



When Commenting on International Incidents, Consider the Layers!

January 3, 2020 Commentary by J. Matt Wallace, Mustang Community, Bosque County, Texas, USA

Is it possible to write something that is useful, relevant, and read by the people who need to read it the most? Probably not. Since I'm a fan of long-shots and underdogs, here's my try.

Hopefully, this will not be seen as a comment on the recent killing of Iran's top mastermind. Iran described him in glowing terms as if he was the top defender of the oppressed from the past couple of decades. That description seems to immediately undermine the credibility of Iranian leadership. While that was a sideways comment on the event, the actual event is not my focus here. This is about people's need to comment on international events, and specifically for those who try to explain. Let's get started.

Layer #1 – Freedom of Speech

In my country, you absolutely have the right to say whatever you want. That's awesome and worth celebrating. Knock yourself out! With that said, just because you can say something, it's not always the best for you and/or others for you to sound off, even if you know exactly what you're talking about. Your comments are likely to be less helpful if you don't know what you're talking about. I hope most rational, reasonable people will agree with this and have few reasons to add to this declaration. Also, it's not lost on me that I'm sounding off right now, and I may or may not know what I'm talking about.

Layer #2 – General Feelings

Hey! You are THE expert on your feelings. Sharing or not sharing those feelings is up to you. To use this recent international incident as an example, there are some who support Trump in whatever he does. There are others who are the opposite of that. "Orange man bad!" Anything he does is bad! If that's your schtick, you go for it. I'm sure you will get all kinds of love from those who love to hear they are not alone. Likewise, the other side will play the exact same game, and that's probably not going to change. By going down that road, I hope that you've already pondered and accepted what that means. Even though it seems apparent to me, it may not be to you. Taking these kinds of sides (*regardless of the topic, situation, etc.*) does not support evidence that you can assess a situation in a more holistic manner. In other words, your bias has grown into a real problem. Declaring "the way it is" may be something we should be careful to do. I trust that my repeated disclaimers in this will reinforce that I'm presenting these concepts as my take and from my perspective. How you assess my comments matter. I trust that if these comments hold up to enough scrutiny that it will lend credibility to the thoughts. I'm not apologizing for my perspective, but I'm constantly aware and honest about the possibilities that I might have left out something important or just got something dead wrong. Matter of fact, depending on your perspective or focus, there's no doubt that I'll miss something. But the main point here is that sharing feelings is fine. You want to share them? Great. If it's the 93rd chorus of the same old song, then that's kind of boring and a little bit insulting to your audience... as if we didn't "get it" earlier. This has never been more true than the addition of Trump to the political landscape. But, Layer #1! Go for it.

Layer #3 – Commentary on International, Geopolitical, and Cross-cultural Stuff

Much of the following would apply in a much broader sense, but since I don't want to make the effort to write this to be more generic, let's just stick with Americans commenting on international anything. Yes, Layers #1 and #2 are still valid. Go for it. They are real. They are important. With that said, the number of times that "normal Americans" are worth listening to about International news is dangerously low. I mean fractions of a single percent. Are we stupid? Not necessarily. I tend to think that the general consensus among non-Americans about how little we know can be a little overblown. At the same time, it can make at least a little sense that the rest of the world has a bigger vested interest in knowing our stuff than most Americans need to know non-American stuff. Until that ignorance becomes a problem. In most cases it's not. But when it is a problem, it is a problem. So, what is one to do? Also, I'm not making a moral judgement about this dynamic, but it seems to make sense to me. Does America deserve this attention? Yes and no, but mainly yes. That's not a function of Americans being better. That's another conversation. But let's just say, there are a lot of people who would NOT go to the garden-variety American for their first take on an international incident. I'm pretty confident in this assessment. I might be wrong, but if you think otherwise, I'm going to want to hear your reasoning and supporting data. So, since this is written primarily to "garden-variety" Americans, it's important that we start with this bit of insight. If you don't know that the rest of the world generally thinks we don't know squat about "what's really going on," then you needed to hear this. Most likely, you had hints already.

Now, here's the meat. There are situations where a garden-variety American might have some real insight. It's probably important for me to clarify that I am most definitely including well-traveled Americans in the garden-variety category. I can think of a few people who have spent considerable time abroad who might be a little 'butt hurt' by my including them in the garden-variety category. Nevertheless, even that experience doesn't overcome the following logic. It just complicates it a bit.

International incidents are insanely complicated. I know. That's a huge news flash! But, in all honesty, even when someone does, in fact, know all of the relevant facts, if they are smart and honest, they would have to acknowledge that they still might not have all of the relevant facts. That's just the way that works. TOO MANY VARIABLES. That leaves us with doing the best we can with what we do know. That lack of complete knowledge coupled with general human inadequacies means that less than great decisions are regularly made. That basically leaves us with our intentions. And we all know what road is paved with good intentions. Even so, motives and larger goals then must factor in pretty heavily. In this most recent incident, I'd say the two sides have pretty incompatible goals. The dead general did not want the best for the USA. The USA obviously would not agree with him. That super over-simplified conflict of goals is fine for making this point, even as there was much more going on. Which is a great reason to return to the opening of this paragraph. International incidents are insanely complicated.

Since garden-variety Americans are not known for having the best insights on such things and the list of people who have access to the actual relevant data is a very short list, why do so many garden-variety Americans seem to think they're going to explain it to us? I say this is a counter-productive exercise. Please stop. Sharing 'interesting bits of information you might not have been aware of' postings that illuminate data, dynamics, groups, past behaviors, confused logic, and anything else that seems relevant to an incident or event is a great thing to do. That can



make us less ignorant. It's especially helpful when those offerings are not partisan or agenda-driven on face value. But that's typically not what happens.

If you have access to some real intel from actual players in the midst of an international incident, I can promise you that your best play is to keep your mouth shut, unless you want to lose that relationship. If you don't believe me, you can try it out for yourself. First of all, a real player in the realm of international incidents will only share things to serve a purpose. Talking to the media is an attempt to steer things in some direction. Talking to garden-variety Americans might be an emotional outlet, but those with real insight will also have security guidelines to follow and I doubt that you are that valuable of a friend to risk those.

Bottom line... people who are quick and ready to unpack what's going on and how you should understand and respond to international incidents are not to be trusted. There is no telling what will happen next, immediately after an international incident. During the pre-next step in the incident's story might 'prove' they are 'right' in their assessment, but I bet their assessment is lacking. The variables of what will unfold will add new variables. Some of it will be rational. Some not. The chances of someone 'explaining it to us' in a couple of tweets or through a five-paragraph Facebook posting is ridiculous. Surely you already knew this. If you are one that tends to do this, please stop.

And yet, I still want to encourage people. Say what you will. As is usually the case, our personal assessment of each person commenting is being impacted by everything that person posts. While we are far from done, it is nice to know that at least the first level of social media sophistication has come and gone, more or less. Humble brags are more obvious than ever before and generally on the decline – from my personal observations. Self-proclaimed moral superiority through the shouting down of other others is really lame, even though that hasn't slowed as much as the humble brags. Labeling others as idiots is often tempting, but it actually kind of proves the one doing the labeling isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer either.

Wouldn't it be nice if we were all half-as-smart as some of us think we are?!

Consider the Layers & Consider Not Commenting

Some international incidents are truly jacked up. Most have an edge. If you are in tune with anything, they are going to push some emotional buttons. Your initial assessment might be right on the money. Chances are there's a lot more going on than you will ever know. Be suspicious of explanations and especially those who would have you believe that they've got it figured out. But, still, listen carefully. Statistically speaking, you are probably not one to weigh in on it. But, Layer #1, baby!

