria will improve anything in those countries?* The counterargument – well, we can't leave them to the Islamic State, that'd be horrible, distorts reality. However horrible it will be for Iraqis, Kurds, and Syrians to face the Islamic State alone, it will *only be worse* if we intervene by arming proxies, or by deploying soldiers and carrying out air strikes. I know this, and can say so

definitively, because I have two eyes, and a brain, and am literate, and was paying attention to what happened over the last fifteen years.

Meanwhile – just so we know how the Middle East perceives us – the place we want to stabilize through the creation of a client-state in Kurdistan, or through Iraq, or – I'm not sure what our plan is because all the options are so bad – in any case, our reputation is so shitty in the region that as *The Huffington Post* reported recently, Middle Easterners believe that the [CIA is funding the Islamic State](#). We are a myth to the very people we insist on helping – a nightmare – why are we so insistent on participating in yet another bloodletting? When they're both expensive, and do no long-term good?