

Longboat Key News

Dumb and Dumber at the United Nations

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As usual, the 70th Session of the United Nations provided a platform for the usual range of despots along with the occasional democratically elected leader. Pope Francis was given the stage on September 25 and this gave him the opportunity to make some really dumb statements about economic policy. President Obama addressed the General Assembly on September 28 and this gave him the opportunity to make some really dumb statements about foreign policy.

Pope Francis is a wholly laudable public figure. He has charmed the world with his humility. He has reached out to the vulnerable, he has comforted the afflicted and he afflicted the comfortable. Most of all, he has been a model shepherd of his flock. Still, his statements on economic development and the ills of capitalism border on the ridiculous and should be reserved for the 8 P.M. spot on MSNBC.

The pope finds capitalism responsible for everything from income inequality to the environmental degradation of the planet. Granted that there is less income inequality in socialist paradises such as Cuba where almost everyone is poor, but in the context of overall economic growth with much improved conditions for the poor, poverty is shrinking in those countries that have shifted to a capitalist model.

Asia in particular has shifted from socialist based economies and as Marian Tupy of the Cato Institute points out, the industrial revolution and the economic development that followed were a boon to the West and it moved those countries far ahead of the rest of the world. Where the United States was once 11 times richer than Asia, now the United States is only 4.8 times richer. In short, those countries in the Third World that have adopted the capitalist model are catching up.

The pope seemed to be mirroring Al Gore when he said that the world was becoming a “pile of filth,” and laid that salient fact at capitalism’s door step. Here the pope is wrong again. Environmental conditions in the West are good and getting better. Air and water quality in the Third World leave much to be desired but environmental conditions in the developing world will improve as their economic conditions improve. That is the lesson taught by the history of the West.

Two other aspects of the pope’s visit to the United States and the U.N. reveal a blind spot in his thinking. As was written in an article from Political.com, “Francis arrived here from a country, communist Cuba, built entirely on economic theft and political oppression, and yet he couldn’t

bring himself to issue even the slightest criticism. He turned his back on Cuba's dissidents and found it impossible to justify at a press conference aboard the plane on the way to the United States.

Pope Francis also missed an opportunity to say a kind word about the embattled Christians in the Mideast. Mark Steyn wrote that, "His Holiness in fact has chosen not to matter, even as European politicians take decisions that will guarantee 'Christendom' will be non-Christian. There is something shallow and decadent about a pontiff who prioritizes 'climate change' even as every last Christian is driven from the Archeparchy of Mosul. What will they say of such a pope? That he fiddled with the thermostat while Rome burned?"

President Obama, to be fair, was in a difficult spot when addressing the U.N., or what he calls "the family of nations" with his usual message that diplomacy and international order will win the day while might and force will lose. Obama told the U.N., "But I stand before you today believing in my core that we, the nations of the world cannot return to the old ways of conflict and coercion – we cannot look backwards."

But, while Obama was waxing poetic about international order, Putin was increasing Russia's reach. He called for the formation of a "broad international coalition" to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq. If Obama, or anyone else, has any questions about who the coalition would take on as allies, Putin removed any doubt: "No one but President Assad's armed forces and Kurd militia are fighting the Islamic State." Then Putin went so far as to assert that stability in Syria and the Mideast might benefit from dictatorial rule.

The hard truth is that Obama has a compelling vision of a world ruled by diplomacy and reason but it is not a vision shared by Russia, Iran, China and many others. Putin will save Assad because he is putting boots on the ground and arming the Syrian loyalists with the latest weapons. Putin has also signed an intelligence-sharing agreement with Assad, Iran and the leaders of Iraq. Thus, it is Putin with his 19th century ideas that will lead the international coalition in Syria.

It was also unfortunate that Obama decided to scold Putin for using force in the Ukraine. "Imagine," he said, "if instead Russia had engaged in true diplomacy. That would be better for Ukraine, but also better for Russia and better for the world." It is likely that all Obama's sermon accomplished was to remind the world that the United States has done little to assist the Ukraine despite their pleas for assistance.

Both Francis and Obama are very smart and accomplished people. It is unfortunate their U.N. appearances were not their finest hour.