

June 10, 2013

Charles Krauthammer on the results in Syria of the United States having an irresolute and irresponsible president.

On Wednesday, Qusair fell to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. Qusair is a strategic town that connects Damascus with Assad's Alawite heartland on the Mediterranean, with its ports and Russian naval base. It's a major strategic shift. Assad's forces can now advance on rebel-dominated areas in central and northern Syria, including Aleppo.

For the rebels, it's a devastating loss of territory, morale and their supply corridor to Lebanon. No one knows if this reversal of fortune will be the last, but everyone knows that Assad now has the upper hand.

What altered the tide of battle was brazen outside intervention. A hardened, well-trained, well-armed Hezbollah force — from the terrorist Shiite group that dominates Lebanon and answers to Iran — crossed into Syria and drove the rebels out of Qusair, which Syrian artillery has left a smoking ruin.

This is a huge victory not just for Tehran but also for Moscow, which sustains Assad in power and prizes its warm-water port at Tartus, Russia's only military base outside of the former Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin has stationed a dozen or more Russian warships offshore, further protecting his strategic outpost and his Syrian client.

The losers? NATO-member Turkey, the major supporter of the rebels; Jordan, America's closest Arab ally, now drowning in half a million Syrian refugees; and America's Gulf allies, principal weapons suppliers to the rebels.

And the United States, whose bystander president, having declared that Assad must go, that he has lost all legitimacy and that his fall is just a matter of time, is looking not just feckless but clueless. ...

Jennifer Rubin says Sue and Sam are unlikely to challenge their boss with any original thoughts.

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Susan Rice earned her stripes saying the most ludicrous things on national television because the White House wanted her to. Speak truth to power? You've got the wrong gal.

Nothing personal to Power, but a United Nations ambassador doesn't make national security policy and isn't responsible for much. (Hence, the lunacy of having Rice opine on national television on Benghazi, Libya.) We have had great ones (e.g. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, John Bolton) who spoken up for the United States and defended our values and our allies. We've had rotten ones who were less than competent and/or craved consensus with tyrannical regimes (e.g. Bill Richardson, Andrew Young, Rice). The good ones were put there by presidents who had a grip on national security and the bad ones by those who slept through

history (ignoring the rise of al-Qaeda) or who hadn't a clue about how to wield American power. In short, U.N. ambassadors have been mirrors of, not beacons for the presidents they served. ...

Spengler, in the person of David Goldman says Muslim civil wars stem from a crisis of civilization.

Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum (where I am associate fellow) replies this morning to Bret Stephens' June 3rd Wall Street Journal column, "The Muslim Civil War: Standing by while the Sunnis and Shiites fight it out invites disaster." The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, when the Reagan administration quietly encouraged the two sides to fight themselves to bloody exhaustion, did America no good, Stephens argues:

"In short, a long intra-Islamic war left nobody safer, wealthier or wiser. Nor did it leave the West morally untainted. The U.S. embraced Saddam Hussein as a counterweight to Iran, and later tried to ply Iran with secret arms in exchange for the release of hostages. Patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, the USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down an Iranian jetliner over the Gulf, killing 290 civilians. Inaction only provides moral safe harbor when there's no possibility of action."

Today, he adds, there comes "the whispered suggestion: If one branch of Islam wants to be at war with another branch for a few years — or decades — so much the better for the non-Islamic world. Mass civilian casualties in Aleppo or Homs is their tragedy, not ours. It does not implicate us morally. And it probably benefits us strategically, not least by redirecting jihadist energies away from the West." This is not a good thing for the West, but a bad thing, he concludes. Pipes and Stephens are both friends of mine, and both have a point (although I come down on Pipes' side of the argument). It might be helpful to expand the context of the discussion.

I agree with Stephens that it is a bad thing. It not only a bad thing: it is a horrifying thing. The moral impact on the West of unrestrained slaughter and numberless atrocities flooding YouTube for years to come is incalculable, as I wrote in a May 20 essay, "Syria's Madness and Ours." If Syria looks bad, wait until Pakistan breaks down. The relevant questions, though, are 1) why are Sunnis and Shi'ites slaughtering each other in Syria at this particular moment in history, and 2) what (if anything) can we do about it?

Part of the answer to the first question is that Syria (like Egypt) as presently constituted simply is not viable as a country. Iraq might be viable, because it has enough oil to subsidize a largely uneducated, pre-modern population. As an economist and risk analyst (I ran Credit Strategy for Credit Suisse and all fixed income research for Bank of America), I do not believe that there is any way to stabilize either country. In the medium term, Turkey will lose national viability as well. I outlined some of the reasons for this view in my 2011 book How Civilizations Die (and why Islam is Dying, Too).

Globalization ruins countries. It has done so for centuries. Tinpot dictatorships that keep their people in poverty the better to maintain political control will break down at some point. Mexico broke down during the 1970s and 1980s; the Mexican currency collapsed, the savings of the middle class were wiped out, and the economy shut down. In 1982 I wrote an evaluation of the Mexican economy for Norman Bailey, then director of plans at the National Security Council and special assistant to President Reagan. I saw a crash coming, and no way to prevent it.

Three things prevented Mexico from dissolving into civil war (as it did during the teens of the past century at the cost of a million lives, or one out of seven Mexicans). One was the ability of Mexicans to migrate to the United States, which absorbed perhaps a fifth of the Mexican population. The second was the emergence of the drug cartels as an alternative source of employment for up to half a million people, and generating between \$18 and \$39 billion of annual profits. And the third is the fact that Mexico produces its own food most years. When the currencies of the Latin American banana republics collapsed, there was always enough food to maintain minimum caloric consumption. Not so in Egypt, which imports half its food and is flat broke. Egypt and Syria are banana republics but without the bananas (Daniel Pipes assures me that Egypt does grow bananas, and he personally has eaten them, but they are not grown in sufficient quantity to meet the country's caloric deficit). Turkey was the supposed Muslim model for democracy and prosperity under moderate Islam. That idea, which I disputed for years, has gotten tarnished during the past week.

Israeli analysts have understood this from the outset. Two years ago (in an essay entitled "Israel the winner in the Arab revolts") I quoted an Israeli study of the collapse of Syrian agriculture preceding the civil war: ...

... If we had a Syrian elite dedicated to modernization, free markets, and opportunity, we could have an economic recovery in Syria. But the country is locked into suppuring backwardness precisely because the dominant culture holds back individual initiative and enterprise. The longstanding hatreds among Sunnis and Shi'ites, and Kurds and Druze and Arabs, turn into a fight to the death as the ground shrinks beneath them. The pre-modern culture demands proofs of group loyalty in the form of atrocities which bind the combatants to an all-or-nothing outcome. The Sunni rebels appear quite as enthusiastic in their perpetration of atrocities as does the disgusting Assad government.

What are we supposed to do in the face of such horrors? I am against putting American boots on the ground. As I wrote in the cited May 20 essay, "Westerners cannot deal with this kind of warfare. The United States does not have and cannot train soldiers capable of intervening in the Syrian civil war. Short of raising a foreign legion on the French colonial model, America should keep its military personnel at a distance from a war fought with the instruments of horror."

The most urgent thing to do, in my judgment, is to eliminate the malignant influence of Iran ...

For lighter fare, how about an interview with one of Pickerhead's favorites; Carl Hiaasen.

Carl Hiaasen's latest book, "Bad Monkey," begins when a couple of tourists on a fishing trip reel in a human arm. It's just a typical day in South Florida, the setting for Mr. Hiaasen's best-selling novels, which both satirize and celebrate the state that he's called home for almost all of his 60 years.

The colorful coterie of characters in Mr. Hiaasen's new book (to be published Tuesday) includes a voodoo queen, a kinky coroner and the author's usual assortment of corrupt politicians. He tells the story in such a matter-of-fact way that he could be reporting it—which, in fact, he did.

Most of the book's events are inspired by real places and true stories. As a longtime reporter, Mr. Hiaasen knows that reality is often stranger than fiction, especially in Florida.

"It's not an exaggeration to say this is the most corrupt place in the country," he says with delight.

"Bad Monkey" deals with a former cop's quest for redemption against the backdrop of South Florida's real-world scandals—from the Russian underworld in the Florida Keys to fugitives who escape to the Bahamas. This afternoon in late April, however, Mr. Hiaasen is relaxing in a decidedly different milieu. He's sitting in his living room, decorated in soothing blues and soft beiges, in a two-story house on a quiet corner of Vero Beach, Fla., just across the street from the ocean. ...

Washington Post

Message from the ruins of Qusair

by Charles Krauthammer

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What altered the tide of battle was brazen outside intervention. A hardened, well-trained, well-armed Hezbollah force — from [the terrorist Shiite group that dominates Lebanon](#) and answers to Iran — crossed into Syria and [drove the rebels out of Qusair](#), which Syrian artillery has left a smoking ruin.

This is a huge victory not just for Tehran but also for Moscow, which sustains Assad in power and prizes its [warm-water port at Tartus](#), Russia's only military base outside of the former Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin has stationed a dozen or more Russian warships offshore, further protecting his strategic outpost and his Syrian client.

The losers? NATO-member Turkey, the major supporter of the rebels; Jordan, America's closest Arab ally, now drowning in [half a million Syrian refugees](#); and America's Gulf allies, principal weapons suppliers to the rebels.

And the United States, whose bystander president, [having declared that Assad must go](#), that he has lost all legitimacy and that his fall is just a matter of time, is looking not just feckless but clueless.

President Obama doesn't want U.S. boots on the ground. Fine. No one does. But between nothing and invasion lie many intermediate measures: arming the rebels, helping Turkey maintain a safe zone in northern Syria, grounding Assad's murderous air force by attacking airfields — all the way up to enforcing a no-fly zone by destroying the regime's air-defense system.

Obama could have chosen any rung on the ladder. He chose none. Weeks ago, as battle fortunes began changing, the administration leaked that it was contemplating possibly, well maybe, arming the rebels. Then nothing.

Obama imagines that if America is completely hands-off, a civil war like Syria's will carry on as is, self-contained. He simply does not understand that if America withdraws from the scene, it creates a vacuum that invites hostile outside intervention. A superpower's role in a regional conflict is deterrence.

In 1958, President Eisenhower — venerated by today's fashionable "realists" for his strategic restraint — [landed Marines in Lebanon](#) to protect the pro-American government from threats from Syria and Egypt.

In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Russia threatened to send troops on behalf of the Egyptian army. [President Nixon threatened a U.S. counteraction](#), reinforced the Sixth Fleet and raised the U.S. worldwide military alert level to DEFCON 3. Russia stood down.

That's how the region works. Power deterring power. Obama deals instead in empty abstractions — such as "international legitimacy" — and useless conclaves, such as "Friends of Syria" conferences.

Assad, in contrast, has a real friend. Putin knows Obama. Having watched Obama's retreat in Eastern Europe, his passivity at Russian obstructionism on Iran, his bended-knee "reset" policy, [Putin knows he has nothing to fear](#) from the U.S. president.

Result? The contemptuous [Putin floods Syria with weapons](#). Iran, equally disdainful, sends [Revolutionary Guards to advise and shore up Assad's forces](#). Hezbollah invades Syria and seizes Qusair.

[Obama's response](#)? No warning that such balance-altering provocations would trigger even the most minimal American response.

Even [Obama's chemical weapons red line](#) is a farce. Its very pronouncement advertised passivity, signaling that anything short of WMD — say, massacring 80,000 innocents using conventional weapons — would draw no U.S. response.

And when that WMD red line was finally crossed, [Obama went into lawyerly overdrive](#) to erase it. Is it any wonder that Assad's allies are on full offensive — [Hezbollah brazenly joining the ground war](#), Russia sending a small armada and mountains of military materiel, Iran warning everyone to stay out?

Obama's response is to send the [secretary of state, hat in hand, to Moscow](#). And John Kerry returns actually thinking he's achieved some great diplomatic breakthrough — a “peace” conference that Russia will dominate and use to re-legitimize Assad and marginalize the rebels.

Just to make sure Kerry understood his place, Putin kept him waiting outside his office for three hours. The Russians know how to send messages. And the one from Qusair is this. You're fighting for your life. You have your choice of allies: Obama bearing “international legitimacy” and a risible [White House statement](#) that “Hezbollah and Iran should immediately withdraw their fighters from Syria” or Putin bearing Russian naval protection, Iranian arms shipments and thousands of Hezbollah fighters. Which do you choose?

Right Turn

[Obama isn't hiring people to challenge him](#)

by Jennifer Rubin

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[Susan Rice](#) earned her stripes saying the most ludicrous things on national television because the White House wanted her to. Speak truth to power? You've got the wrong gal.

Nothing personal to Power, but a United Nations ambassador doesn't make national security policy and isn't responsible for much. (Hence, the lunacy of having Rice opine on national television on Benghazi, Libya.) We have had great ones (e.g. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, John Bolton) who spoken up for the United States and defended our values and our allies. We've had rotten ones who were less than competent and/or craved consensus with tyrannical regimes (e.g. Bill Richardson, Andrew Young, Rice). The good ones were put there by presidents who had a grip on national security and the bad ones by those who slept through history (ignoring the rise of al-Qaeda) or who hadn't a clue about how to wield American power. In short, U.N. ambassadors have been mirrors of, not beacons for the presidents they served.

What Rice and Power share — like Eric Holder, Chuck Hagel, Valerie Jarrett and Jack Lew — is an all-encompassing loyalty to defend the president, whatever it takes, and partisan fervor. These qualities in [Obama's second term team](#) facilitate his hubris and shield him from disagreeable facts. We can hope that at the president's arm Rice will be different, but let's not hold our breath.

Indeed, two former Obama advisers confirm that this is all about giving the president continuity and increasing his comfort level (i.e. removing any conflict). The [Wall Street Journal reports](#):

President Barack Obama further tightened his control of U.S. foreign policy Wednesday by tapping a pair of trusted advisers for key national-security roles. . . .

“It's symbolic of what this administration has been doing with most appointments, which has been staying on track, providing continuity and not making waves,” Leon Panetta, a former

defense secretary and CIA director under Mr. Obama, said in an interview. “It certainly fits a pattern that we’re seeing—having people appointed who are close to the president and who are known quantities.”

Added Dennis Ross, who was part of the National Security Council staff in the first term: “I wouldn’t take these two appointments as being an indicator that somehow the policy is going to change. I don’t think that’s the case. What it reflects is the comfort level he has with the two of them.”

Unlike Rice, who will be within the White House cocoon, Power, if she is clever and determined enough to keep her reputation for seriousness on human rights, will have to pick her spots. But then again, far away at Turtle Bay with no operational control over any instrument of power, she’s no match for Rice (her formal rival) the Pentagon chief, the CIA director (another Obama loyalist!) and the new secretary of state (who fancies pleading with Russia to get “peace” in Syria, thinks the “peace process” can be restarted, wants a special relationship with China and considers Mahmoud Abbas’s new puppet as prime minister of the Palestinian Authority to be a swell choice).

In short, the history of Obama’s appointments has been of individuals who either didn’t assert themselves (and live up to their potential) or who were picked because they could be counted on not to. I’m not holding out hope for anything better, especially in an administration hunkering down under a cloud of scandals.

Spengler

[Muslim Civil Wars Stem from a Crisis of Civilization](#)

by David Goldman

Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum (where I am associate fellow) [replies](#) this morning to [Bret Stephens](#)’ June 3rd *Wall Street Journal* column, “The Muslim Civil War: Standing by while the Sunnis and Shiites fight it out invites disaster.” The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, when the Reagan administration quietly encouraged the two sides to fight themselves to bloody exhaustion, did America no good, Stephens argues:

“In short, a long intra-Islamic war left nobody safer, wealthier or wiser. Nor did it leave the West morally untainted. The U.S. embraced Saddam Hussein as a counterweight to Iran, and later tried to ply Iran with secret arms in exchange for the release of hostages. Patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, the USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down an Iranian jetliner over the Gulf, killing 290 civilians. Inaction only provides moral safe harbor when there’s no possibility of action.”

Today, he adds, there comes “the whispered suggestion: If one branch of Islam wants to be at war with another branch for a few years — or decades — so much the better for the non-Islamic world. Mass civilian casualties in Aleppo or Homs is *their* tragedy, not ours. It does not implicate us morally. And it probably benefits us strategically, not least by redirecting jihadist energies away from the West.” This is not a good thing for the West, but a bad thing, he concludes. Pipes and Stephens are both friends of mine, and both have a point (although I come down on Pipes’ side of the argument). It might be helpful to expand the context of the discussion.

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Part of the answer to the first question is that Syria (like Egypt) as presently constituted simply is not viable as a country. Iraq might be viable, because it has enough oil to subsidize a largely uneducated, pre-modern population. As an economist and risk analyst (I ran Credit Strategy for Credit Suisse and all fixed income research for Bank of America), I do not believe that there is any way to stabilize either country. In the medium term, Turkey will lose national viability as well. I outlined some of the reasons for this view in my 2011 book [How Civilizations Die \(and why Islam is Dying, Too\)](#).

Globalization ruins countries. It has done so for centuries. Tinpot dictatorships that keep their people in poverty the better to maintain political control will break down at some point. Mexico broke down during the 1970s and 1980s; the Mexican currency collapsed, the savings of the middle class were wiped out, and the economy shut down. In 1982 I wrote an evaluation of the Mexican economy for Norman Bailey, then director of plans at the National Security Council and special assistant to President Reagan. I saw a crash coming, and no way to prevent it.

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Israeli analysts have understood this from the outset. Two years ago (in an essay entitled "[Israel the winner in the Arab revolts](#)") I quoted an Israeli study of the collapse of Syrian agriculture preceding the civil war:

Syria will prove impossible to stabilize, for reasons sketched in my March 29 essay, and explained in more detail by economist Paul Rivlin [3] in a note released the same day by Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center, entitled "Behind the Tensions in Syria: The Socio-Economic Dimension."

Quoted at length in the Arab press, Rivlin's report went unmentioned in the Western media – a gauge of how poorly the Western elite understands the core issues. Clinton has been ridiculed for calling Assad a "reformer" (in fact, she said that some members of congress think he's a reformer). Rivlin explains Syria's president is a reformer, at least in economic policy. The trouble is that Syrian society is too fragile to absorb reforms without intolerable pain for the 30% of

Syrians below the official poverty line of US\$1.60 a day. As Rivlin explains: “Syrian agriculture is suffering from the country’s move to a so-called ‘social market economy’ and the introduction of a new subsidy regime in compliance with international trade agreements, including the Association Agreement with the European Union (which Syria has still not ratified). The previous agricultural policy was highly interventionist, ensuring (at great cost) the country’s food security and providing the population with cheap access to food items. It is now being replaced with a more liberal one that has harsh consequences for farmers and peasants, who account for about 20% of the country’s GDP [gross domestic product] and its workforce.”

Syria’s farm sector, Rivlin adds, was further weakened by four years of drought: “Small-scale farmers have been the worst affected; many have not been able to grow enough food or earn enough money to feed their families. As a result, tens of thousands have left the northeast and now inhabit informal settlements or camps close to Damascus.”

Assad abolished fuel subsidies and freed market prices, Rivlin adds. “In early 2008, fuel subsidies were abolished and, as a result, the price of diesel fuel tripled overnight. Consequently, during the year the price of basic foodstuffs rose sharply and was further exasperated by the drought.” Against that background, Syrian food prices jumped by 30% in late February, Syrian bloggers reported after the regime’s attempt to hold prices down provoked hoarding.

The rise in global food prices hit Syrian society like a tsunami, exposing the regime’s incapacity to modernize a backward, corrupt and fractured country. Like Egypt, Syria cannot get there from here. Rivlin doubts that the regime will fracture. He concludes, “Urban elites have been appeased by economic liberalization, and they now fear a revolution that would bring to power a new political class based on the rural poor, or simply push Syria into chaos. The alliance of the Sunni business community and the Alawite-dominated security forces forms the basis of the regime and, as sections of the population rebel, it has everything to fight for.”

We tend to forget that the first stirrings of globalization during the Age of Navigation ruined Latin America, Asia, India, and China. That was the premise of my [first “Spengler” essay](#) at *Asia Times Online* on January 27, 2000:

Item: After the conquest of the New World, Spain’s entire capture of precious metals went to India and China to pay for luxury cloth and spices. That did for approximately 90 percent of the indigenous pre-Colombian population.

Item: The African slave trade instituted by the Portuguese and later the British first produced sugar in Brazil and the Caribbean, to be turned into cheap intoxicants for the European market. Tobacco was a second absorber of slave labor. Cotton became important much later. Production of these vices did for a third of the West African population.

Item: In order to sell cheap cotton cloth to India, the East India Company arranged for Indians to grow opium and for Chinese to buy it. All the silver mined in Latin America, which two centuries earlier had passed to China to pay for silks, found its way back to Europe to pay for opium. That did for untold millions of Indians and Chinese.

The loss of life was frightful. The Taiping Rebellion of 1850 to 1864 in the wake of the Qing Dynasty's humiliation by the British claimed 20 million lives, most of them civilians. Millions starved in Bengal when manufactured cotton replaced the local handwoven cloth.

If we had some bagels, we could have bagels and lox, if we had some lox. Syria doesn't have enough oil to survive in the region. It doesn't even have enough water, as the *New York Times'* [Thomas Friedman](#) noticed last month, two years after Israeli analysts published the story in depth:

"The drought did not cause Syria's civil war," said the Syrian economist Samir Aita, but, he added, the failure of the government to respond to the drought played a huge role in fueling the uprising. What happened, Aita explained, was that after Assad took over in 2000 he opened up the regulated agricultural sector in Syria for big farmers, many of them government cronies, to buy up land and drill as much water as they wanted, eventually severely diminishing the water table. This began driving small farmers off the land into towns, where they had to scrounge for work.

Because of the population explosion that started here in the 1980s and 1990s thanks to better health care, those leaving the countryside came with huge families and settled in towns around cities like Aleppo. Some of those small towns swelled from 2,000 people to 400,000 in a decade or so. The government failed to provide proper schools, jobs or services for this youth bulge, which hit its teens and 20s right when the revolution erupted.

Then, between 2006 and 2011, some 60 percent of Syria's land mass was ravaged by the drought and, with the water table already too low and river irrigation shrunken, it wiped out the livelihoods of 800,000 Syrian farmers and herders, the United Nations reported. "Half the population in Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers left the land" for urban areas during the last decade, said Aita. And with Assad doing nothing to help the drought refugees, a lot of very simple farmers and their kids got politicized. "State and government was invented in this part of the world, in ancient Mesopotamia, precisely to manage irrigation and crop growing," said Aita, "and Assad failed in that basic task."

If we had a Syrian elite dedicated to modernization, free markets, and opportunity, we could have an economic recovery in Syria. But the country is locked into suppurating backwardness precisely because the dominant culture holds back individual initiative and enterprise. The longstanding hatreds among Sunnis and Shi'ites, and Kurds and Druze and Arabs, turn into a fight to the death as the ground shrinks beneath them. The pre-modern culture demands proofs of group loyalty in the form of atrocities which bind the combatants to an all-or-nothing outcome. The Sunni rebels appear quite as enthusiastic in their perpetration of atrocities as does the disgusting Assad government.

What are we supposed to do in the face of such horrors? I am against putting American boots on the ground. As I wrote in the cited May 20 essay, "Westerners cannot deal with this kind of warfare. The United States does not have and cannot train soldiers capable of intervening in the Syrian civil war. Short of raising a foreign legion on the French colonial model, America should keep its military personnel at a distance from a war fought with the instruments of horror."

The most urgent thing to do, in my judgment, is to eliminate the malignant influence of Iran, which is treating Syria like a satrapy and sending tens of thousands of fighters as well as

material aid to the Assad regime. Attacking Iran would widen the conflict, but ultimately make it controllable. No sane American should want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. As [Admiral James Stavridis](#) told the *New York Times* today, “If you can move 10 tons of cocaine into the U.S. in a small, semi-submersible vessel, how hard do you think it would be to move a weapon of mass destruction?”

Ultimately, partition of Syria (and other Middle Eastern countries) on the model of the former Yugoslavia probably will be the outcome of the crisis. There are lots of things to keep diplomats busy for the next generation. But the terrible fact remains that it is not in our power to prevent the decline of a civilization embracing over a billion people, and to prevent some aspects of that decline from turning ugly beyond description. Among the many things we might do, there is one thing we must do: limit the damage to ourselves and our allies.

WSJ

[Weekend Confidential: Carl Hiaasen](#)

The best-selling author on how truth really is stranger than fiction—especially in Florida
by Alexandra Wolfe



Carl Hiaasen, journalist, columnist and novelist.

Carl Hiaasen's latest book, "Bad Monkey," begins when a couple of tourists on a fishing trip reel in a human arm. It's just a typical day in South Florida, the setting for Mr. Hiaasen's best-selling novels, which both satirize and celebrate the state that he's called home for almost all of his 60 years.

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The author, who was born a few hours south in Broward County, left his home state for a brief stint at Emory University in Atlanta, then graduated from the University of Florida in 1974, just months before President Nixon resigned. Seduced by the lure of investigative journalism, Mr. Hiaasen landed at the Miami Herald, where he still works as a regular columnist.

After collaborating with a friend to write his three earliest novels, Mr. Hiaasen wrote the first of his own in 1986. Since then, he's written 12 more, most of which have been national best sellers. His first book for young adults, "Hoot," came out in 2002. He'd originally planned to write just this one, so that the children in his family could see what he did for a living. But "Hoot" ended up selling over two million copies in the U.S. alone and became a movie. He's now working on his fifth YA book.

Though Mr. Hiaasen's affection for wildlife and what he calls his "smart-ass attitude" are threads in all of his fiction, he finds YA books easier to write, and they take him just half as much time to finish—about six to nine months. "My wife always says she has no trouble seeing me write from an adolescent sensibility," he laughs. "Kids love it when you make fun of grown-ups, and I've been doing that my whole life in the newspaper business and the novels, so it wasn't that much of a stretch." And the main characters don't arrive on scene with as much baggage. "I don't have to explain five failed marriages and a meth habit," he says.

Throughout, Mr. Hiaasen has continued writing his newspaper column, in which he sets crooked politicians pointedly straight. "Why write a column?" he asks. "It keeps you on the hamster wheel. The muscle keeps getting exercised."

Seeing the natural settings he loved subdivided into concrete lots came as such a shock when he was a child that the theme of environmental preservation has informed both his columns and his novels. "When you're young, you don't understand the politics of development," says Mr. Hiaasen, looking out to his lawn. "Fifty years later, I'm still asking how they get away with it."

"They," according to Mr. Hiaasen, often means Florida's politicians. He calls the state legislature the "festival of whores." But he stops short of declaring corruption a statewide conspiracy. "It's just a nonstop orgy of sleaze," he says, and one that has given him an unending source of material. "The great thing about Florida is usually the crooked public servants are really stupid,"

he says. "It's not like Boston or some other places, where there's a certain skill or a certain style. Here it's just clumsy grabs for cash."

Such schemes are on full display in "Bad Monkey." One is based on a sailfish scam reported in the Miami Herald: a fishing outfitter makes a deal with a taxidermist and places pre-caught fish in the way of unsuspecting tourists' poles. Once the tourists make their catch, the captain suggests having the fish stuffed and mounted. As for body parts, like the arm in his opening scene, Mr. Hiaasen said they were always turning up in strange places when he was covering the drug wars.

He came up with the idea for a character demoted from law enforcement to "roach patrol," or restaurant inspection, after reading actual restaurant-inspection reports that differentiated counts of live and dead roaches. "I don't think the diners care" whether the roaches are alive or dead, smiles Mr. Hiaasen. "That was funny to me in my own sick way." And it literally took away his appetite. "In terms of a dietary tool, I would highly recommend it," he says.

Most of the book is set in the Florida Keys, where Mr. Hiaasen met his wife Fenia and lived for 10 years. "There's one way in and one way out," he says, referring to U.S. 1, the archipelago's single highway. "It used to be that Key West led the nation in the number of fugitive captures." Having just one major thoroughfare, he says, heightens the drama of the Keys as a setting. In the real world, police officers carefully monitor the route, sometimes to the chagrin of Mr. Hiaasen himself, who admits that "there are very few places I haven't gotten a speeding ticket."

Back in Vero Beach, Fenia and the couple's 13-year-old son, Quinn, have just come home. Mr. Hiaasen is planning to spend the rest of the weekend with them. These days he gets up early to write either his column or his book and "feels the energy going out of it" by 2 or 3 p.m. "When my first son was young, I used to work more," says Mr. Hiaasen, referring to his older son, Scott, from a previous marriage. Scott now also works at the Miami Herald. "Those years go by so quick that I don't want to make the same mistake." Still, he doesn't regret his younger years. "I think it was just part of trying to get ahead."

Mr. Hiaasen is already well into his new YA book. He started it as soon as he finished "Bad Monkey," a practice he insists on. "As long as you've got a work in progress, nothing bad can happen," he says.

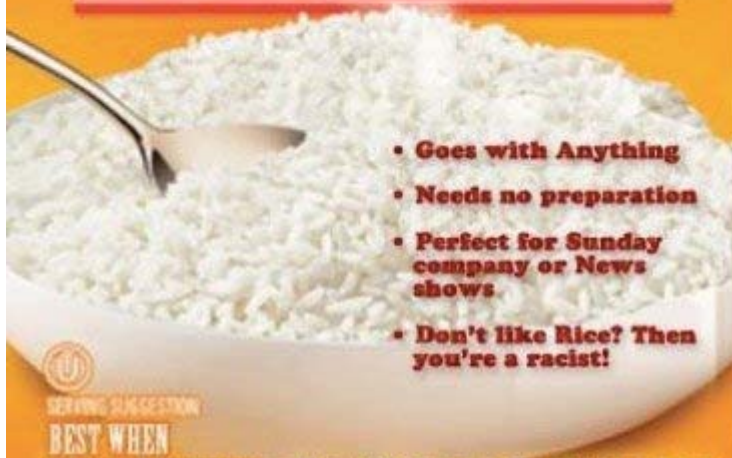




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