

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



August 05, 2013

IF I WERE KING . . .

If I Were King is the title of a best-selling late Victorian-era novel by the Anglo-Irish author/politician Justin Huntley McCarthy (1859-1936). A romantic tale about the legendary French poet/rapscallion François Villon (1431-?), King Louis XI, and Louis's cousin Katherine De Vaucelles, *If I Were King* was eventually turned into both a highly successful Broadway play and a Rudolph Friml

operetta (renamed *The Vagabond King*), as well as an oft-produced motion picture, starring William Farnum in the 1920 version, John Barrymore in 1927, and Ronald Coleman in 1937. (Anyone interested in reading a free online version of *If I Were King* can download it at Gutenberg.org.



Without giving away its overly convoluted plot, suffice it to say that Villon -- poet, thief and scamp -- manages to capture the heart of a royal mademoiselle and become King Louis' Grand Constable for a week. Villon comes to the king's attention when, disguised as a commoner, Louis goes to a tavern, seeking to discover who is betraying him. There, he comes across the "beloved

rogue," who is in the act of criticizing the king, proclaiming how much better a

job he could do -- if only *he* were king. As things turn out Villon kills the traitor - who turns out to be Louis' Grand Constable -- and the king rewards him by making him Constable for a week. In the end, Villon is exiled from Paris, but before leaving, wins the heart of the beautiful Katherine. Music up, lights fade.

Over the past several weeks, while dealing with the almost daily inanities of Congress and its inability to do what is both right and necessary, I have found the words "*If I Were King*" on my lips and in my brain. Not that I, like McCarthy's François Villon, believe I could do a better job, for I know I could not. (At this point I can hear the chorus of "*You'd better believe its!*" from all those readers who are resolutely certain I don't know the first thing about *anything*.) Rather, I find myself wondering what decree or fiats I would promulgate *If I Were King*.

I think my first edict would be to make it an act of treason to put the nation's security in peril for the sake of personal political profit. Regrettably, this is something Congress has been doing rather successfully for quite some time. I mean anyone on Capitol Hill with half a brain (which would obviously exclude Representatives Gomert, Bachmann and King) knows that for a majority of Americans, the nation's fiscal health has been on the critical list for many years. Anyone but a fool recognizes that while our economy is easily capable of creating unimaginable wealth for the very few, it is utterly incapable of creating much beyond fast-food jobs for the vast majority. And yet, despite a welter of evidence to the contrary, many continue to claim that government is the culprit; that high taxes and government "hand-outs," mendacious immigrants and even more rapacious labor unions are the source of all our problems. That if only we would cut any and all entitlements, eliminate the EPA, FDA, DOE and SEC, we would see prosperity trickle down from on high.

Are they so dense as to not realize that consumers are the real job creators; that if average people don't have jobs or reasonable wages this economy can never have a vigorous recovery? I have always believed that the truly rich would do better with a smaller share of a rapidly-growing economy than their current huge share of an economy that's hardly moving. There certainly are people on both sides of the aisle who understand this . . . but won't act upon it. Why? Because they have put personal political profit ahead of the nation's security.

Remember, *If I Were King*, this would be an act of treason.

Far too many members of Congress -- mostly Republicans -- are afraid to say, do or even hint at anything that might get them in Dutch with their far, far right flank. For if they do, they might find themselves looking for work somewhere other than Capitol Hill. This far, far right flank has placed America in a lethal pincer grip of retrogression. Two examples should suffice:

Out in California's 45th Congressional District (Orange County), State Republican Senator Mimi Waters is the early front-runner to replace retiring Congressman John Campbell. By every traditional measure Waters should be a shoo-in: she has great name recognition, high visibility, and, after a decade in the state legislature the ability to raise vast sums of money. She also has a 94% rating with a major anti-tax group, which is incredibly important in this arch-conservative district. But a while back, Senator Waters cast one -- ONE -- vote for a Democrat-sponsored tax extension (SB 11), and is now being viewed with great suspicion; "true" conservatives are questioning whether she isn't some sort of closet liberal! All this for voting once in favor of a Democrat-sponsored bill. The California-based [Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association](#) and [Americans for Tax Reform](#) (Grover Norquist's group) are now looking around for a "real" conservative to challenge her in the primary.

Then there is the case of South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham. Graham, who is nearing the end of his second term, has been a thoughtful member of the Republican caucus, one not afraid to occasionally work with colleagues from across the aisle. At one point he joined then-Senator Hillary Clinton in co-sponsoring a bill to expand health care for reservists and National Guard troops. He has also worked with New York Senator Chuck Schumer on tariff legislation and has long been a supporter of comprehensive immigration reform. And despite having a lifetime American Conservative Union rating in excess of 85, he is in trouble back home. Why? Because as one Tea Party candidate recently told a campaign gathering, "Our senator has a track record of trusting government, of working to grow this government." Others have faulted him for his past support for President Obama's Supreme Court nominees, and his sponsorship of cap and trade legislation. Giving Graham's less than overwhelming 60% approval rating among voters in the Palmetto State, his future is in jeopardy. Don't be surprised if he veers hard right, goes against his past actions and convictions, and puts his political future ahead of what is best for the country's security.

As our old friend Villon wrote, "*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?*" namely, "Where are the snows of yester-year?"

If I Were King . . .

©2013 Kurt F. Stone

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



August 11, 2013

GROUND YOUR STAND

Yes, yes, I know: *Ground Your Stand* is a pretty kitschy title for an essay -- an obvious and unapologetically sophomoric play on words. Nonetheless, it *is* the title of this week's piece . . . one which will strive to make a serious -- and hopefully less than kitschy -- point. For it seems to me that these days, the positions -- the stands -- many people take on issues of importance, are, far more often than not, grounded in the



tremorous quicksand of pre-packaged, spoon-fed opinion. Baldly stated, far too many of us are being schooled by folks who haven't the slightest idea what they're talking about. And, what's even worse, as more and more major media outlets are scooped up by the unfathomably wealthy, our ability -- let alone our opportunity -- to

separate the cement of responsible reportage from the quicksand of partisan propaganda will become ever more dangerously degraded.

As a rather public person, I have the opportunity of conversing with literally hundreds of people every week. While I would relish more chit-chat about baseball (my Dodgers are absolutely fantastic!), most of the conversations deal with political issues: with Obamacare, the state of the economy, the disfunctionality of Congress, foreign relations, the Middle East . . . you name it. Frequently, I find that these conversations, far from being an exchange of facts, impressions or ideas, are a boldfaced attempt to

ram a point of view down my throat; to prove that they are right and I am wrong. Just within the past week, I have been told in no uncertain terms that:

- President Obama's cancelling his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin was "an act of weakness";
- Obamacare is "forcing a lot of employers to go out of business";
- "With the likes of Filner, Weiner and Spitzer it's the Democrats, not the Republicans, who are anti-woman";
- If the government winds up being shut down, "it will be the President's fault";
- "Democrats want to keep unemployment high so that more and more voters will be beholden to them for food stamps";
- "The single-best way to expand the nation's economy is to slash spending."

Now, while intelligent people can agree to disagree -- and I for one do *not* agree with much of the above -- the thing that struck me in listening to these people is how many of them used precisely the same verbiage. When I asked, as an example, how slashing spending would create economic expansion, I was told that "in the real world, that's how things work." When asked for an instance when cutting federal expenditures led to economic revival, the response was a groaning silence. When it came to the issue of Obamacare causing many small businesses to shut their doors, I asked for further details; all I got in response was "It's happening all over America." With regards to Filner, Weiner, and Spitzer, I said that while I certainly agree that all three are undoubtedly reprobates, they, unlike such squeaky-clean politicians as Romney, McCain, Cantor and Rubio support a woman's right to choice, as well as equal pay for equal work. "They have severe shortcomings as men, not as members of the Democratic Party," I said. To this all I got back was the comment that "It's the Democrats who are anti-woman, not the Republicans."

Could it be that these folks are grounding their stands in the same partisan fact-free loam? You betcha. And what's more, the ground upon which they anchor their stand is even less secure than one might imagine.

According to a recent Farleigh Dickenson University [PublicMind survey](#) watching only Fox News makes one less informed than watching no news at all. In their study 1,185 respondents nationwide were asked about what news sources they consumed in the past week and then were asked a variety of questions about current political and economic events in the U.S. and abroad. On average, people were able to answer correctly 1.8 of 4 questions about international news, and 1.6 of 5 questions about domestic affairs. Researchers determined that someone who never watched the news would nonetheless be able to answer 1.22 out of 5 questions on domestic policy correctly. Unbelievably, those who got their information from Fox News were only able to answer 1.04 out of 5 correctly -- meaning that watching Fox makes you less well informed than watching no news at all. Now, in fairness, those who got most of their

information from MSNBC were scored only slightly higher (1.26 out of 5). At the top of the scale, the best informed were those who got their news either from NPR (1.51), Sunday talk shows (1.47) or the John Stewart Show (1.47).

In terms of international issues, NPR devotees again scored best -- 1.97 out of 4, while those getting news from Fox languished in last place at 1.08 out of 4. The survey concluded that " . . .those who watched no news -- answering questions by guessing or relying on existing knowledge -- fared far better than those who watched the most popular 24-hour cable news network (i.e. Fox News)."

Cable news, talk radio and most websites do have political slants. They are in business to entertain, keep their advertisers happy and their viewers/listener/readers engaged. If they can back up their opinions with facts, more power to them. However, in most cases, as they used to say on Fleet Street, "If it bleeds, it leads." Sensationalism and attack will generally win out over reason and fact. Regrettably, that is the nature of the beast.

However, if we are to have control of our destiny as a society and nation, we must strive to be informed; to seek fact instead of slant, to grapple with issues rather than regurgitate pre-digested opinions.

In short, we need to ground our stand . . . even if it does sound a bit kitsch.

©2013 Kurt F. Stone

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")

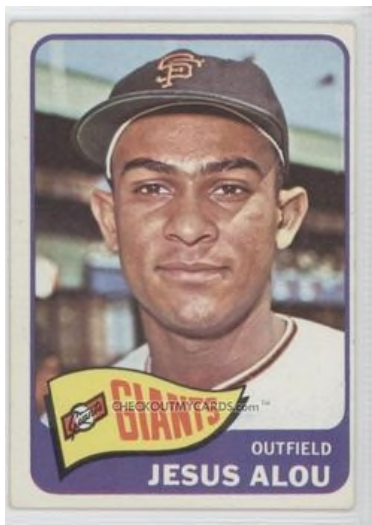


August 18, 2013

NAMING NAMES

Tennessee, can lay claim to an impressive list of people who, if not literally native to, at least did spend the majority of their lives in "The Volunteer State." Included in this list are such notables as:

- **Andrew Jackson** (1767-1845), "Old Hickory," the nation's 7th president;
- **Davey Crockett** (1786-1835): congressman and "King of the Wild Frontier";
- **Jack Daniel** (1850-1911): Originator of "Jack Daniels Distillery";
- **Adolph Ochs** (1858-1935), longtime publisher and owner of the *New York Times*;
- **Hattie Caraway** (1878-1950): the first woman elected to the United States Senate;
 - **Sgt. Alvin York** (1887-1964): the most decorated hero of World War I;
 - **Robert Penn Warren** (1905-1989): 3-time Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and poet;
 - **Morgan Freeman** (1937-): Movie star *par excellence*;
 - **Oscar Robertson** (1938-): Before Michael Jordan, there was "The Big O";
 - **Tina Turner** (1939-): one of the greatest singers of all time, and
 - **Quentin Tarantino** (1963-): Oscar-winning director/screenwriter.



And, as of the other day, perhaps the list should be expanded to include **Lu Ann Ballew**. "And who is Ballew?" you may well ask. She's the Tennessee Child

Support Magistrate who unilaterally decided to rename a seven-month old baby "Martin" because she objected to the parents' selection of "Messiah." Her reasoning? In her ruling she explained that "The word Messiah is a title and it's a title that has only been earned by one person and that person is Jesus Christ." Further, the magistrate added, "It could put him at odds with a lot of people and at this point he has no choice in what his name is." I guess she's not a baseball fan; otherwise she would have been familiar with Jesus, one of the three Alou brothers, who *were* the San Francisco Giants' outfield back in the early 1960s. Then too, what about the millions upon millions of Muslim men named "Mohammed?" I am not aware of a single Muslim *qadi* -- judge -- ruling that the use of the prophet's name was impermissible.

For those who think that Magistrate Ballew's ruling is just about the dumbest, most inane thing they've ever heard, it's good to remember that Tennessee was the state that gave birth to the ["Butler Act,"](#) which made it unlawful to teach evolution in any state-funded school. (*This infamous act, which led to the [Scopes Monkey Trial](#), was passed by the Sixty-Fourth General Assembly in 1925; the state didn't get around to repealing it until 1967.*)

While few -- if indeed, any -- readers of this blog might consider naming a child "Messiah," I doubt any of us would deny that right to someone else. "Democracy," an anonymous wag once noted, "gives everyone the inalienable right to act like a fool." And yet, as alien as the name might seem to many of us, the Social Security Administration's annual report of popular baby names shows that in 2012, "Messiah" was number four among the fastest-rising baby names. It is also listed as a perfectly accepted Hebrew name -- משיח (*pronounced "Mah-shee-akh"*) -- in Alfred J. Kolatch's authoritative *The Name Dictionary: Modern English and Hebrew Names*.

As a rabbi, I have officiated at probably 350-400 baby namings over the past 35 years. I can tell you that names go in cycles; at one point Jason, Adam, Jessica and Ashley were about as popular as you could get. Today, it's more like Aiden, Jayden, Bryce and Grayson. Among Jewish people, changing or Americanizing one's name is as common as putting milk in your tea. Dear old dad used to tell the joke, "*I met a man named Chayim Schitzpetzel. When I asked him what kind of a name that was, he told me he was thinking of changing it. 'To what?' I asked him. 'To Jacob Schitzpetzel . . .'*" Heck, the four of us went to court and became legally "Stoned" back in 1957. I wonder what would have happened if Lu Ann Ballew had been sitting on the bench; might she have denied our request and decreed that our new last name would henceforth be "Pebble?"

The Bobbies, Johnnies, Billies, Suzies and Janes of yesterday have been traded in. Why just in the sports pages of this morning's *Sun Sentinel*, I came across the following:

- Devonta Freeman: running back, Florida State University;

- Adarius Glanton: linebacker, Florida Atlantic University;
- Drico Johnson: defensive back, University of Central Florida;
- Cre'von LeBlanc: nickelback, Florida Atlantic University;
- Demetruce McNeal, safety, Auburn University; and
- Barkevious Mingo, linebacker, Cleveland Browns.

Lu Ann Ballew's objection to naming a baby "Messiah" had nothing to do with aural aesthetics; it was a decision based solely on her personal religious druthers . . . and a callous, blinkered disregard for the Constitution. In Hebrew, one would say that she'd committed -- מוחלטת חוצפה מעשה -- "An act of utter gall." Never mind that her ruling will eventually be overturned; it's the mere fact that there are people out there -- and in positions of legal authority -- who see no problem or issue in taking a machete to our First Amendment rights when *their* religious scruples come into play. Ironically, Lu Ann Ballew, who is likely against government involvement in the lives of all Americans, is herself, a great example of that species known as *judex activist* -- "judicial activist." In reality, the term has lost all meaning. For of late, branding someone an "activist judge" says next to nothing about judicial philosophy. If you agree with a judge, he/she is a "strict constructionist." If you disagree, he/she is a "judicial activist."

Admittedly, there have been times when judges have denied plaintiffs the right to legally change their name to such inane cognomens as "F**k Censorship," "Steffi Owned Slave," and "Rejoice ChristIsKing." In the latter case, [the judge argued](#) that allowing certain names could infringe on the religious liberties of others, and he offered the example of a court employee forced to call out a name with a religious message -- such as "Rejoice ChristIsKing." Of course, this ruling -- which comes from a New York Court, is not binding on Tennessee. They have their own brand of *mishagoss*.

Parents have been saddling newborns with memorable, oftentimes wacky names for a long long time. Frank Zappa named his children "Dweezil," "Moon Unit," "Diva Thin Muffin," and "Ahmet." Sylvester Stallone named his son "Sage Moonblood." Irish singer/songwriter Bob Geldhof named his daughter "Fifi Trixibelle," magician Penn Gillette named his kid "Moxie Crimefighter," and my favorite, actor Rob Morrow, named his daughter "Tu" -- "Tu Morrow" got it? Then again, how many of us went to school with someone named "Candy Cane," "Mary Christmas" or "Crystal Ball?"

Remember, Democracy is the inalienable right to make a fool of yourself -- or to saddle kids with moronic names that will no doubt earn them their share of jibes, pinches and snubs. But no one -- least of all a Child Support Magistrate -- has the right to tell anyone what they may -- or may not -- name that child.

Gee, I wonder if Judge Ballew has a child named "Cat . . .?"

©2013 Kurt F. Stone

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



August 25, 2013

VIN SCULLY: SHAKESPEARE WITH A MIC

Benjamin Franklin famously opined that "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." Well, I'm here to tell you that his list wasn't complete. For indeed, if you are a Southern Californian there is a third eternal verity: that Vin Scully, the voice of the Los Angeles Dodgers, is the greatest announcer in the history of sports. Period. And, *mirabile dictu*, this past Friday,



the Dodgers announced that the 85 year old Scully will be returning to the broadcast booth for a record 65th season in 2014. For Dodger fans -- indeed for all Angelenos -- Scully is much, much more than the voice of the Dodgers; he is, without question, the most beloved citizen of that place Dorothy Parker once called "72 suburbs in search of a city." When, several years ago, team owners

asked fans to vote for their all-time favorite Dodger, guess who won? Hint: it was neither Sandy Koufax nor Don Drysdale. It was L.A.'s favorite redhead.

Vin Scully has been with the Dodgers longer than Connie Mack managed the Philadelphia Athletics, and longer than Joe Paterno coached the Nittany Lions. In fact, the only person ever to serve a single sports team longer is another Dodger: Tommy Lasorda, who signed his first contract in 1948 -- one year before Vin came on board.

I first heard the voice of Vin Scully on April 18, 1958 -- the first game the Dodgers ever played in Los Angeles. They beat the San Francisco (formerly New York) Giants 6-5. Carl Erskine defeated Al Worthington; Clem Labine got the save and third baseman Dick Gray was the first Dodger to homer at the cavernous Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. I remember being absolutely mesmerized by the dulcet tones of the Dodger announcer. It was as if he was talking to me and me alone. By the end of that first season -- in which they finished a miserable 7th, 23 games behind the Milwaukee Braves -- I had my own radio. Since then, I would estimate that I have heard Vin Scully call nearly 8,500 games, which means that next to my late father, his is the male voice I've heard most often in my life.



As any Dodger fan knows, Vin Scully does far more than merely announce a game. He is a walking, talking and breathing baseball encyclopedia. His memories are priceless; his stories are sensational. He not only tells mostly first-hand stories of the past 70-plus years of baseball, but also, when appropriate, tidbits about world and Broadway history, literature and music. At the same time, this 85-year old might also remind listeners that AC/DC does "Hell's Bells" and that "Enter Sandman" is by Metallica. He does all this while calling a baseball game. And best of all, unlike just about any other announcer, he knows when to be silent. I guess the greatest proof of the Scully's genius is that almost everyone attending games at Chavez Ravine (Dodger Stadium) is listening to him on the radio . . . even though the game is going on right in front of them.

Over the course of his career, Vin has called three perfect games, 25 no-hitters, 25 World Series and 12 All-Star Games. Among the iconic moments he has called:

- **Don Larson's perfect game in the 1956 World Series:** *Got him! The greatest game ever pitched in baseball history, by Don Larsen! A no hitter, a perfect game in a World Series ... Never in the history of the game has it ever happened in a World Series ... And so our hats off to Don Larsen – no runs, no hits, no errors, no walks, no base runners. The final score: The Yankees, two runs, five hits and no errors. The Dodgers: No runs, no hits, no errors ... in fact, nothing at all. This was a day to remember, this was a ballgame to remember and above all, the greatest day in the life of Don Larsen. And the most dramatic and well-pitched*

- ballgame in the history of baseball. ... Mel (Allen) you can put this in your ring and wear it a long time.
- [Sandy Koufax's perfect game, September 9, 1965:](#) *And Sandy Koufax, whose name will always remind you of strikeouts, did it with a flourish. He struck out the last six consecutive batters. So when he wrote his name in capital letters in the record books, that "K" stands out even more than the O-U-F-A-X.*
 - **Hank Aaron's 715th home run on April 8, 1974:** *What a marvelous moment for baseball; what a marvelous moment for Atlanta and the state of Georgia; what a marvelous moment for the country and the world. A black man is getting a standing ovation in the Deep South for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol. And it is a great moment for all of us, and particularly for Henry Aaron. ... And for the first time in a long time, that poker face in Aaron shows the tremendous strain and relief of what it must have been like to live with for the past several months.*

Vin Scully is more than an icon; more than a living legend. He is, simply stated, the best there ever has been. Scully is to baseball announcing what Shakespeare was to English literature, what Bach was to music, Einstein to theoretical physics or Sir Charles Chaplin to cinema -- both *sui generis* and nonpareil. Scully has taught baseball -- both the game and the "game within the game" to countless millions over the past 65 years. He has been both a brilliant constant and a thorough-going gentleman in an ever-changing world where far too many idols have feet of clay. To my ear, he sounds just as young, vital and resonant in August 2013 as he did that first time I heard him back in April 1958.

When Sir Charles Chaplin died on December 25, 1977, I felt a tremendous sense of loss. Although I never met him, I had seen just about every film he'd ever made, and read every book ever written by or about him. He was -- and still is -- to my way of thinking, *the* greatest genius in the history of cinema. I remember reading dozens upon dozens of eulogies delivered by the great men and women of his profession; heartfelt and wonderfully literate sentiments by the likes of René Clair, Lord Olivier, Jacques Tati and Federico Fellini. The simplest -- and yet the most touching -- was spoken by Bob Hope, whose words best sum up not only the life, times and achievements of "the little fellow," but Vin Scully as well:

"We were fortunate to have lived in his time."

Thank you Vin for being the third eternal verity. We are so very fortunate to be living in *your* time.

©2013 Kurt F. Stone

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



August 31, 2013

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Moments ago, the White House announced that although President Obama has concluded that the U.S. "should take military action" against the Syrian regime



for alleged use of chemical weapons, he will nonetheless seek authorization from Congress before taking any such action. In his announcement, the president said he had the authority to act on his own, but believed it is important for the country to have a debate. This is a bit of welcome news for those of us who have been holding our collective breath. I for one congratulate the president for inviting Congress to participate in a national dialogue, but fear the debate could easily devolve into yet another exercise in partisan political posturing. I can envision many of those who bought into Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction rationale and gladly voted for war in Iraq, questioning whether Assad really gassed his own people and then voting against military action in Syria -- and for no better reason than that this is Obama, not Bush. Make no mistake about it: such a partisan political

free-for-all would be a tragedy of epic proportions. For an intelligent, purposive

debate is absolutely essential. We are in desperate need of a dialogue which examines every piece, every player, every possible strategy on the international political chessboard.

Geopolitical strategist [Robert D. Kaplan](#) has noted that " . . . each war is a unique universe unto its own and thus comparisons with previous wars, while useful, may also prove illusory." This is a crucial point to keep in mind for the upcoming debate. In debating what is to be done about Syria, the haunting spectre of wars past and present -- Kosovo, Gulf War I, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya -- each will no doubt lurk about the periphery; each promising to provide great guidance for shaping our future actions. But as Kaplan correctly notes, each war is unique. In the case of Libya, as an example, Russia, China and the Arab League gave its blessing; they all wanted Colonel Gadaffi taken out. In the case of Syria, the League has maintained a steadfast silence; Russia and China are on the side of Assad. In Kosovo, replacing Slobdan Milosevic with elements of the Kosovo Liberation Army wasn't nearly as risky as replacing Assad with . . . with whom . . . Muslimist Jihadists? Sunnis spoiling for revenge against Alawites? Irani-sponsored Shiites? Removing Milosevic wasn't about to destabilize the Southern Balkans; striking against Assad could easily destabilize the entire Middle East, thereby further imperiling Israel and acting as an even greater goad to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

It is both good and reasonable to question why President Obama is so intent on taking some kind of military action against Assad's Syria. Is it solely because Assad has allegedly killed 1,429 Syrians -- including 426 children -- with chemical weapons? Hell, he's been killing Syrians by the tens of thousands with *conventional* weapons for nearly two years. Is President Obama's decision to take military action the result of his being caught on the horns of a self-made rhetorical dilemma? Remember, he did draw a rhetorical "red line" in the sand some months ago - a line which has now been crossed.

The general consensus is that Syrian President Bashar al--Assad ordered the use of chemical weapons against his enemies. The problem I have is trying to figure out why in the world he would do it. He was not losing the civil war. In fact, he had achieved some limited military success recently. Like everyone else on the planet, he heard President Obama declare that the use of chemical weapons would cross a red line. Yet Assad did it.

Or did he? Part of the national debate should include asking that question. Is it possible the rebels staged the attack in order to draw in an attack on al-Assad? Could the pictures have been faked? Could a third party, hoping to bog the United States down in another war, have done it? The answers to these questions

-- although potentially illusive -- are important, because they guide the U.S. and its allies' response. The official explanation could be absolutely true--or not.

I for one truly do not know what we should do. I for one am slightly wary of those who at this point are solidly, unreservedly behind taking -- or not taking -- military action against Syria. This international game of chess is so complex, so fraught with danger, that utter certainty -- at least at this pre-national debate point -- is a path which leads to fool's mate.

What is to be done?

I for one am conflicted. At present -- and unless someone can present me with a strongly compelling argument -- I really cannot see a great reason for taking military action. "A shot across the bow?" What a poor metaphor; when you fire across a ship's bow, you inflict no damage. Rather, you're trying to make a point by scaring the daylights out of the enemy.

But this assumes that the enemy is rational . . .

The British writer Ian Leslie has noted that some issues are so complex that they can understandably lead to feelings of ambivalence. "Sometimes it's best to have conflicted feelings," Leslie wrote in a recent essay. F. Scott Fitzgerald believed that a capacity for ambivalence indicated intellectual ability: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Even Freud saw emotional ambivalence as an intrinsic part of the human condition.

"What Is to Be Done?" isn't just the title of this essay. It is also the title of a seminal -- though very poorly written -- 19th century novel by the Russian writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889). I remember reading the novel back in the mid-1960s when I spent nearly a year reading as much Russian lit as I could stomach -- Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Gorki, Tolstoy Sholokhov. Despite containing some great progressive ideas about freedom, equality and women's rights, Chernyshevsky's didactic novel was poorly written and had a hopelessly meandering plot. Even Chernyshevsky himself admitted in the introduction to *What Is to Be Done?* that he wasn't that a very good novelist. To



this day I remember what a trial it was getting through the entire novel, and what a revelation it was contemplating the author's idealism. In other words, I was both conflicted and ambivalent about *What Is to Be Done?*

Just as I am about Syria.

So you tell me: what *is* to be done?

©2013 Kurt F. Stone