

Defining Civilization Down

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Modern civilization and its Judeo-Christian precepts insist that all men depend on one another to sustain our common aspirations and discipline our common failings.

Civilization is made possible only by measuring all humans in any society with a single standard, which itself is also based on our shared human nature.

Defining civilization down creates a permanent moral third world by permitting the worst actors to pass muster while excluding the best from the conversation.

Distinguished scholars, friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be with you today to give the 2024 Russell Kirk Lecture. I'm deeply grateful to The Heritage Foundation and Alliance Defending Freedom for the invitation.

Like Edmund Burke in his own age, Mr. Kirk tried to convince his countrymen that there were truths and virtues—ancient truths and trustworthy virtues—worth guarding and handing on to our children. In this vein, Mr. Kirk expounded “six canons of conservative thought:” tradition and convention, transcendence and piety, political prudence, and ordered liberty.¹ Today I will focus on the relation between convention and ordered liberty and the one virtue without which neither is possible: courage.

Domestically, both order and liberty are threatened by changing conventions that measure conduct with two standards, one for the majority, and especially

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1340>

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the white middle and working classes, and another for minority groups. Abroad, order and liberty are threatened when one standard is expected of the United States and another of other nations or groups. In the Holy Land and Arab world, one standard is applied to a single nation, Israel, which is held to unmeetable standards in its battle with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, while Israel's neighbors are routinely held to much lower standards that regard terrorism and savagery as par for the course or even "necessary."

The result of this double standard globally is to define civilization down. It creates a permanent moral third world by permitting the worst actors to pass muster while excluding the best from the conversation. It permits, for instance, a court with judges from my native Somalia and from China to pass judgment on Israel, the Middle East's sole democracy.

What's at Stake?

It is not always possible to get a second chance in life. The West failed the first time to protect the Jews of Europe, and the Holocaust was the result. October 7 is our second chance.

Yet a new normal is emerging wherein Israel is seen as the sole aggressor and Jews worldwide as the *real* problem. We must reply: "This is not normal, it's not true, and it won't form any part of our moral conventions and foreign policies." Antisemitism is one of the oldest conspiracy theories. We must root it out of our lands and sometimes also out of ourselves.

I'll begin domestically, where I find the source of our current foreign policy weakness. Then I'll move to identify three international arenas wherein we choose to hold ourselves to impossible standards while allowing others to come to the table seemingly without scrutiny. Then I'll speak to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the same terms.

Finally, I'll offer no specific policy advice except to practice taking a courageous disposition toward what we already know to be true. It sounds quaint at first, but I believe we must begin simply by taking courage and thereby move toward morally clear, informed, and therefore consistent politics. Domestically, we'd act in order to save our civilization from descending into tribal war; abroad, in the hope never to allow the horrors of the Holocaust to be repeated.

Domestic Double Measures

I came to Washington, D.C., in September of 2006. For my own safety, I had left the Netherlands where I had lived since 1992 and served as a

Member of Parliament. Those who threatened me and continue to do so today are a subset of Muslims inspired by a mix of ideology and religion called Political Islam or Islamism.

I said back then that Muslims in Europe were not held to the same standards to which the Europeans—who welcomed us by the hundreds of thousands—held themselves. I explained to Americans that this lowering of standards to appease Arabs and Muslims was racism dressed up as compassion and disdain masquerading as kindness. It was moral confusion, and it was dangerous—suicidally so.

I looked up to America, and particularly to many Americans. I thought they recognized that Islamism had been fashioned into a modern totalitarian ideology. The devastating attacks of 9/11 had happened only five years earlier. I was told that America was still a young, strong, vibrant nation. She had the spirit to fight and vanquish whoever dared attack her.

After all, America had led the struggle against National Socialism and later Communism, the deadliest ideology in the second half of the 20th century. She had won resoundingly—not only in the corridors of power and through diplomacy and market capitalism, but also on the battlefield of ideas. I therefore assumed that America would readily recognize a totalitarian ideology for what it was even if it shrouded itself in religious garb.

Little did I know that the double standards that I had been complaining about in Europe in fact originated in America along with their heated and bitter debates that to this day remain unresolved. It even goes as far back as the 20th century discussions on the attempts at moral equivalence between the Soviet Union and the United States.

I borrowed the title of this speech from the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who published his classic essay “Defining Deviancy Down” in 1993.² In that essay, he concluded that the amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels the community can “afford to recognize” and that, accordingly, we have been redefining deviancy so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized and also quietly raising the “normal” level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by any earlier standard. The reasons, he said, were altruistic, opportunistic, and denial, but the result was the same: an acceptance of mental pathology, broken families, and crime as a fact of life.

In that same summer, Charles Krauthammer responded to Senator Moynihan with a speech at AEI. He acknowledged Senator Moynihan’s point but said that was only one side of the story.³ Deviancy was defined down for one category of society: the lower classes and black communities. For the middle classes that are overwhelmingly white and Christian, the

opposite was true. Deviancy was in fact defined up, stigmatizing and criminalizing behavior that was previously regarded as normal.

In other words, there was a double standard at work.

Krauthammer reckoned that this double standard makes us feel good. A society must feel that it is policing its norms by combating deviancy. Having given up fighting the real thing, we can't give up the fight.

This double standard of defining deviancy up and down maps onto a later trend I saw in public life when I served in the Parliament of the Netherlands, summed up as "equality for us, culture for them." If "youths" of immigrant families would harass women on the street, it was "part of their culture." When a Dutchman discouraged his daughter from dating such "youths," he was termed a "racist."

Double Measuring Abroad

America's troubles now contribute to the spread of double measuring abroad. Here are three examples.

- Eco warriors like to block roads in Britain, vandalize art in our museums, and harass our energy workers at sea. But China, which is regularly opening new coal power plants, gets a free pass. There are no such protests against China's energy policy in China itself because they would be forcibly suppressed and none in the West because climate activists want to villainize authorities in their own nations while avoiding offense to the leader of international socialism.
- When it comes to human rights, every country could do better. But if you follow mainstream news, you might be excused for believing that the greatest human rights abuses occur in the United States rather than, say, in Iran where the population is kept in theocratic submission. For us, the bar is now set so high we can never hope to reach it. For them, it is set low enough that they can never fall beneath it. In November 2023, Iran hosted the U.N. Human Rights Council's meeting in Geneva.
- Closer to the bone is Cultural Marxism. According to the logic of intersectionality, "white silence is white violence," but white speech is also "a form of violence." For white Americans, both silence and speech are potentially "violence," but actual physical violence committed by black Americans or selected minorities is a form of legitimate protest

or “speech.” In reply to the massacre of Israelis on October 7, one BLM-sympathetic journalist wrote: “What did y’all think decolonization meant? Vibes? Papers? Essays? Losers.”⁴

The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

The application of moral double standards is seen at its most dramatic when it comes to the now 70-year-old Arab–Jewish conflict. Consistently, defining deviancy up for Jews and Israel and down for Arabs and Muslims is a form of moral confusion that has led to persistent strategic and policy failures. This conflict has become a crucible for at least three false assumptions.

- First, we are told that if Israel continues to pursue her mission to destroy Hamas, then Israel will create the next generation of Islamists and terrorists, not just in the Middle East but across the globe. Therefore, Israel should agree to a cease-fire and hold to it even if, as would certainly be the case, the other side does not.

The assumption is false. The overwhelming evidence of the last 75 years is that Islamist extremism is unaffected by what Israel does or fails to do. The extremists are created in the classrooms, sitting rooms, and neighborhoods of Muslim and Arab countries, in madrassas and mosques, many of which are half a world away from Israel. Since 9/11, we have also seen these centers of indoctrination sprout up in the foreign-funded mosques, madrassas, and Islamic centers across Europe and the United States.

- Second, we are told that what Prime Minister Netanyahu has done or failed to do was the cause of Hamas’s savage attacks and is now standing in the way of peace. By casting Netanyahu as the belligerent, uncompromising, democracy-undermining monster, we shift attention away from the core issue, which is the belligerent, uncompromising Palestinian intransigence backed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Since 1947, the Arabs have remained fixed in their determination to eliminate the state of Israel, in part by preventing peace from ever coming about. Were the failed peace attempts in 1973, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2000, and 2008 all the fault of Bibi Netanyahu? Was no Arab agency involved? Take the Oslo Accords and their follow-on at Camp David

in 2000. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin offered “a separate Palestinian entity short of a state” and an agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. PLO leader Yasser Arafat left the negotiating table.

Washington and London are currently pushing a two-state solution in response to the October 7 attacks. If such a “solution” were implemented, it would continue the pattern of dysfunction and lead to the next eruption of deadly violence. When terrorists get rewarded with a state, terrorism becomes a tool of political persuasion. The same kinds of terrorism will recur, which will invite Israel to retaliate, which will result in more demands being met.

- Third, we are told that the classic human dynamic of war and peace does not apply to this conflict. The standard dynamic is that the winner takes all so that a lasting peace can occur. That logic has never been applied to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Up until 1967, the conflict was called the Arab–Israel War. Israel defeated the Arab countries in the Six-Day War and again in the Yom Kippur War six years later. At that point, the name of the war was changed to the Israel–Palestinian conflict, and the territories Israel had acquired in defending itself against aggression were declared to be “occupied” and therefore illegitimate. If in war there is no winner and no truce holds, then peace can never prevail.

Civilization Defined Down

October 7, 2023, illustrated the swift descent from civilization into barbarism. The threat always lingers under the surface and in our hearts, but on that day, the heinous acts themselves were manifested in the massacre of innocent, unarmed, and totally unprepared civilians. These were young people at a music festival, many of them peaceniks. Family members were shot, stabbed, and mutilated in front of one another. Babies were shot, beheaded, and burned. Similar things were done to the elderly. Women were raped (reportedly, even as corpses). Homes were burned.

And the perpetrators reveled in their acts. Their GoPro cameras were set to record. They uploaded the grim footage to various online platforms, for they knew large audiences awaited that barbaric footage.

One terrorist called his parents to boast about just killing 10 Jews. “MashaAllah,”⁵ they said. Celebrations ensued, not only by Palestinians but also by many Arabs, Muslims, and fellow travelers on Western university

campuses. Top university administrators displayed a shocking level of moral confusion in response to campus events celebrating the horrors of October 7, calling for the elimination of the Jewish state. Who lives between “the river and the sea” after all? Famously, the three Women of the Ivies could not even take courage before Congress simply to say “This is not who we are. We condemn this.”

The ensuing demonization of Israel for waging what is historically a standard siege and the relentless calls for a cease-fire have followed. These calls have been so effective that now Israel’s great allies in the U.K. and the U.S. are twisting Israel’s arm to concede.

Even without the appeasement of a complete cease-fire, we know full well that it is only a matter of time before Hamas and her helpers reorganize and repeat the atrocities of October 7. We know it because this has been Hamas’s pattern: Attack, provoke a retaliation, complain of disproportionality; then acquire the world’s sympathy, a negotiated cease-fire, aid, and the time to plan the next attack.

The pattern of Palestinian misconduct that we have allowed ourselves to get accustomed to and even become desensitized to can be seen in the series of events beginning in 1947 when the Palestinians sabotaged the U.N. partition plan. With the help and incitement of the major Arab powers of the day, they went to war in 1948. They lost that war—a loss that was never fully accepted by the Arab world.

On 6 September 1970, their proxies hijacked international commercial flights. Later that month, the Black September group attempted to overthrow the Jordanian government. Then in 1972, the same group carried out the Munich Olympics massacre.

In 1994, Hamas killed around 55 Israelis and injured over 150 in an effort to derail the peace process. They stated that these attacks were a part of jihad against Israel’s “occupation.” Hamas eventually became the voice of the hard-liners and finally of many mainstream Palestinians and Arabs. In 2000, they rejected the Camp David Accords and started an Intifada.

The international community has been treated to the routine reneging on or sabotaging of peace deals that are near completion. Funds from organizations (whether UNRWA,⁶ UNIFIL,⁷ or another useful international laundering acronym) are used in the development of suicide terrorist attacks, which often involve the training and use of children. Civilians are used as human shields and tools of the propaganda war. At school, the children are taught to kill and die. Palestinian leaders raise money from pariah states and acquire weapons, stratagems, and expertise to continue waging war even as these leaders are at the table pretending to be engaging

in peace talks. Overall, they engage systematically in deception, double-speak, and duplicity.

Decades of deviant behavior have been “normalized” by making it all seem necessary. Endless excuses are made on behalf of the Palestinians (“the ‘occupation’ is unbearable”) or to legitimize their excuses for norm violations (“Israel makes them do it”). Throughout this conflict, Palestinians and their backers have been denied agency. Yet somehow they are still seen as active “freedom fighters.” The story suggests that if only Israel would grant every Palestinian concession, then the entire Arab world would become democracy-loving, rainbow flag-waving, Jew-hugging Swedes.

Arab Agency

Nevertheless, there are rays of hope. Within a few hours of the October 7 massacre, the Moroccan regime condemned the violence against civilians. The UAE called the event “barbaric and heinous” and demanded that Hamas immediately release the hostages.⁸ This is not nothing, and it shows that one source of the rot—Gulf funds for indoctrination of Palestinian children—may one day dry up.

The United States should help this along by applying the same standards of conduct to Muslims and Jews, the same standards of statecraft to Arab nations, Iran, and Israel. Regimes like the UAE’s need to be helped and rewarded. Arabs have agency. When they exercise it well, they deserve our gratitude, our respect, and possibly our trade deals.

Conversely, when they use that agency to promote the death cult of political Islam, they must be condemned and shunned. Arabs (and Persians) must be treated as adults who can make rational choices, not as moral primitives or squabbling children who just need a little longer in time-out and a bit of creative appeasement to make them behave responsibly.

Up from Moral Chaos

Let me summarize what has been said above before I conclude. Defining deviancy up for Israel and down for her enemies has brought us into the moral confusion and almighty mess that is unfolding today in the Middle East.

What we must immediately do is to support Israel’s righteous mission to defend her security. We must defend her from information warfare and hostile propaganda. We must seek to sustain a majority that understands that Israel is on the threshold of being destroyed by implacable enemies.

We must seek to persuade young Americans of these things. We must not frustrate or sabotage Israel's effort to achieve the full destruction of Hamas and to embark on the long and hard journey of the de-Hamasification of the hearts and minds of the Palestinian people.

We must do this not only for Israel, but also as an act of charity to the Arabs. For there is little more dehumanizing than being told that some good and moral standards apply to *us* but that *you* don't need to bother because we have a lower standard for your kind.

If we abandon the idea of equal moral standards for all on certain essential elements of human conduct, civilization will descend swiftly into barbarism, and many great achievements will be lost: Many more October 7s would follow. Embracing a common minimum standard of civilization is the only way forward. Fortunately for America, her biblical heritage and history together dispose her to do just that—if she only looks to them for wisdom and takes the courage to follow it.

“Take Courage” as Political Wisdom

“A decline in courage,” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said in 1978, “may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today.” The leaders, he said “get tongue-tied and paralyzed” when they deal “with aggressors and international terrorists.” He then asked rhetorically whether one must point out that “from ancient times a decline in courage has been considered the first symptom of the end.”

Everything eventually ends, but not all things must end in failure. History, as I said above, does not often give second chances, but since October 7, we now have a second chance to do right by the Jewish people in Israel.

Recently, I have become a Christian, and I'm learning what my newfound faith means. I've benefited from the Christian teaching about grace, our great second chance that is a free gift from God. Understanding that we are all sinners has seasoned my sense of what is politically possible with humility, but it also gives me hope that no one and no nation is irredeemably lost. In my search for truth, I have learned from the Hebrew Scriptures written by those Pope John Paul II called my “older siblings in the faith.” This all has caused me to think about the historic connection between faith and politics in America, especially in relation to domestic and foreign policy.

America, in G. K. Chesterton's words, is a “nation with the soul of a church.”¹⁰ Our biblical heritage once gave America the courage to stand with Europe against Naziism and Fascism. Yet America's participation in World War II was slow to solidify. Winston Churchill cajoled Franklin Roosevelt

for two years before the tumultuous events of December 1941 made full American involvement politically possible.

Roosevelt's personal envoy then announced America's intention to stand for civilization against barbarism. After a dinner hosted by Churchill, the U.S. envoy quoted from the book of Ruth: "Whither thou goest I will go, and whither thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." He added "even to the end"—at which point Churchill wept. I doubt Roosevelt knew precisely *how* he would meet this obligation when he made it, but he had finally mustered the courage to promise it in good faith.

Help us now to define civilization right for everyone by taking the courage to say to Israel: "Where you go I will go," with the courage of a still vital "creedal nation," for the sake of the nation that came into existence to protect the Jews from a second Holocaust and in the hope of lasting peace and brotherhood with the Arab nations. Courage is not all that will be needed, but without it no peace convention will ever allow Jews and Arabs to order their own liberty in the Holy Land.

Modern civilization and the Judeo-Christian precepts it embraces insist that all men are equal, free, and dependent on one another for sustaining our common aspirations and disciplining our common failings. "Civilization" is another word for the greatest levels of cooperation between near-strangers that the world has ever witnessed, made possible only by measuring all humans in any society with a single standard, which itself is also based on our shared human nature.

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Endnotes

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