

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
21 February 2015

Presidential Leadership: The Importance of Words

Since the 1950s, the National Prayer Breakfast, usually in February, has been an important event in Washington, D.C. Normally, it is not a controversial event. Typically, the President makes remarks or gives a brief speech at this breakfast. This year, President Obama's comments evidenced a lack of wisdom and discretion. In fact, his choice of words indicated a failure of leadership as president. Let me explain.

One of the important roles of the President of the United States is to help define reality for the American people (e.g., in the area of foreign affairs, the economy, rule of law, etc.). His choice of words in describing these critical areas of American life are important for Americans as they struggle to understand all that is occurring in their world. Currently, most everyone's mind and focus is ISIS, that barbaric Sunni Islamic group ravaging Syria and Iraq. Shortly before the Prayer Breakfast, ISIS had burned alive the Jordanian pilot it had captured. Correctly, President Obama characterized ISIS as "a brutal vicious death cult that, in the name of religion, carries out unspeakable acts of barbarism—terrorizing religious minorities like the Yazidis, subjecting women to rape as a weapon of war, and claiming the mantle of religious authority for such actions." Important words from a world leader. But then the President shocked almost everyone by his additional comments. He urged Westerners not to "get on a high horse;" violence is a part of the Christian past, he said, presumably wanting his listeners to draw a moral equivalency between ISIS and its brutality and brutality done by Christians in the past.

Obama's historical examples were: "During the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ." To use the Crusades as an example was most incendiary. Thomas Asbridge, medieval historian and director of the Center for the Study of Islam and the West at the University of London, observed that "Any use of the word 'Crusade' has to be made with great caution. It is the most highly charged word you can use in the context of the Middle East." Columnist Ross Douthat suggests that "a lot of Christians are going to hear an implied equivalence between the Islamic State's reign of terror and the incredibly complicated multicentury story of medieval Christendom's conflict with Islam . . . and so all you've really done is put a pointless fight about Christian history on the table." Furthermore, to use the Crusades in such a speech is to buttress one of the fundamental claims of Al Qaeda: Western presence in the Middle East is simply a replay of the Crusades; Americans are the new "crusaders." Al Qaeda will use Obama's words to validate their existence; ISIS will do the same.

In regards to the Crusades and medieval Christendom, if one is going to be honest about history, one should also mention that had Christian armies not rallied against militant Islam, Islam would have overtaken Christianity. At the 732 Battle of Tours, Charles Martel and Christian armies stopped Islam's advance in France, the highwater mark of Islam in the West. In 1683, the Muslim Ottoman Turks were stopped at the gates of Vienna, preventing any further advance of Islam in Eastern Europe. Islam presented a real, existential threat to Western freedoms and liberties in the early medieval world, during the Crusades, and at the beginning of the modern period. It is a historical fact that Christian Europe stopped the advance of militant, jihadist Islam. Had that not occurred, Western Civilization would have developed very differently.

It is quite clear that President Obama has a near pathological fear of being accused of Islamophobia. He refuses apparently to make any link between radical, militant, jihadist Islam and the recent explosions against civilians by Boko Haram in Nigeria, by the Taliban in Pakistan, by al Qaeda in Paris, and by jihadists in Yemen and Iraq. As columnist Thomas Friedman suggests, "We've entered the theater of the absurd." For example, after the slaughter of the four Jewish people at the kosher deli in Paris, both the White House and the State Department spent much of the day insisting that the attack had nothing to do with Jews. Indeed, the president said it was someone "randomly shoot[ing] a bunch of folks in a deli." Further, Friedman quotes from Rich Lowry in *Politico Magazine*: "The administration has lapsed into unselfconscious ridiculousness. Asked why the administration won't say [after the Paris attacks] we are at war with radical Islam, [White House spokesman, Josh] Earnest . . . explained the administration's first concern is accuracy. We want to describe what happened. These are individuals who carried out an act of terrorism, and they later tried to justify that act of terrorism by invoking the religion of Islam and their own deviant view of it." Friedman offers a common sense, yet brilliant conclusion: "But it is not good for us or the Muslim world to pretend that this spreading jihadist violence isn't coming out of their faith community. It is coming mostly, but not exclusively, from angry young men and preachers on the fringe of Sunni Arab and Pakistani communities in the Middle East and Europe." The worldview of Islam does explain and, in an extremist sense, is the cause of this horrific violence in Europe and in the Middle East. It is not merely a few wacko young men who seek a few obscure Islamic texts to justify their reign of terror. Their worldview, which explains their actions, comes from resurgent, radical, jihadist Islam. It is intellectually dishonest for our president and his administration to ignore this and refuse to state the obvious! He is our leader and he must help define the reality of what we face in this global war on terror. Radical, militant Islam is at the center and is the cause of such terror.

Finally, as columnist Charles Krauthammer has declared of President Obama, "Once you've discounted your own moral authority, once you've undermined your own country's moral self-confidence, you cannot lead. . . If, during the very week Islamic supremacists achieve 'peak barbarism' with the immolation of a helpless prisoner, you cannot take them on without apologizing for sins committed a thousand years ago, you have prepared the ground for strategic paralysis." President Obama should help America define its worldview as an important element in this war on terror against radical, militant Islam. But is our worldview

weapon an equally militant secularism? Secularism is, at its heart, ambiguous when it comes to defining evil and assumes that humanity is basically good when it comes to personal morality and ethics. In other words, evil is an aberration, rather than the norm. Thus, with secularism as its core worldview, the West has no coherent methodology for defining evil nor for identifying its cause. The president and his administration seem to want us to believe that Boko Haram, al Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, etc. are all bizarre aberrations and not really connected to the worldview of Islam. However, if our president were intellectually honest, he would say that such militant, jihadist terror is sourced in a worldview—and that worldview is Islam. He must help the American people define clearly the enemy we are facing. A radical, resurgent, jihadist Islam is our enemy in this war on terror. The president of the United States should lead and state the obvious to the American people. The distorted, convoluted language he and his administration use to define our enemy leads only to more confusion. That is not leadership!

See Michael D. Shear in the *New York Times* (7 February 2015); Ross Douthat in *Ibid.* (8 February 2015); Thomas L. Friedman in *Ibid.* (21 January 2015); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (13 February 2015); and Albert Mohler, “The President and the Prayer Breakfast” www.albertmohler.com (10 February 2015).