

Arms Sales, Cash, and Losing Your Religion

The lucrative Arms Sales market exists in the exact place where rational self-interest intersects with humanist idealism. Much as individuals have a right to exist, countries have a right to exist, and few would contest the prudence of building and maintaining modern weapons by which to protect that right. When a country builds weapons for its own military, and the purpose of that military is to defend, one may argue or object about the extent to which it is wise to train and organize the use of those weapons, but their necessity is comprehensible. Countries, like individuals, have a history of attacking one another.

While building weapons and equipment for self-defense is therefore fairly uncontroversial, *selling* said arms and weapons to people or nations that will misuse them—or, worse, are already engaged in [busily and enthusiastically misusing them](#)—is not necessary or prudent. This is because (1) human life is supposed to have an intrinsic value beyond anything money can buy, and (2) bullets and blasts tear open human bodies in order to spill out guts, blood, shit, and all the strange fluids that lurk beneath every human's skin, maiming and/or killing them. How one uses weapons, therefore, is one of the most important things in the world, once the decision has been made to produce them for self-protection. Much as a war of aggression is immoral, the sale of weapons that will create the conditions of a war abroad is also immoral. That's pretty simple. Or... is it?

Leaving Points on the Board

It is, it is simple. Nevertheless, in the ongoing effort to appear balanced, everyone's favorite "sick man of the old media" *The Atlantic* recently published an [article](#) arguing that

“Progressives” should stop allowing political rivals to [monopolize weapons sales to other countries](#). Written by Army veteran of Afghanistan (this means the author knows the effect weapons have on his fellow humans), former Obama policy thinkfluencer, avowed Democrat and (apparently) Friend to America’s Arms Industry Andrew Exum, the piece is titled “What Progressives Miss About Arms Sales.” It offers a logically coherent argument in favor of profitability (political, industrial) over morality.

This argument has been made by many over the years. Readers familiar with the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition likely know Satan’s temptation of Jesus Christ during the Son of God’s wanderings in the desert. Whether one is a devout Christian and believes that this was an actual event that occurred and Christ’s refusal to be tempted had the consequence of saving Christian souls by redeeming them from original sin, or one is an atheist and values the story as an allegory for how to resist debasing oneself and exhausting one’s moral and ethical (which is to say, one’s *human*) credibility, few would argue that actually Satan is the good guy with a smart idea, and Christ is the bad one who’s a dupe and sucker for not choosing all the kingdoms of earth (with their weapons-making industries) over the Kingdom of Heaven.



SATAN: Hey guy sell some weapons to this demon I know

he's a cool dude

CHRIST: That would
be wrong

SATAN: Guy you're
leaving points on
the board I know
this other demon
who'll sell them
instead

CHRIST: Oh well in
that case

But that's the piece's argument, that Christ was a chump. The too-good Progressives are foolishly spurning Satan's offer of cool, hard cash. They're damaging America's weapons industry by shrinking client pools, and eroding America's ability to exist as chief of the Western hegemony [*why* American should be chief if it cares more about profitability than people's lives is a question that goes unposed and unanswered]. These lousy point-missing Progressives are, through their Sunday-School fixation on morality (surely, the naïve morality of a decent if simple child), boxing Democrats out of controlling the Executive branch by letting Donald Trump and Jared Kushner take credit for sweet arms deals ("deliverables," for those who have any experience working in government, according to Exum, who has). Presumably, it would have been better if President Clinton had been able to score this deliverable.

Exum describes two Progressive objections to selling arms to bad people, what he describes as the strategic objection, and the moral objection. The strategic objection boils down to modern variations of "we gave the mujahedeen weapons to fight the Soviets but then they turned Taliban and used the weapons on us so we should avoid doing that again." This is a good objection, and reasonable. Exum's answer is that if we don't sell arms to bad people, other people will, so we should sell them to (a) maintain our influence with the bad people who

want to buy our weapons, and (b) lower the costs of producing said weapons, for ourselves and for the bad people / bad actors. Exum himself calls this answer “quick and dissatisfying,” which is a good assessment, so I’ll just repeat it.

Objection #2 is “moral.” And here’s where I feel really bad for someone who deployed, and saw combat and the consequences of combat, and attended Sunday School as a child, and “has a lot of respect” for the Progressive standpoint (which opposes selling weapons to repressive, totalitarian, religiously intolerant and/or authoritarian regimes). I feel bad because Exum’s answer to moral objections is equally dissatisfying, to the point where one really wonders what compelled him to write and publish such an article.

The first part of his answer poses the sales of weapons to bad actors (in this case the Saudis) as hypothetical: “selling weapons to the Saudis that might be used in Yemen,” is how he characterizes representative Chris Murphy (D-CT)’s objections to the deal. In general, hypotheticals can be good—we’re not selling arms to the Ukrainians because hypothetically they might be used to start WWII. But the arms deal with Saudi Arabia is unusually clear and—what’s the opposite of hypothetical?—*actual*. Weapons sold to the Saudis are either the exact weapons being used in Yemen, or weapons used to arm and equip soldiers in Saudi Arabia, freeing different weapons (that would otherwise not have been available) to be used in Yemen (or against rebellious Saudis, or anyone else). There’s no hypothetical about arming and equipping a regime engaged in warfare—you don’t get to choose which bullets Stalin uses to shoot Hitler and which he uses in a pogrom against Jews. It doesn’t work that way. Also, in this specific case, fuck hypotheticals, we’ve had 16 years of killing in the Middle East. “Uh, maybe they won’t drop that specific bomb” is the rhetorical device of a coward.



Irrefutable argument

The second component of the argument is even more absurd. According to Exum, when Progressives take a moral stand against arms sales, it's "leaving points on the board." This analogy is somewhat confusing; unless there is another context for it with which I am unfamiliar, "leaving points on the board" describes the phenomenon in American football where Team A is penalized during a play in which Team B scores (practically speaking, usually, a field goal). Depending on the context and field position, the correct move for Team B's coach is to "leave the points on the board" and accept the field goal's result rather than taking the penalty and continuing to play but "taking the points off the board." If there is sufficient time, or if the situation is desperate, the coach of Team B could elect to "take points off the board" and accept the penalty instead—if, say, time was running out and Team B needed a touchdown to avoid defeat, or, conversely, if there was plenty of time and the risk was worth it.

Exum's formulation has the Progressives as Team B—the group which has scored a moral victory while Team A suffers the equivalent of a penalty by being seen to do something every scrupulous adult human knows is bad. Team B then elects to "leave points on the board" rather than use their position of moral advantage for profit. In so doing, though, Team B / Progressives somehow (the analogy does not make it clear) end up losing out to Team A, politically and financially. At best, this analogy is puzzled and incomplete—at worst, it makes a clear case to readers and thinkers that morality is something crafty people use to exchange for money, friendship, or

political position.



Ol' "Joltin'" Joe Namath doesn't know all that much about arms sales, but he knows that in a clutch situation, you **always** leave the points on the board, always

What happened to arguing that generosity, kindness, and preserving the sanctity of human life were ends unto themselves? Surely, if one is being sincere, those ideals are incompatible with selling weapons to objectively unethical regimes. Wasn't this the ultimate intellectual lesson of the enlightenment, combined with humanity's experience with The Holocaust and other genocides in and around World War II? That after the hundreds of millions killed or forcibly displaced through warfare, ethnic cleansing, starvation, and outright genocide that there was ontological, immeasurable value to humanistic, non-utilitarian good, and that this good stood apart from whatever religion one happened to believe?

Collapse of the Democratic Party

Deliberately or not, Exum asserts that political expediency should be the point of human action, rather than an outcome of virtuous individual and/or collective action. This assertion is evil, plain and simple. It has been popular with mainstream or centrist Democrats for most if not all of my adult life, and as far as I can tell, has severely damage the Democrats' ability to interest voters. By focusing on "deliverables" and "low-hanging fruit," a certain class of people without any identifiable ideology beyond profit for profit's sake has systematically bartered away the Democratic Party's reason for having existed in the first place. The science of politics to them is how a target demographic group polls with a certain political position during an election year—not whether or not the content of that position is ethical.

As a Democratic Socialist, it seems plausible to me that this is simply one more manifestation of the way capitalism distorts and frustrates the will of the people, exploiting their work and the hours of life lived on earth to unethical ends. Pandering to a few million people who happen to be part of the industry pushing weapon systems sales to war criminals makes sense when you're the [CEO of a weapons manufacturing company whose bonus is tied to sales](#). When you're a skilled mechanic, you probably care less about what you're making, exactly, and a bit more about what that thing is being used to do. The capitalist system depends on convincing everyone that participating in the festival of rapacity and shitty unnecessary product-pushing stretching from Silicon Valley to Hollywood, from Hollywood to New York, and then to Washington D.C. is in their best interests. It isn't!

We live in extraordinary times. Citizens have VIP tickets to the spectacle of hundreds of millions poured into [developing and marketing a device for which no clear demand exists](#) while veterans remain homeless. They watch on social media as poorly conceived, [Democrat-backed](#) charter school initiatives suck funding, teachers, and students out of the public system. They

gape in astonishment as a popular Democratic politician [stuffs donations from the pharmaceutical industry into his pocket and then votes against the interests of his constituency](#). And let's not forget Obama basically [robbing taxpayers to bail out the banks](#).

Why can't establishment Democrats see how their ethically promiscuous attitude toward selling weapons is exactly what's turning workers of all colors, ethnicities, nations and gender and/or sexual identifications away from the party, and from America? That losing votes isn't a function of certain hyper-specific constituency platforms, but rather of conspicuous moral turpitude and blatant hypocrisy? Is the cash from Raytheon that good?

Globalism for Few, Insecurity for Many

The hypothesis floated by George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton after the Cold War was this: increase the amount of money earned in the developing world, cultivate a middle class abroad and at home, and democracy would flourish. This was a good idea, but it seems to have failed, in part because a "middle class" as we understand it in the U.S. depends on *social* mobility, and [that's actually been reduced](#) since the collapse of the USSR. [Fewer people have more money](#). Capitalism's promise of a "better" life has been exchanged for the promise of a more convenient life. Convenience, conveniently, leaves plenty of room to argue for global and local exploitation, slavery, warfare, and all the awful shit most Americans and Westerners probably, if they thought about it, would say they don't think is something in which they should participate (and certainly not abet).

Without an ethical anchor, without a firm understanding of the difference between *good* and *evil*, otherwise known as the difference between *generosity* and *selfishness*, one creeps inexorably toward the latter. Either (or both) Real and Allegorical Jesus Christ makes an important and powerful

decision to embrace philosophical good not because it's an easy thing to do—money, power, and dignified employment are seductive. The better the money, the better the job, the better the *influence*, the more seductive the choice. Important: Jesus spurns this choice, offered by Satan.

And choices that result in people dying in war (*especially* Americans dying) weigh particularly heavy on Americans' consciences, more so even than more quotidian choices with equally far-reaching effects. One might think that if the lesson was going to be learned, that Democrats would have learned this lesson after getting us into Vietnam, and certainly after authorizing the use of force in Iraq (they did not). Somehow in spite of history, the American Center-left has slowly but inevitably arrived at the current moment, wherein an Obama Democrat and *war veteran who knows what it means to make the argument* claims that if we don't arm and equip a horrific, repressive regime that is actively and enthusiastically murdering its own people as well as everyone with whom it disagrees and can lay hands on—Saudi Arabia, most recently—that China will do so, and we'll lose money and influence. And oh, right, Democratic squeamishness has made it so that Trump can make this deal with the Saudis instead of the Chinese, and that's why workers support Trump, because he's willing to do what's necessary.

This hedonistic, Satanic view of the world (selfishness and cynicism usually descend into Hedonism, very rarely sublimating into Stoicism) only accounts for one part of the equation (the financial part that we can measure precisely, today) and ignores the probability of any potential negative consequence, even likely negative consequences. But there's another component—as long as we peddle weapons to bad regimes, we will always—as in, never not—live in a world beset by the type of systemic oppression and repression that only ever get resolved through violence. Regimes like the one ruling Saudi Arabia have a way of murdering their civilians and those of

neighbors, then requiring more weapons.

The Piper Gets Paid

Arms sales will make people employed by military-industrial companies and consultancies more comfortable (not as comfortable as they would be if they controlled the means to production but that's another essay). These people will buy homes, and afford medical insurance, and enroll their children in expensive private schools and universities. It's a pretty good deal for shareholders with stock in Raytheon or Boeing or Lockheed Martin or Kellogg, Brown and Root. Most of all it's a great deal for the executives who run these companies, and the politicians who benefit from their campaign contributions.

Ultimately, if one is a patriotic American, like myself, one is forced to reconcile injuring or killing other humans with turning a profit. And I'm not sure a few dollars is worth it if it means losing my integrity in the bargain, assuming that the profit is even real. For every multi-year \$100 billion dollar contract the U.S. signs with Saudi Arabia or similar execrable, criminal regimes, we dish out [well over \\$100 billion per year](#) fighting the terrorism that happens when the same criminal scum uses these weapons against their rivals in and outside their country. This does not reckon the value of a human life (priceless), nor does it factor in the financial obligations we incur for U.S. veterans of those wars. Ethically and financially, selling arms to regimes that are inclined to use them for bad purposes is a bad deal for the U.S.

And that's what some people seem to miss about Arms Sales. It's an easy mistake to make, for those who view financial or political profit as capable of redeeming morally objectionable actions. Progressives would be wise to continue "missing" this point.