

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *On Syria, a Wilsonian Report Card*

The Editors

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William Tecumseh Sherman, the Civil War general who burned Atlanta, is credited with coining the phrase "War is Hell." But according to the *New York Times* editorial page, war is primarily a noble struggle for liberation—at least if you're a freedom fighter with a pure heart, dedicated to the cause of universal human rights. If only such creatures existed.

[The Times is upset](#) with the Free Syrian Army for "further stoking dangerous sectarian animosities" and adopting "brutal and illegal tactics" in their fight against Bashar al-Assad. The international community has supported these freedom fighters, the *Times* says, but is now embarrassed by receiving a midterm report card from Human Rights Watch with more than a few black marks: "abuses including kidnapping, detention and executions of security forces and pro-government militia members."

This tendency to see one side as engaged in some great moral revolution inevitably results in disappointments like the *Times* experienced this week. As Ted Galen Carpenter [recently wrote](#) at The Skeptics blog, many of the forces that politicians or pundits have initially held up as models of virtue—the Nicaraguan Contras, Angola's Jonas Savimbi or the Kosovo Liberation Army—turn out as anything but the saints they are initially thought to be.

The *Times* claims the findings "are also a rebuke and a warning to Russia and China," as if these countries will suddenly be persuaded to join the Western crusade for human rights after viewing the YouTube videos [that so troubled](#) the cutting-edge research team at Human Rights Watch.

In any given conflict, all sides are likely to engage in brutal and unsavory tactics to one degree or another. Even the United States was embarrassed by its torture of prisoners held in Abu Ghraib in Iraq. One need not endorse admittedly disturbing methods to recognize that as much as one would like to see a noble fight for liberty, the Syrian conflict is also a struggle for power. And when people are engaged in such a knock-down

fight, they invariably do whatever it takes to win. To assume otherwise is naive Wilsonian idealism at work—and a **howler**.