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OPINION | OUR VIEW

Syria Must Face The Consequences

And so now it is Syria that looms as the next piece of Middle Eastern madness that the world must deal with in the bluntest terms.

Now it is Syria that will apparently be the next focus for America's military endeavors.

Now it is Syria that once again shows that not everyone plays by the same rules — that is, the rules of decency, of morality, of life and death.

The Syrian civil war, which was unleashed during the Arab Spring of 2011, has turned the nation into a slaughterhouse. It's estimated that more than 100,000 people have died since President Bashar Assad's Alawite regime began its brutal crackdown on Sunni rebels and their sympathizers, not to mention any innocents who happened to be in the way.

We've seen this tragic morality play wind out before, in other guises and other slaughterhouses. They're wrought by leaders who see blood on their hands as a malignant sign of total power and of the mastery of souls.

Assad apparently took that malignancy one terrible step further last week when Syrian forces allegedly launched a chemical attack in the suburbs of Damascus. According to the humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders, more than 350 people died in the incident. It crossed the so-called "red line" that President Obama had declared last year.

The U.S. has been hesitant to intervene in this conflict, but that will likely change now. On Monday, Secretary of State John Kerry called the evidence of the chemical attack "undeniable" and damned the action as a "moral obscenity. ... This international norm cannot be violated without consequences."

That sounds like an unmistakable threat of a vigorous response that goes beyond condemnations and sanctions — the kind of response that hunts on the tips of missiles and rains down like a wrath from the heavens.

Assad's reign, now held together by slaughter and grief, is about to come crashing down, one way or another.

But for the U.S., it is another dicey excursion that can create more problems than solutions. The likely alternative to the Assad regime does not figure to be a pro-western, secular government, nor one that would necessarily resist the kind of radical Islamic elements that the U.S. has been broadly warring with since 9/11. And, while entering the conflict would align us with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it would put us at odds, yet again, with Iran and Hezbollah, and further shake our relations with Syrian ally Russia, which said a western attack on Syria would be "catastrophic."

And we must weigh that against the specter of the dead and those who would die from what we do — and, as we have seen, from what we don't do.

In real life, you see, there are no clear, easy choices. There are only hard decisions and their consequences.

Syria may well have made that decision for the U.S. and the other nations who would intervene.

And so now it is Syria who, it seems, will face those consequences.

Unfortunately, there now appears to be no other, saner path.

kmh

ON THIS DATE

By The Associated Press

Today is Wednesday, Aug. 28, the 240th day of 2013. There are 125 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 people listened as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

On this date: In 1609, English sea explorer Henry Hudson and his ship, the Half Moon, reached present-day Delaware Bay.

In 1862, the Second Battle of Bull Run (also known as Second Manassas) began in Prince William County, Va., during the Civil War; the result was a Confederate victory.

In 1922, the first-ever radio commercial aired on station WEAJ in New York City; the 10-minute advertisement was for the Queensboro Realty Co., which had paid a fee of \$100.

In 1945, the Allies began occupying Japan at the end of World War II.

In 1947, legendary bullfighter Manolete died after being gored during a fight in Linares, Spain; he was 30.

In 1955, Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago, was abducted from his uncle's home in Money, Miss., by two white men after he had supposedly whistled at a white woman; he was found brutally slain three days later.

In 1968, police and anti-war demonstrators clashed in the streets of Chicago as the Democratic National Convention nominated Hubert H. Humphrey for president.

In 1972, Mark Spitz of the United States won the first two of his seven gold medals at the Munich Olympics, finishing first in the 200-meter butterfly and anchoring the 400-meter freestyle relay. The Soviet women gymnasts won the team all-around.

In 1973, an earthquake shook Veracruz, Mexico; death toll estimates range from 600 to 1,200.

In 1983, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin announced his resignation. In 1988, 70 people were killed when three Italian stunt planes collided during an air show at the U.S. Air Base in Ramstein West Germany.

In 1990, an F5 tornado struck the Chicago area, killing 29 people.

Ten years ago: British Prime Minister Tony Blair denied the government had "sexed up" a dossier on Iraq's weapons threat and said he would have resigned if it had been true. A Defense

Department survey found that nearly 1 in 5 female Air Force Academy cadets said they had been sexually assaulted during their time at the academy.

Five years ago: Surrounded by an enormous, adoring crowd at Invesco Field in Denver, Barack Obama accepted the Democratic presidential nomination, promising what he called a clean break from the "broken politics in Washington and the failed policies of George W. Bush." Former U.S. Marine Jose Luis Nazario Jr., accused of killing unarmed Iraqi detainees in the Iraqi city of Fallujah, was acquitted of voluntary manslaughter in Riverside, Calif.

One year ago: Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney swept to the Republican presidential nomination at a storm-delayed national convention in Tampa, Fla. Hurricane Isaac spun into the southern Louisiana coast, sending floodwaters surging and unleashing fierce winds, as residents hunkered down behind boarded-up windows.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Sonny Shroyer is 78. Actor Ken Jenkins is 73. Former Defense Secretary William S. Cohen is 73. Actor David Soul is 70. MLB manager Lou Piniella is 70. Actress Barbara Bach is 67. Actress Debra Mooney is 66. Singer Wayne Osmond (The Osmonds) is 62. Actor Daniel Stern is 56. Olympic gold medal figure skater Scott Hamilton is 55. Actor John Allen Nelson is 54. Actress Emma Samms is 53. Actress Jennifer Coolidge is 52. Movie director David Fincher is 51. Actress Amanda Tapping is 48. Country singer Shania Twain is 48. Actor Billy Boyd is 45. Actor Jack Black is 44. Actor Jason Priestley is 44. Olympic gold medal swimmer Janet Evans is 42. Actor J. August Richards is 40. Rock singer-musician Max Collins (Eve 6) is 35. Actress Carly Pope is 33. Country singer Jake Owen is 32. Country singer LeAnn Rimes is 31. Actor Michael Galeota is 29. Actress Sarah Roemer is 29. Actor Arnie Hammer is 27. Rock singer Florence Welch (Florence and the Machine) is 27. Actor/singer Samuel Larsen (TV: "Glee") is 22. Actor Kyle Massey is 22. Actress Quvenzhané Wallis (Film: "Beasts of the Southern Wild") is 10. Reality TV star Alana Thompson, AKA "Honey Boo Boo," is 8.

Thought for Today: "The essence of immortality is the tendency to make an exception of one's self." — Jane Adams, American social worker and Nobel Peace laureate (1860-1935).

FROM THE BIBLE

He predestined us for adoption ... through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will. Ephesians 1:5. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis

YOUR LETTERS

Great Kayak Event!

Peg Ellingson, Rick Kuchta, Dan Specht, Michelle Van Maanen and Todd Van Maanen, Yankton

We want to congratulate Jarett Bies, The South Dakota Canoe Kayak Association, Rick McElroy and all the other volunteers who made the Yankton Riverboat Days Kayak Run such a great event in which to participate.

The six-mile race was well planned and executed, giving everyone who took part a chance to race or leisurely paddle down the Missouri. It was also a great opportunity to meet fellow kayakers from near and far.

Thank you for all your efforts in coordinating this race. We hope it becomes an annual Riverboat Days event.



Trimmings For Labor Day

BY ROBERT B. REICH

Tribune Content Agency

The good news this Labor Day: Jobs are returning. The bad news this Labor Day: Most of them pay lousy wages and provide low, if not nonexistent, benefits.

The trend toward lousy wages began before the Great Recession. According to a new report from the Economic Policy Institute, weak wage growth between 2000 and 2007, combined with wage losses for most workers since then, means that the bottom 60 percent of working Americans are earning less now than 13 years ago.

This is also part of the explanation for why the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line has been increasing even as the economy has started to recover — from 12.3 percent in 2006 to around 14 percent this year. More than 35 million Americans now live below the poverty line.

Many of them have jobs. The problem is that these jobs just don't pay enough to lift their families out of poverty.

But wait a minute. Since 2000, productivity has grown by nearly 25 percent. That means the typical American worker is now producing a quarter more output than he or she did 13 years ago.

So if wages have flattened or declined for the bottom 60 percent, yet productivity has increased, where have the gains gone? Mostly to corporations and the very rich.

All of which gives some context to the strikes in recent weeks at fast-food chain stores, such as McDonalds, where workers are demanding a raise to \$15 an hour from their current pay of \$8 to \$10 an hour. And the demonstrations and walkouts at Walmart stores, whose workers are also demanding better pay. The average Walmart employee earns \$8.81 an hour. A third of Walmart's employees work fewer than 28 hours per week and don't qualify for benefits.

Few of these workers are teenagers. Most have to support their families. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median age of fast-food workers is over 28; and women, who comprise two-thirds of the industry, are over 32. The median age of big-box retail workers is over 30. These workers typically bring in half their family's earnings.

They deserve a raise.

At the very least, the minimum wage should be increased from the current \$7.25 an hour to \$10.50 — and to \$15 in areas of the country with a higher cost of living. Had the federal minimum wage simply kept up with inflation from the late 1960s, it would already be well over \$10 today.

Contrary to the predictable pontifications of conservative pundits, such a raise won't cause many low-wage workers to lose their jobs. Unlike industrial jobs, these sorts of retail service jobs can't be outsourced abroad. Nor are they likely



Robert REICH

to be replaced by automated machinery and computers. The service these workers provide is personal and direct: Someone has to be on hand to help customers and dole out the burgers.

And don't believe critics who say any wage gains these workers receive will be passed on to consumers in higher prices. Big-box retailers and fast-food chains have to compete intensely for consumers. They have no choice but to keep their prices low. This means wage gains for low-paid workers are most likely to come out of profits — which, in turn, would slightly trim returns to shareholders and compensation packages of top executives.

That wouldn't be such a bad thing. According to a report by the National Employment Law Project, most low-wage workers are employed by large corporations that have been enjoying healthy profits. Three-quarters of these employers (the 50 biggest employers of low-wage workers) are raking in higher revenues now than they did before the recession.

McDonald's — bellwether for the fast-food industry — posted strong results during the recession by attracting cash-strapped customers, and its sales have continued to rise. McDonald's CEO Don Thompson was awarded a big whopper of a compensation package last year, valued at \$13.8 million.

Yum! Brands, which operates and licenses Taco Bell, KFC and Pizza Hut, has also done wonderfully well. Its CEO, David Novak, received \$11.3 million in compensation last year. The company enjoyed a 13 percent gain in annual earnings — its 11th straight year of double-digit growth. Shareholders got a return of 15 percent.

Walmart, the nation's largest employer, also continues to grow despite a sluggish economy, and pays its executives handsomely. The total compensation of Walmart's CEO, Michael Duke, was \$20.7 million last year, up from \$18.1 million in 2011. Total sales rose 5 percent to \$466.1 billion. Earnings per share rose 10.6 percent.

Not incidentally, the wealth of the Walton family — which still owns the lion's share of Walmart stock — now exceeds the wealth of the bottom 40 percent of American families combined, according to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute.

It would not be a tragedy if some of these shareholder returns and compensation packages have to be trimmed in order that low-wage workers at McDonald's, KFC and Walmart get a raise.

Indeed, if this nation is to reverse the scourge of widening inequality, such a trimming is necessary.

Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, is professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley and the author of "Beyond Outrage," now available in paperback. His new film, "Inequality for All," will be out Sept. 27. He blogs at www.robertreich.org.

The Okla. Killing And Outrage

BY LEONARD PITTS JR.

Tribune Content Agency

I have nothing to say about the murder of Christopher Lane.

Except this:

The killing of this Australian man, allegedly by a group of boys who were bored and could think of nothing better to do, suggests chilling amorality and a sociopathic estrangement from the sacredness of life. The fact that these teenagers were able to get their hands on a gun with which to shoot the 22-year-old student in the back on Aug. 16 as he was jogging in the small Oklahoma town of Duncan, leaves me embarrassed for my country — and thankful I am not the one who has to explain to his country how such a thing can happen.

None of this will satisfy the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people who have written me emails demanding (it is always interesting when people think they can demand a column) that I write about this drive-by shooting as an act of racial bigotry, an inverse of the Trayvon Martin killing, if you will. There is a numbing repetitiveness to these screeds: Where is Jesse Jackson, they demand. Where is Al Sharpton? Where are you? Or as one subject line puts it: "Why no outrage!!!!"

Actually, I have plenty of outrage. Just not the flavor of outrage they would like me to have.

It is, for some people, a foregone conclusion that any time violent crime crosses racial lines, some kind of racial statement is intended. But violent criminals are not sociopolitical theoreticians and violent crime is not usually a social manifesto. With relatively rare exceptions — we call them hate crimes — the fact is, if a thing shoots you, it is not because you are white, black, gay or Muslim, but because you are there.

So is Lane's shooting one of those exceptions? A case can be made that it is. One of the young black suspects, after all, tweeted his anti-white bigotry back in April. The hashtag: HATE THEM.

But a case can also be made that it isn't. Of the remaining two suspects, one is reportedly white and the other, the alleged shooter, apparently has a white mother. The prosecutor told



Leonard PITTS

the *Duncan Banner* newspaper there's no evidence Lane was targeted because of his race and in any event, bringing hate crime charges is a moot point. In Oklahoma, hate crimes are misdemeanors; the boys are already facing felonies.

Again, none of this will satisfy those dozens, if not hundreds, of email writers, not to mention the authors of similar screeds on right-wing websites. What they're doing is simple. They are using tragedy to play a cynical game of tit-for-tat: "I'll see you Trayvon Martin and raise you a Christopher Lane." In other words, they want to use this tragedy to validate their view that white people are victims of black racism.

And if all that was meant when African-Americans decry racism is that sometimes white people do violence against you, then the email writers and right-wing pundits might have a point. But it isn't and they don't.

No, what is meant is that even when violence is done against you, you may automatically be considered the "suspect" and your killer set free. What is meant is that judges are harder on you, doctors less aggressive in treating you, banks more apt to deny you, landlords less likely to show you apartments, hiring officers more likely to round file your application. What is meant is good luck hailing a cab in midtown Manhattan. What is meant is that other people will airily dismiss the reality of those things, or, as has many times happened to me, admit the reality but advise that you should accept your lot in silence.

Then in the next breath, those same people will ask you to empathize with how racially victimized they are. The sheer, blind gall of it beggars imagination.

Last week, Christopher Lane was killed for no good reason, apparently by three morally defective boys.

Sorry, but he's the victim here. White America is not.

Leonard Pitts is a columnist for The Miami Herald, 1 Herald Plaza, Miami, Fla., 33132. Readers may contact him via e-mail at lpitts@miami-herald.com.