

Policy Watch: Bush at 'High Noon'

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A few days ago, I watched once again the Western classic "High Noon," starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. I'd seen it on previous occasions, but what struck me now is how the story in this 1952 movie bears an uncanny resemblance to contemporary international relations since the war in Iraq.

At the beginning of the movie, Will Kane (Cooper) has just resigned as marshal of the small Western town where he served for many years and is about to leave with his new Quaker bride, Amy (Grace Kelly). Just as they are on the point of departure, though, the town learns that Frank Miller (Ian MacDonal), a dangerous criminal whom Kane had arrested and who was subsequently sentenced to hang, has been released from prison. What is more, he is heading back to town in order to join three of his old partners in hunting down and killing those responsible for sending him to prison -- especially Marshal Kane.

A new marshal is due to arrive tomorrow, but Miller is due to arrive on the noon train today. Kane's wife and friends urge him to leave. At first he does, but then he changes his mind and returns with his wife. He feels that he must protect the town, and that if he can gather a posse of townsmen, they can prevent Frank Miller and his friends from causing any trouble.

The problem is nobody wants to help Kane. Some are afraid of getting killed if they confront Miller and his gang -- especially when nobody else seems willing to help Kane. The good people in church Kane appeals to for help recognize that Frank Miller is a villain, but fear the effect that news of a gunfight in their town will have on potential investors. The people in the saloon actually welcome the return of Miller, anticipating that they too will enjoy the renewal of the "good times" that Kane ended in arresting him. The hotel clerk tells Amy Kane that her new husband deserves a "comeuppance." By the time Frank Miller arrives on the noon train and immediately proceeds with his compatriots in search of the marshal to gun him down, there are no other men helping Kane.

The parallels to today's situation are not exact, but George W. Bush is definitely playing the role of Gary Cooper. He is determined to protect America's friends and allies against terrorists or outlaws such as Saddam Hussein. Only, like the townspeople in the movie, many of America's friends and allies didn't want his protection against Saddam, fearing the situation that could arise if a fight ensued. There were also some (including the Russians, French, and Chinese), who like the people in the saloon, benefited from Saddam's remaining in power since they were doing business with him. Finally, there were even those (the Russians again) who resemble the hotel clerk who eagerly anticipated the United States getting its "comeuppance" through intervening in Iraq.

Like Marshal Kane, President Bush cannot understand those who will not join him against the common foe. But like many of the townspeople, many of America's allies saw Bush's determination to enter a fight that he could have avoided in Iraq as a bigger problem. However ill he was treating his own population, Saddam Hussein was not an immediate threat to them, while toppling him could unleash forces that America could not control -- a prediction that has proven accurate. Unlike Kane, Bush did succeed in deputizing a few allies to join the United States in Iraq. But there are now fewer and fewer deputies as the allies have one by one dropped out, leaving America increasingly alone.

Are America's allies (and the townspeople in the movie) cowards? Some might think so. In the

film, some of those who refuse to help Kane are motivated by emotion, but most do not help him because they do not see it either in their own or the town's interests to do so. If Kane would just leave town as the others Miller is after (including the judge who sentenced him) do, they reason, Miller would not cause trouble for them. Kane's determination to stay and fight against Miller appears as much of a threat to these townspeople as Miller's return.

If Kane had left town as the townspeople wanted, would Miller have left them in peace or would he have ran amok? If the latter, would the townspeople have rallied round to stop him, or would the new marshal (one whom Miller did not bear any grudge toward) have been able to? These questions are moot because Kane does not leave, and so the gunfight that many hoped to avert takes place.

In "High Noon," Kane -- with only the help of his Quaker wife -- kills Miller and his three compatriots. Bush, by contrast, has not been able to get rid of his many opponents in Iraq and elsewhere. In both cases, though, one thing is clear: rightly or wrongly, both the townspeople in the film and America's allies now deeply resent being protected from threats that they have not asked to be protected from. Those who insist on imitating Gary Cooper cannot expect to be thanked for doing so.

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