

# Taking No Prisoners

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## [Morality, Race, and Chemical Assaults in Syria](#)

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Tomahawk Launch from USS Ross

**By Roger Witherspoon**

In 2013, President Assad launched a massive gas attack on civilians which killed more than 1,400 men, women, and children. President Obama was both horrified and angry and sought legal authorization from the gop-controlled Congress to launch a military strike against Syria.

The Republicans, who had criticized many Obama initiatives as “overreaching,” unauthorized and illegal, declined to grant approval. They were encouraged in their position by Donald Trump, who had seen newspaper still photos – sanitized for American audiences – of the chemical attack. Trump repeatedly said the US has “no business” in Syria and the use of chemical weapons there was not our problem. More than once the prolific Trump tweeted “stay out!”

That attitude didn’t change with the regular use of barrel bombs (<http://bit.ly/2oGZg7S>) which have killed

thousands of Syrian men, women, and children. There were videos and still pictures of destroyed neighborhoods and assorted bodies sticking out of what used to be apartment buildings. But they didn't earn a 3 AM tweet.



And that was understandable: why should a Caucasian billionaire give a damn about a bunch of Muslim babies dying in a Syrian street? And why would a rich white man who associated freely with white supremacists ever side with a black President over a moral issue?

In the ensuing years, on the other side of the globe, thousands of Muslim Rohingya men, women, and children have been slaughtered by Buddhist mobs and military in Myanmar and Thailand. Thousands of Rohingya tried to flee on overloaded boats, only to be pushed further out to sea to die by navy vessels from surrounding countries whose captains viewed Muslims as vermin to be exterminated.

To this, Trump has said nothing. But then, it was a bunch of Muslims being killed by a bunch of slopes — nothing for a white man to bother tweeting about.



In South Sudan there were horrific pictures of men, women, and children being massacred or starving in an ongoing civil war. There were some photos of desiccated bodies rotting in the sun, and others of reed-thin waifs ( <http://bit.ly/2nJTQnz> ), their empty bellies bloated, being held to the last by emaciated mothers with no milk to give.

The incoming president, during the course of his world briefs, would have had these photos if he cared to look at them and thick dossiers if he cared to read them. But then, a bunch of black women and children dying in the

African sun was hardly worth a white man's tweet.

Which brings us to April, 2017. As it happens President Trump, as usual roaming the mansion bored and alone, was looking at late night television and saw real time videos of men, women, and children dying in the streets of Syria from the same type of gas attack launched by the same murderous President Assad four years ago. The videos these 70 victims were riveting, a stark difference from the static photo or two in a local newspaper four years earlier. It didn't matter that in terms of scale, this brutal assault killed just 5% as many as the 2013 attack he dismissed with a tweet.

This time, there was no black president to automatically oppose. This time, there was no opposition Congress to interfere. This time, Trump actually looked at the videos — and found it difficult to turn away from the haunting scene: a woman's writhing, uselessly flailing limbs that eventually stop in death; the straining, heaving chest of children starving for air until their little bodies give up and the heaving slows and then stops forever — children light-skinned enough to evoke images of his own grandchildren.

And that was enough for Trump to loose the weapons of war ( <http://bit.ly/2p7XN6G> ).

The launching of 59 Tomahawk missiles against a Syrian airbase came less than a week after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that the official policy of the United States was that President Trump didn't give a damn how many people were slaughtered in Syria's one-sided, uncivil war. A generation ago, Assad's father secured control of the country by the brutal slaughter of some 20,000 Syrians. Assad has improved on that level of butchery, with more than half a million dead citizens to his credit as he seeks to kill anyone who isn't part of his minority sect and a sycophant blindly supporting him. With Tillerson's announcement, the President of the United States gave Assad permission to continue his murderous ways, secure in the knowledge that America would neither question his morality nor interfere in his slaughter.

But then, there was late night television and the images that Trump couldn't get out of his head. It would be encouraging to think that the immorality of Assad's chemical war offended Trump. But that's unlikely in a man who boasts of sexually assaulting women and openly disdains morality. It would be encouraging to think that as President, Trump realizes America has a longstanding role in the world to oppose evil and could not ignore this brazen violation of civilized norms. But that would be counter to his longstanding position of "America First" and the rest of the world can go to hell. It would be encouraging to think that Trump sat down with all the long-term experts at the State Department to understand America's role in the face of this reviled throwback to World War 1. But then, Trump fired all the State Department experts.

Which brings us back to skin color.

The man who schemed to avoid serving his country saw Death in Syria stalk scores of women and children who looked like his, and felt compelled to order other Americans' children into the breach to avenge them. As a parent , I understand the revulsion at the chemical attack. But then, as a father and grandfather I understood it in 2013.

But as a black father whose child is serving her country overseas, I wish I had confidence that decisions that could again place her in harm's way were based squarely on the morality of the situation and the role of America in a dangerous world and not on the ability of the President to identify with the color of a foreign victim's skin.