Hope as a Moral Hazard

Anna Simons
April 22, 2014

http://warontherocks.com/2014/04/hope-as-a-moral-hazard/

Two weeks ago, I heard myself say "hope is a moral hazard" in response to someone else invoking the truism that "hope is not a strategy." The setting was a discussion with graduate students focused on terrorism, non-proliferation, and related subjects. These were not my students, so they didn't really know me, and I'd been asked what the U.S. should do when good people elsewhere are stuck in systems that they, and we, don't like.

At the time, I was explaining the "sovereignty solution" rubric which ties together those two quintessentially American principles of "to each his own" and "don't tread on me." The example I had used, which provoked the question, was: say a population prefers Sharia to the rule of Western law. The U.S. government should stop wagging its collective finger, insisting that Sharia is bad. Indeed, if we stopped hectoring other people to give up their conception of what works best for them, we would be taking a lot of the sting – as in most of the violence – out of anti-Americanism. But does such a hands-off approach mean everyone everywhere will always be happy or feel sufficiently free? Of course not.

On further reflection, I would now say that, like so many things, hope is probably best thought of as a double-edged sword. Our offering others hope can work *for* people. But it can also cut against them. And too often these days the latter ends up being the case. For instance, didn't political agitators in Darfur hope the world would come riding to the rescue once the government started cracking down on innocent civilians? Didn't Syrian rebels expect to receive help as soon as President Obama and others publicly condemned Bashar al-Assad? Just like Ukrainians must now hope NATO will do something to assist their defense. The list goes on – which is both tragic and ironic since the international community, the European Union, and even a unitary actor like the U.S. have proved time and again that they cannot, and therefore should not, be counted on. This is what I mean by saying hope is a moral hazard (borrowing, but then somewhat twisting Alan Kuperman's argument that the promise of armed humanitarian intervention can irresponsibly encourage people to rebel).

Because it is as dangerous as it is paralyzing to think that help is coming, people who don't like their government, their fellow citizens, or their plight would be well advised to recognize that they have only themselves to depend on. It turns out rebels who commit to re-making their world on their own also generally do better in the mid-run.

Will, grit, and determination always matter. Think Israel (circa 1948), Eritrea over the course of 30 years of war, and Paul Kagame's Rwanda (circa 1994). Going it alone in the face of tremendous odds granted each of these countries the makings of a promising future, something that the Republic of South Sudan – the world's newest country, and a chronic recipient of far too much aid – already doesn't have. Of course, South Sudan also lost a seminal leader when John

Garang died in a helicopter crash (see: Pakistan in the wake of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's premature death, or the Philippines after the unexpected loss of Ramon Magsaysay).

But leaving aside the question of whether a strong leader or strong institutions is more important, something else we see with Israel, Eritrea, and Rwanda is that no matter how instrumental self-reliance is for literal nation-building and instilling a sense of national pride, too much pride can also be toxic. Let a group win something on its own in the face of everyone else's apathy, and its members are bound to feel self-righteous. Unfortunately, self-righteousness represents the darker side of hope. While arrogance and a holier-than-thou attitude may be essential during the fight, they all too quickly turn detrimental after, especially since those steeped in self-righteousness too seldom feel the need to express empathy for others.

Consequently, the best approach to helping rebels help the people they claim to represent may be to avoid offering rebels *anything* – at least initially. This includes encouragement. If the regime they are toppling is truly rotten, and the rebels are truly organized, they should be able to prove their worth relatively quickly. Then, but only *then*, would it make sense to extend them recognition, followed by technical assistance. Not only would prudential recognition be the most useful way to help restore stability, but offering assistance as soon as systems are in place to equitably distribute services could help prevent later pathologies.

In other words, with no promises made, wannabe rebels would be forced to have to think long and hard, and plan and prepare, before they act. Two corollaries to timely but merit-based assistance are: we should never assist rebels or insurgents simply because they are the enemies of our enemies; that never works out well. But nor should we assist rebels in the hopes that we will gain something from the arrangement later on. "Empowering" others means *we* cede power. The aim instead should always be to side with those who behave responsibly, and are capable of being held to account by those they seek to govern – the very same principles of responsibility and accountability that should be applied to all sitting heads of state.

At first glance, what I have just described might suggest a bit of a catch-22. After all, how does anyone prove their worth simply by making a number of promises? But here my response would be: exactly! For instance, did Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress really deserve tens of millions of dollars?

Washington routinely backs – or worse, compels those in uniform to have to work with – too many warlords and other power-mongers whose expedient worth comes back to haunt us. Again, we would do far better in the long run if we chose to only side with those who have demonstrated their organizational aptitude and moral rectitude, and who equitably deliver services and protect people regardless of their religious, tribal, ethnic, or political affiliations (which is the essence of good government). Otherwise, by encouraging oppressed people to think that all they need to do is rise up and the West (or we) will help them win, only sets them up for slaughter.

This is why, from certain angles, Washington's recent practices aren't just maddening but unconscionable. As was reported several days ago, not even those in the White House can agree on whom to back in Syria. Yet, the Administration openly seeks Assad's demise *and* sends arms

to some of his opponents. Similarly, at the same time that Washington promises it won't send troops to Ukraine, it still pledges weapons. To any sentient person (to include Putin) that splits an impossible hair. Do we want the people we are arming to win, or don't we? This is not to suggest that we should declare war on Russia *or* send military assistance to the Ukraine. I cite this example simply as an instance of our hypocrisy.

Unfortunately, the degree to which policy makers say all sorts of things and then act, don't act, and/or hedge the U.S.'s bets isn't just hypocritical; it is corrosive. It suggests to those of a conspiratorial bent that decision makers must be operating according to some hidden agenda. One current suspicion: the Administration is going out of its way to not only weaken the United States' image, but its role overall. For a less sinister but no less cynical view, there is the self-interested military-intelligence-industrial complex, which the idea of a "Long War" suits just a little too perfectly.

However, most citizens, to include many who have served in the military, would no doubt prefer to believe that those in charge of making policy *do* have a plan for keeping the United States strong and safe, and that their hearts (if not their pocketbooks) are in the right place. Still, I worry. Optimism has always served "we the people" well. In many regards, it is the most effective weapon in our arsenal. But even in our case, domestically speaking, optimism needs to be anchored in reality. In point of fact, it has only really worked for*,* rather than against, a coherent foreign policy when it has been coupled with clear and proven principles.

One glaring problem today is that we have no principled foreign policy. Instead, we have the opposite. We promise help, make hollow threats, draw red lines, and then rarely follow through. A second problem is that the more we tempt others to endanger themselves through our offers of hope, the more intractable we make their situations. Third, our inconsistency and inconstancy undo our best intentions. That renders *us* the moral hazard.

Add this up, and we owe it not only to future generations of Americans who will have to live with the legacy we leave them, but also to all oppressed people, to re-think how and when we proffer assistance. We should wake up to the conflicted nature of the messages we send. We should also shed our current hubris about "shaping" others. Or, for those who insist that this is what the U.S. needs to do, at least turn this conceit and its timeline upside down: let non-Americans shape themselves. And then, if there is merit in what rebels, insurgents, or others prove able to do, we should grant them full-fledged recognition followed by the timely delivery of whatever technical advice they seek.

Anna Simons is a Professor of Defense Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School. She is the author of Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone *and* The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*, and is most recently the co-author of* The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security*. The views expressed are the author's and do not reflect those of the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy, or the Naval Postgraduate School.*