



## What If a Drone Hit an American Wedding?

Guest: Connor Boyack

January 15, 2014

*Connor Boyack is president of the Libertas Institute and creator of the Golden Rule News Network.*

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**WOODS:** Before we talk about this website—which I love, by the way—I want you to first talk about what you might have in mind when you’re using the term “golden rule” in connection with foreign policy. There’s a certain former presidential candidate who comes to mind in connection with this.

**BOYACK:** For those who are moving from a different planet or from some desert where they’ve never heard of this before, the Golden Rule is largely a religious concept, though many nonreligious ethicists share it as well. It’s a very pervasive concept in our society, and that is as it’s taught in Matthew by Jesus. He says in that instance, “Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you do ye even so to them.” And it’s said differently by different religious leaders. Most of the large world religions have this concept. It’s basically treating other people as you want them to treat you. It’s a very simple concept, an essential core to human relations.

As you note, as it relates to foreign policy, it came up in the recent presidential debates in South Carolina. The presidential candidates in the Republican party were fielding a question on foreign policy, and everyone except Ron Paul advocated increased military intervention. Newt Gingrich, for example, suggested that the approach to those he labeled “America’s enemies” was simply to “kill them.” Mitt Romney doubled down. He said, “Of course you take out our enemies, whatever they are. These people declared war on us. They’ve killed Americans. We go anywhere they are, and we kill them.” So you have this rabid, foam-at-the-mouth response from all these other candidates, and then you have Ron Paul, who strikes a different chord. He says, “If another country does to us what we do to others we’re not going to like it very much. So I would say that maybe we need to consider a Golden Rule in foreign policy. Don’t do to other nations what we don’t want them to do to us.”

This is extremely consistent with the Golden Rule. Not just with interpersonal relationships. This isn’t just something between husband and wife, or siblings or co-workers. Ron Paul is suggesting even nations or groups of people—let’s just treat other people, even outside of our immediate sphere of influence, how we would want them through their governments, through their militaries, to be treating us.

The reaction was quite interesting. Keep in mind in South Carolina it’s predominantly Baptist that’s the specific denomination that’s very strong, but it’s largely Christian in general. You would think that these people would understand the Golden Rule, and at least to some degree be willing to support it. Yet when Ron Paul suggested this in the context of foreign policy he was outright, and very loudly, booed by the audience.

It’s an interesting dynamic to see Christians, of all people, having this response. It was almost, I might call it,

pharisaical. You recall, of course, that Jesus Christ was belittling the Pharisees, who had created this complex legal and moral system that allowed them to feel good about their own, what he termed, “wickedness.” So here you have Christians in our day who have largely rejected the foreign policy based on the Golden Rule, and that’s what our project is seeking to do: restore that angle much along the lines that Ron Paul discussed in that debate.

**WOODS:** Before we get to the nature of that project let me raise what I think a lot of the people in that South Carolina audience would say in response to you. They would say, look, Boyack, your problem is you’re establishing a false moral equivalence here. The fact is they’re bad and we’re good. You can’t stand around saying, gosh, if other countries treated us the way we treat them.... Look, we do what we have to do, because they’re bad, and because they’re threatening to do bad things to people around the world. We don’t do what we do because we take a perverse delight in doing bad things. We’re good, and they’re bad. That’s the distinction here that a libertine like you can’t seem to recognize.

**BOYACK:** And in sympathy for people who might employ that criticism, let’s at least give them the benefit of the doubt, recognizing that they’re facilitated in that opinion by a media that dehumanizes people who have brown skin or live in Third World countries or that aren’t in a Western culture. They’ve largely grown up in a system of media that has helped them to adopt that system that sees them as unequal and different and therefore not like them and worthy of being excluded, if not deemed an enemy of the state or combatants or insurgents or whatever you want to call them. So I sympathize with people who want to share that view only in that they’re ignorant in that view for a good reason, and they haven’t been exposed to the truth, because they don’t know where it is. And they haven’t heard these ideas before.

Of course the ideas are wrong. It’s like Obama now, their administration’s policy is to call anyone an insurgent who’s over the age of 17 and in the vicinity of an actual known insurgent who’s targeted by a drone strike. So if you’re the brother or the cousin or a merchant standing next to the guy, and the bomb drops on you, you’re all of a sudden implicated as being associated with that allegedly bad actor and therefore you are also an insurgent. So the legal system, the media, everything helps people adopt this personality. They’re quite wrong, but I can at least understand why people think that way if they do share that opinion.

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**WOODS:** Tell me now about this Golden Rule News Network that you’ve started. Give me an example of an article that somebody might read on that site, and then tell us about the spin that’s been placed on it.

**BOYACK:** As pretext for giving you an example, a bit of history is needed. People who already agree with us, who are likeminded, or even just only by a little bit, we’ve often entertained these theoretical examples. So let’s say Anwar al-Awlaki is assassinated and then a couple of weeks later his 16-year-old son. Antiwar activists and the libertarians, we all try and generate conversation with people and say, how would we like it if another nation did that to us? It’s exactly what Ron Paul was bringing up. We try and have these conversations. Maybe sometimes we’re persuasive, but it’s really hard to try and crack this shell that people live in and get them to really entertain the idea.

A few weeks ago, in December, Reuters broke the story which has since exploded—the bombing of a wedding convoy in Yemen by a drone. I think about a dozen people were killed if I’m remembering right. It was over a dozen people. They were coming back from a wedding. It was tragic, and there was a piece in the *Atlantic* that really kind of catalyzed the thought process for me to start this project. It said, “Can you imagine the wall-to-wall press coverage, the outrage, and the empathy for the victims that would follow if an American wedding were attacked in this fashion, or how you’d feel about a foreign power that attacked your wedding in this fashion?”

Again he’s employing the same thing that Ron Paul did, the same thing that we do. He’s trying to generate

this conversation of the Golden Rule analysis of foreign policy. Reading that finally prompted me to say, you know, these conversations have proven largely ineffective. Maybe on random instances someone is waking up and realizing the error of their ways, and they're becoming an antiwar activist or learning to promote peace rather than war. It's not as effective. It's not having the impact it should merely to talk about it.

That was the genesis of the website, and it's much like the Onion. Everyone's familiar with [TheOnion.com](http://TheOnion.com). They use satire to really poke fun at something or make a point in an effective way to get people to think about things slightly differently than they might otherwise hear of or be exposed to. In this specific example, we've got the bombing of a wedding convoy in Yemen, and essentially on our site, all we do is we take real-world examples such as this one, and we change the names and the locations and all the key components of the article and flip them around to be American. Suddenly the drone attack killing a wedding convoy in Yemen becomes a missile strike from a Chinese carrier off the West Coast killing a caravan of American college students, because they were going after an alleged hacker that was in that caravan that had hacked their secretive firewall network in China. We change the circumstances a little.

When we first shared that story it went all over Facebook. People, of course, first thought it was real, so they were outraged: how could this happen? What's going on? And then they realize it's satire. It generated a lot of great conversation that we were getting and that we saw happening on other people's threads. They were copying around, so that's one of many examples. Sadly, there are many examples to use, because this happens all the time. We have no shortage of articles that we're going to be able to use in the weeks and months ahead to do this exact kind of thing.

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**WOODS:** Are you the website or do you have a stable of writers who are able to convert these stories into thought-experiment type stories?

**BOYACK:** Yes to both questions, really. I started it. I've written most of the articles that are up there now, but we have a team of interested people who are going to be freelancing and contributing to this. The real impact of the website, I think, is not going to be in the historical stuff. We're going all the way back. There was the example of the U.S. military infecting people in Guatemala in the 1940s with STDs. So we're turning that around and having that happen in America. We can go back through history and do some of these egregious things.

I think the staying power, the biggest impact of the website, is going to be with events in the future or what will then be current events, right? Think of just a few weeks ago when the bombing of the wedding convoy happened. If this website existed, if we were able to quickly publish a companion piece, everyone's talking about reading these stories in the news. If we can get the satirical story out there that twists it, it's going to be a lot more relevant, have a lot more impact. So we do have a team of people who are involved not only in doing research and what stories might be good to write that have already taken place but to be ready once an event happens in the future, a drone kills another innocent family, so we can quickly get an article out and have people try and change the debate with their friends and circles of influence.

**WOODS:** You mention using historical events, and I agree with you that I think it's events that are going to occur in the future that will be the most low-hanging fruit and the easiest for proselytizing for these ideas. But it calls to mind, for example, the decisions under Franklin Roosevelt to establish the relocation camps for the Japanese and Japanese-Americans. That sort of incident, if that occurred in some country that the United States and the American people consider to be their enemies today, if that occurred in *their* history, we would never hear the end of it: this just goes to show how incorrigibly evil these people are. But when it's U.S. history we either glide over it or we try to minimize it. It's our first instinct. And when I say *our* I don't mean *my*. I mean just a lot of average Americans. Their first instinct is: I must defend my government. I must put them in the most favorable light possible. I bet people in other countries feel the same way.

They've got to put their stupid government in the most favorable light possible. How about not doing that for a minute? How about just stopping and saying, look, I don't care whose government this is, whether it's theirs or mine. I have no say in any of these governments. They don't give a crap what I think about anything, and they're engaged in atrocities that I should acknowledge are atrocities regardless of who's carrying them out.

**BOYACK:** That's exactly right. I'm glad you brought that up, because the way we were going to be effective with these articles I think is using kind of the bogeyman, right? For example, we've got John Yoo, who worked as legal counsel for George W. Bush. The guy who says there's absolute authority for the president to do anything he deems best in protecting the country, including torturing a small child. I won't get into the graphic nature of that story.

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**WOODS:** Oh, yeah. It's bad. It's horrifying torture that he envisions.

**BOYACK:** We turn it around and said North Korea. The article, the title if you go on the website is "North Korea Claims Authority to Torture American Children." In that example they have some American prisoners like tourists who were nearby, and they claim that they were spies. So they've got these American prisoners and the chief lawyer for North Korea is saying this stuff. People were outraged. How could this happen? This is exactly the kind of reaction that we're trying to get with these articles: to say yeah, look, it's easy to think that way when you read a headline and it's just this North Korean bogeyman, the dictator over there. But when they actually get in the article, and they realize: wait a minute; this happened in America.

I think it's going to be a lot more persuasive than just pitching theoretical ideas to people. You're exactly right. We're all too prone—again, not a collective *we*—to be apologists for the state in which we live. So we're trying to break that paradigm. I think using the bogeyman that currently exists around the world that people more easily find to be objectionable, those are going to be the easy examples, and the people that we include in the stories, because people are more likely to be enraged at a known bogeyman rather than the president of the United States.

**WOODS:** When I gave that example when I talked about people who are desperate to search for corroborating evidence to support the claims of their government or to find justifications for what their government did, that was me. That's what I did when I was younger. The U.S. government would do some crazy thing, and people on the Left would criticize it, so I would think I was therefore obligated to defend it. No, I'm not. This is a twisted way of thinking that we're all indoctrinated into, and what you're doing is trying to draw us out of it.

Now it's easy for me to sit here on the other side of this microphone and give you assignments—

**BOYACK:** Please.

**WOODS:** —I am going to do that, because what I'm thinking about involves videos sometime down the road. The Onion does videos. I'd like to see a news broadcast where it's 30 seconds of the made-up version, the Golden Rule version. Then it goes in reverse. Then you say, wait a minute, sorry. We got the names and the places wrong. Let's start that over again. Then they tell the real story, and bang, you've got your Facebook page at the end. You've got your website name. And you just keep on harping on this day after day. I bet you'd get people out there who would love to help you out with video work. You're a busy guy. Here I am giving you assignments, but at least you can dream, right? Someday wouldn't that be where you'd like to go?

**BOYACK:** It is, in fact. We've got big dreams for the site. We're starting with war, because I think that's the most pertinent issue. It's one thing to talk about some guy being locked up in jail. It's another when

grandmas and kids are being blown up by drones at the behest of our military. It's the most sensational issue, but it's the most impactful one. You think about life, liberty, and property. Let's start first on the issue of life, but once we get some writers, we get a steady stream of articles; we are going to branch out into other stuff. Government corruption and white-collar crime and transparency issues and all this kind of stuff. Doing videos would be a fantastic thing.

I think we have a real opportunity here. Using social media is a very effective way. Think on Facebook, you log in, and you see the link. You see a screen shot, and you see a little blurb. If we have the right screen shot and the right title, people are going to be attracted to that. It's going to catch their eye. They're going to read it and be outraged. They're going to click. It's been really effective so far just to leverage social media and get these things to be more easily spread around rather than going to some academic conference or reading a white paper or some theoretical conversation. These things all are good. They have their place. I don't want to minimize them. But I think in our sound-bite generation, where people are unwilling to read anything that's longer than a couple pages and spend a lot of time, this is a good opportunity to really try and persuasively get to people and help them understand that, look, your initial gut reaction of "this is wrong" is right. You need to make sure you're consistent in that when it's your own government, when it's your own politicians. I'm really hopeful that utilizing social media is going to be a really effective thing to change the debate and get people to think a little bit more about this kind of stuff.

**WOODS:** Remind everybody what the URL is?

**BOYACK:** It's very easy. It's just [www.goldenruleneews.org](http://www.goldenruleneews.org).

**WOODS:** In the initial, I don't know, months, how often can we expect to see some kind of update there?

**BOYACK:** One of the things that we do to be a little bit sinister is we don't put dates on the articles, because if someone comes across an article that was written five months ago, we still want them to think that it was written that day as breaking news. Otherwise, they clearly would have heard about it on CNN or FOX.

**WOODS:** Good point.

**BOYACK:** We don't date the articles. We randomize them, so it's not just come and see what's new. We're going to try and do at least an article a week to get through some of the historical stuff. We're primed and ready, so as stuff happens going forward, within an hour or two of that breaking news we're going to try and have a companion article. If and when bad stuff happens in the future, some drone attack makes the news and you want to try and persuade your neocon friends to realize how wrong that is, come check out the website. We'll have that link at the top, that breaking article that we can then share with that relevant current news and try and change the conversation a little bit.

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