

PROFESSOR VALE'S IMPORTANT LESSON

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 18 2011

Professor Peter Vale's provocative piece on "The Responsibility of IR Scholars" deserves comment which I suspect many e-IR readers will provide. Let me offer mine in this blog. I must say that I would hardly claim to be an IR Scholar as I was trained in political economy and government and wear the title of Professor of Public Policy and Organization. This background gives me some appropriate distance from the IR field though I know it well as I directed the MIT Security Studies Program which has strong IR representation. Missing from my background is much direct work on the Northern Ireland Problem and Apartheid, but I do follow closely what was called the Global War on Terror or what Professor Vale hostilely and inaccurately calls "George W. Bush's War on the Moslem World."

Professor Vale confuses I think the ideas that IR scholars occasionally have and constantly promote in their work with actual decisions senior officials make. Ideas no doubt do have impact, even on policy, but it is through a very indirect route and often a slow one. Policy makers don't call in professors for advice. They may commission studies, in our system largely from captive think tanks or stacked advisory committees, but that quest is nearly always for rationales for policy decisions already taken and about political support. The fight that policymakers decide to take on may use in its justifications arguments borrowed from random piles of IR ideas, but it is nearly always after the fact and hardly ever with attribution.

George W. Bush was no Neo-con. Most of the American IR scholars who commented upon the decision to invade Iraq were totally against it. Their public petitions and many OpEds opposing the venture gained only brief notice. A few IR specialists were prominent advocates, but they were not central figures in the Bush administration either as advisors or officials. Condi Rice was an exception, but few took her as a major academic figure as she had moved quickly from visiting academic status to university administration and then officialdom. To have great impact on policy, American academics have to move away from scholarship into speech writing and, then through aggressive elbowing, a position on a politician's staff. Henry Kissinger certainly did that. The scholars who remain in academia promptly disown colleagues who try for political influence, and especially so if the policy oriented types work for Republican administrations. The American academic community, particularly at elite places, is conformist Left, realist or not.

I do not think it fair or accurate to imply that the politicians who decide on war are always heartless or evil. Remember President Bush had to deal with the reality that 3000 Americans, mostly civilians, were incinerated, crushed or force to jump to their deaths from great heights because of the al Qaeda attacks. No American president could avoid ordering a violent response. The Iraq element was in part the result of unfinished business of the Gulf War and in part a requirement to remove troops from Saudi Arabia. Al Qaeda's grievances included the fact that US forces, Christian troops, were protecting Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's holiest places. One punch leads to another. The leaders of al Qaeda no doubt see America, not as a protector of Islam (but it was such in Afghanistan against the Soviets and in Somalia and the Balkans), but as an aggressor and occupier.

Maybe that brings me back to Northern Ireland and Apartheid. Every punch is remembered and returned harder. Each side thinks that it fights for Justice. It takes a long, painful time to solve such problems. It surely requires politicians who face reality and who seek to control emotions, theirs and the people whom they lead.

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