Left, right can agree on International Criminal Court’s incompetence

September 16, 2018

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The Boston Herald

<http://www.bostonherald.com/news/columnists/2018/09/left_right_can_agree_on_international_criminal_court_s_incompetence>

President Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, went out of his way to attack the International Criminal Court last week. As night follows day, a bunch of progressives then went out of their way to attack John Bolton. So, who cares?

In and of itself, it could be viewed as typical “inside the beltway” fighting between the Trump administration and everyone else. But there is more here than meets the eye. What this exemplifies and is really about is the fundamental question of one’s attitude toward “international law” as enforced by international organizations.

To put this in context, the ICC was established some years ago as a forum to prosecute war criminals. It is a semi-autonomous entity that reports to no one and has a vague connection to the United Nations.

There is no dispute that it has not worked well. It has spent over $1.5 billion and managed to prosecute only eight (very bad) people. It has failed to grapple with some of the worst offenders such as Syrian President Bashar Assad or, for that matter, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But, like so many international organizations, its abysmal record does not result in reform or abolition. It just keeps cranking along.

Recently, according to Bolton, the ICC has made noises that it is going to investigate American soldiers in Afghanistan because, why not? So Bolton made clear that the Trump administration will not cooperate in any way and will sanction the ICC if it goes down that road. For that, he was viciously denounced by the usual groups.

What I find interesting is that none of those leaping to attack Bolton actually have much good to say about the ICC. Its incompetence seems to be generally accepted. Similarly, there does not seem to be any cheerleading for an investigation of American troops by a shadowy group of prosecutors with an unknown, and probably political, agenda.

Instead, it is the idea that the United States might assert a different, or even higher, standard than other countries that seems to rub their rhubarb.

Every nation, they say, is equal and has an equal claim to speak to justice. The fact that some countries are led by vicious, bloodthirsty dictators who use chemicals to attack their own citizens, or deny women basic rights, or impose the death penalty on gay persons, is entirely irrelevant in their view. So international organizations like the U.N. and the ICC not only are good, they are better than anything America has to offer.

In contrast, Bolton and others — and I include myself for what that’s worth — believe we have a moral obligation to draw distinctions, to advocate for the ideas that make America special, and to resist attempts to water down America’s sovereignty.

How you come out on this tells a lot about what America’s role in the world should be and how we deal with these international organizations of ill repute.