

## Breaking Up One's Lines: Writing the Wrongs in a Life of Diplomacy

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When I was an undergraduate years ago, I read in a required survey of literature course a selection of poetry by William Butler Yeats, the early 20th century Irish poet. His touchstone poem “The Second Coming” is one of the most cited pieces of the past 100 years of literature, but the poem that caught my attention was “Lapis Lazuli,” which I read in an old, beat-up paperback selection of Yeats’ best poems, a slender volume I ended up dragging around with me as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, an English teacher in Saudi Arabia, and finally, as an American diplomat, serving in embassies and consulates throughout the Middle East. Somewhere along the way, I parted ways with my little book of Yeats, but a couple of lines from “Lapis Lazuli” stayed with me. Like a St. Christopher necklace one wears for protection when traveling, I kept these lines close at hand, for a kind of talismanic protection, and to serve as an admonition of sorts, particularly given my life as a diplomat, working and traveling in a number of the most dangerous places on earth: Baghdad, Gaza, Tripoli, Damascus, and Benghazi, among others. Places that would make clear to me that reputation was well deserved.

The words in “Lapis Lazuli” that provided me this combination of security and admonition read as follows:

*All perform their tragic play,  
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,  
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;  
Yet they, should the last scene be there,  
The great stage curtain about to drop,  
If worthy their prominent part in the play,  
Do not break up their lines to weep.*

What I took from these lines was that professionals – in my case, diplomats – were players in the drama: our large drama of diplomacy and statecraft, of countries jockeying for influence and leverage to achieve their interests; and the smaller, grittier dramas involving those at working levels who issue or refuse a visa, arrange the motorcade for the visiting members of Congress, or report on the riots in some restless neighborhood (jobs a young diplomat would take on as a part of their apprenticeship). Some of the dramas ended well, or at least mundanely, perhaps as products of a grinding foreign policy bureaucracy seeking safe, predictable conclusions; and some of them ended badly, blood-on-the-floor badly.

But as diplomats we were called upon to utter our lines, to remember our role in the diplomatic drama and not get distracted into caring too much about the idiosyncratic outcomes of a particular situation. The point was not to harden one's heart and not care. It was to maintain enough distance – with the developing craft of one's professionalism, knowledge of key institutions, and a clear sense of the trajectory of the larger diplomatic drama at hand – that one could focus on the diplomacy, the statecraft, the play so to speak, and not on offstage disturbances. And sometimes one did care too much, one broke up one's lines, if not to weep then to care too much about the bit players in a subplot: the peaceful demonstrator shot in the eye or the dissident re-arrested for making a courageous – albeit ill-advised – statement criticizing the government. But the admonition came in handy over the years for me – serving as a professional beacon guiding one past treacherous shoals, shoals that in my case included two searing instances where

high-threat situations lived up to their names and ended in violence and death.

The first incident took place when I was a relatively inexperienced diplomat, posted for a three-year assignment at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, still the capital of Israel back in the 2000s. My job was to report to the U.S. government on developments in the volatile Gaza Strip. For Palestinians in Gaza at that time, the Palestinian Authority controlled local security and provision of essential services. I traveled to Gaza a couple of times each week, when security conditions permitted, meeting with a range of contacts: Palestinian Authority security officers, Fatah party political figures (the key political base for the Palestinian Authority), local businessmen, journalists, and medical personnel. In short, I met with anybody who could help me understand what was going on in Gaza. As a diplomat specialized as a political reporting officer, my work resembled in some ways that of a journalist posted overseas. Except that my readers were U.S. government officials back in Washington, primarily in the Department of State, but also more widely, in what we called, in shorthand, “the interagency,” personnel in all agencies of the U.S. government, civilian and military, who in one way or another focused on our relations with foreign governments.

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One morning I headed down to Gaza, escorted by two groups of security personnel: U.S. government employees who worked for Diplomatic Security, a sprawling branch of the State Department, and also private contractors, recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of former U.S. military personnel, most of them veterans of U.S. Special Forces. At Erez Crossing, the last Israeli outpost before entry into Gaza, we joined up with a third car of U.S. security personnel newly arrived in country, who were included on this trip as a part of their training and familiarization with local security conditions.

I stood around joking with some of my security to pass the time while Israeli military personnel processed our papers, eventually allowing us to cross into Gaza. I remembered later hearing some garbled explanation informing us that, to facilitate the training of the new agents, they would be switching the order of the cars in our little convoy, moving my vehicle to the lead position: normally the diplomats being protected would be in the middle, or second vehicle, with armored jeeps in front and behind us, to enhance protection. Shortly after entering Gaza, we in the first car heard a loud explosion and our Suburban was showered in dust. We radioed the second vehicle but did not get a response. Assuming something had happened, and given the lack of alternative egress points

for Gaza, we did a quick U-turn and came upon a scene of carnage on the opposite side of the median. The second vehicle in our little convoy, a four-ton armored behemoth, had been flung upside down and mangled, as if stomped on by some angry or uncaring god. As a crowd began gathering, our security – all of us – froze momentarily. Time slowed. Amid the smoke and mayhem, we saw a man down, outside the vehicle. Nothing. Time stood still. A sudden wave of super-normality washed over; every second and every breath slowed. The third car, with more of our security personnel, attempted to intervene directly, but in the end, Palestinian Authority security officers sorted things out at the scene, coordinating afterwards with Israeli forces and U.S. officials. The toll was staggering: three dead U.S. security personnel and a fourth seriously injured.

I returned to the Embassy in Tel Aviv in the early afternoon and wrote up the situation report, or sitrep, even calling some of my contacts in Gaza to include their reactions. I took a call from a senior State Department official offering condolences and support. The shock hit later in the evening and ebbed and flowed afterwards for quite a while. No, I had not broken up my lines to weep, so to speak, at least not that day.

But on my own time, and over the years, I have thought back to that trip to Gaza with great mourning, sense of loss, and even bewildered guilt about what happened that day, and how, through some bubble of grace that had floated over Erez Crossing moments before the attack, I had been spared while my security colleagues had been torn to shreds in a targeted explosion probably meant for me. Some days after the incident, I reflected on the travel to Gaza. I remembered childhood associations with Old Testament Samson and Gaza and reflected that a temple of sorts had come crashing down on us, as in that Biblical story of long ago, destroying our assumptions of safe travel and normality, and crushing with blinding force the illusion that we were among friends, doing work – such as the interviews with Fulbright scholarship candidates we had scheduled for the day – that was appreciated.

The attackers who placed and hid the explosive device on the road into Gaza City were never identified. The theory pursued by investigators, both American law enforcement and local, was that either local or regional violent extremists, acting independently or as proxies for others, attempted to mount a lethal attack on its diplomats to send a message to the U.S. government. That garbled message, whether inchoate anger or meant as a precise riposte for some act of force or pressure the U.S. government had undertaken in the region, was never clearly understood. Afterwards, Gaza was ruled off limits for any U.S. diplomatic travel, a ban that with few exceptions has remained in place to this day.

The second treacherous incident in my diplomatic career, when a high-risk situation slid into violence and calamity, occurred years later, in 2011. While serving in Washington

as the Director of the Office for North African Affairs, I was sent out to Benghazi for several weeks, Libya's second most important city, to serve as acting Principal Officer in our then-recently established Special Diplomatic Mission, while the permanently assigned officer there, my good friend and colleague, Chris Stevens, took some vacation. We had established the Benghazi diplomatic facility at a time of heady optimism when the upsurge in unrest in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring still took on the rosy coloring of a hopeful, moderate current of political change.

Chris eventually returned to Benghazi and was later summoned back to Washington, to be nominated as U.S. Ambassador to Libya, a country still in substantial turmoil since the ragged collapse of the Qaddafi regime over the previous months. Chris was widely respected and popular among his diplomatic colleagues, both American and foreign. He was good-looking, with a laid-back California hipness that shaded gently into swagger, but one attenuated beautifully by his optimism and generally modest sense of himself. Clearly the coolest kid in class for a long time, Chris had grown to understand that being inclusive and encouraging with his coolness was a powerful ingredient for leadership and achievement. He also had a commitment to service and helping others, evident in the Peace Corps service that preceded his career as a diplomat. Like others, I had been impressed by Chris' hip geniality and his diplomatic chops. We had served together in Israel and our paths in the Middle East had often crossed over the years.

Now Chris was our ambassador to Libya, and I ran the office in Washington that oversaw our relations with the new Libyan government and provided Washington's first line of oversight for our embassy in Tripoli. We learned in early September 2012 that Chris – Ambassador Stevens – was planning an in-country trip to visit his old post in Benghazi to touch base with some of his contacts and friends there.

I was with my boss, the Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs (an inherited bureaucratic archaism for what is commonly referred to these days as the Middle East) on the sixth floor of the State Department that Tuesday afternoon September 11, 2012 when the call came in from our embassy in Tripoli that the U.S. Diplomatic Mission in Benghazi was under attack. We got on the phones immediately: to the embassy in Tripoli, to local contacts in Benghazi and Tripoli who possibly had information on what was happening, and to interagency colleagues in the U.S. military and intelligence community. For the next 15 hours, through a long night, we continued those frantic phone calls – interspersed with secure video teleconference meetings to brief higher level U.S. officials, as we pieced together and tried to describe and address a situation whose dimensions we only barely comprehended – but even that bare comprehension already was beginning to point to tragedy of heartrending family and professional ramifications.

Definitive word came in by telephone from the Libyan Prime Minister around 3 AM Washington time, after hours of long-distance efforts to nail down the truth and wipe away rumor, obfuscation, and the fog of militias and security forces clashing by night: Ambassador Chris Stevens, one of the most beloved, respected diplomats in the Foreign Service, was dead. His body lay at the main hospital in Benghazi. At that moment the exact cause of death was not clear. Action was taken to secure his body and those of the other three Americans killed that night; survivors were evacuated with the bodies to our embassy in Tripoli. We learned subsequently Chris had suffocated from the smoke of a fire set by the attackers, a substantial gang of violent extremists and terrorists who seemed bent on mayhem and possible diplomatic hostage-taking.

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I sat outside my boss's office door, in the pre-dawn hours, as she emotionally but professionally broke the news over the phone to Chris' family that he was dead. Similar calls went out for the other Americans who had been killed. The temple – another temple – had come crashing down, shattering our illusions, our hopes for the promise of a peaceful Arab Spring and our professional confidence in the rightness and security of our diplomatic work and travel to preserve U.S. interests. Two days later, his remains and those of the three Americans were flown back to Andrews Air Force Base. We met the plane at Andrews for a transfer of remains ceremony led by then President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, and that day we did indeed shamelessly break up our diplomatic lines and mourn our colleagues fallen in the field.

Two incidents – in a 28-year career in diplomacy. Incidents that in significant ways shaped my perceptions of that career and continue to reverberate in memories. Most of my work did not approach the level of stress, second-guessing, and violence-scarred memory and sense of loss that characterized these two days' worth of a career. In that 28-year span of professional activity, there was, however, probably a year or two of days filled with the quieter tragedies, injustices, dispossessions, and unmerited violence and repression that a political officer-cum-diplomat like me witnesses in the course of their career. Whether a senior diplomat, finishing out his professional days, traveling through the Syrian city of Raqqa in 2018 to witness the horrendous remains of destruction, a city torn apart in the vicious fight to evict dug-in ISIS fighters. Or a more junior

embassy officer, meeting with a quietly impressive dissident in the shabby, working class outskirts of Damascus in 2005, years before the Arab Spring, who had spent most of his adult life in prison hell-holes and continued to resist Assad regime efforts to silence him.

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Yeats' imagery in "Lapis Lazuli" supports the view that there is salvation in focusing on the job, the vocation, the travel, the exacting professionalism required, whether for the diplomatic performance at hand or whatever line of work the reader might be involved in. Focusing on one's lines and not breaking them up "to weep," as Yeats puts it, despite the tragic elements being confronted, and remaining faithful to the imperatives of the required performance of duty, this can be understood, at least metaphorically, as an admonition for getting through tough professional times. And it helped me over the years, as a gloss, a way to understand the motivating power of professional commitment and dedication to a mission.

But Yeats has a deeper meaning to convey, focused on what I would describe as the highest sort of professionalism – which is the vocation of the artist, whether writer or musician or other creative individual. Writing, like other creative activity, has a transformative power. The writer takes tragedy and injustice and loss, with everything else in the fullness of life, and seeks to create art. As Yeats puts it at the close of his poem:

*On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient glittering eyes, are gay.*

We're no longer focused on the actors (or, in my case, the diplomat) or on uttering their lines and maintaining their professional focus. The perspective has shifted to the creator of those lines, or other works of art, capable of describing – or singing about – tragedy in a manner so transformative that the "mournful melodies" the artist composes prompt a kind of creative joy, a hardened, "glittering" gaiety, as Yeats puts it, "transfiguring all that dread." As I have concluded my career as a U.S. diplomat, a career which required stringent efforts not to "break up my lines," I have shifted to writing about some of these treacherous shoals I experienced in what I aspire to be a creative, fully embracing manner, a diplomatic mournful melody.

The lesson of Yeats – if one can be so presumptuous as to insist on such pedagogy – is that art cannot right the wrongs in a challenging, sometimes dangerous career. The violence and its consequences cannot be undone. But art can give us clues, usually through metaphor and imagery, about how to handle such wrongs – violent incidents and tragic setbacks involving oneself or one's colleagues – and continue functioning, with professionalism. And the writer, when successful as artist, can compose the joyful, mournful melodies such incidents call for, and write the wrong. In my case – bothered for years with remorse over these colleagues' deaths, regretting decisions made or responses that were slow or ineffective, mine and others' – to write the wrong merely signals the aspiration to celebrate and mourn a cherished friend and respected colleagues, with all the art and craft one can summon for the effort.