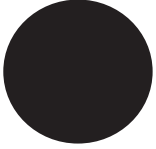


Karl E. Meyer is the editor of World Policy Journal.



## For Democracy, Warts and All

Karl E. Meyer

The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror

Natan Sharansky, with Ron Dermer

New York: PublicAffairs, 2004

The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad

Paperback edition, with an afterword on Iraq

Fareed Zakaria

New York: Norton, 2004

In turning these pages, I was reminded of the Pushmi-pullyu, the creature with identical horned heads facing fore and aft that enlivens the Dr. Dolittle children's stories by Hugh Lofting. Like the Pushmi-pullyu, these volumes are joined at the hips but face opposite ways. For Natan Sharansky, formerly a prisoner in the Soviet gulag, now an Israeli politician, freedom is for everyone and its expansion promises universal peace. Not so fast responds Fareed Zakaria, the India-born *Newsweek* editor who also favors the global promotion of democracy, but limited by serious checks on popular intolerance and illiberal demagogues. Together the books constitute a linked pair of contrary arguments ably articulated on a theme all the more topical following George W. Bush's inaugural commitment to sowing democracy even in rocky soil.

Both authors write with a passion and authority born of biography. As a Soviet dissident and Jewish refusenik, Sharansky was punished for his heresies with nine years' imprisonment. After his release in 1986, he resettled in Israel, winning election to the Knesset and becoming a hawkish ally of the

right-wing Likud Party. He presently serves in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's coalition cabinet as minister for Jerusalem and diaspora affairs. What gives ampler resonance to his arguments is their endorsement by President Bush, who invited the author to an Oval Office meeting. And who indeed has a better right than Sharansky to uphold the cause of dissidents, and to reproach those who pander to tyrants? Besides facing down his KGB tormentors, he joined with the eminent physicist Andrei Sakharov in energizing a broad-based Soviet human rights movement during the 1980s. Justly, he dedicates *The Case for Democracy* to the memory of Sakharov, "a man who proved that with moral clarity and courage, we can change the world."

He did, and they did. Justly, too, Sharansky lauds the landmark Helsinki Final Act of 1975, in which the Soviet Union gained formal recognition of Europe's post-1945 boundaries while agreeing to a human rights code binding on all 35 signatories, including most Western democracies and the Soviet bloc. The act thus forged a direct link between human rights and East-West

relations, a link whose true strength was misjudged alike by Leonid Brezhnev and Henry Kissinger. Sharansky tartly faults the former secretary of state for prizing détente and stability at the expense of justice, and for deferring to Communist godfathers as well as tyrannies in Chile, Greece, Indonesia, and the Arab Middle East. Neither Brezhnev nor Kissinger foresaw the proliferation of “watch committees” whose existence enabled first Jimmy Carter and then Ronald Reagan to censure gross abuses at review conferences in Belgrade (1977), Madrid (1980), Ottawa (1985), and Paris (1990), by which time the Soviet empire was nearing the boneyard.

So why not apply the same leverage to today’s autocracies? Sharansky details his vain attempts to end Western coddling of Middle East despots, and disputes the common calculation, even among Israelis, that a corrupt autocrat like Yasir Arafat could best gain Palestinian acceptance of an unpopular compromise peace. The theory failed; until his death Arafat proved unwilling or unable to take the necessary risks for peace. Having a perpetual enemy was for Arafat evidently essential to ensure his power. In truth, Sharansky reminds us, foreign policy experts repeatedly overestimate the inner strength of autocracy, and underestimate the appeal of democracy. He cites the fallible consensus that long deemed Germany, Japan, and Russia somehow unfit by culture for free government. His own experience in living in “a world of fear” persuaded him that the disabilities of dictatorship were incurable and democratic progress irresistible. “There is a universal impulse among all peoples not to live in fear,” he writes. “Indeed, given a choice the *vast majority* of people will always prefer a *free* society to a *fear* society” (his italics).

Yet alas, beyond generalities, Sharansky never really addresses obvious difficulties. America, for one thing, is not the same America that credibly clamored for his freedom in the 1980s. Beginning with the Iraq

invasion and the subsequent scandals over torture, America’s moral authority as a defender of universal rights has grievously eroded, as attested by polls in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and in this hemisphere, even in Canada. It is awkward, to say the least, to remonstrate others about secretly detaining political offenders—the commonest of human rights abuses—when the Pentagon and Justice Department perpetrate the identical offense. This has been coupled with the administration’s attitude, ranging from indifference to contempt, toward international agreements of every kind, ranging from Kyoto and the law of the sea to the punishment of war criminals.

Thus the country that gave the world the United Nations, the Nuremberg tribunals, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights now resists submitting genocide charges against Sudanese warlords to the International Criminal Court because an American somewhere else (there are no U.S. forces in Darfur) might at some future point just possibly face the same Hague tribunal. On this as on other matters, Washington’s position is very like that of the rich boy in the neighborhood who owns the ball, bat, and baseball diamond, and who invites poorer youngsters to play, so long as he chooses the teams and dictates the rules (and then wonders why he is disliked). It is an embarrassment that even Prime Minister Tony Blair, who at considerable political cost supported the Iraq war, virtually had to beg for the extradition of British subjects held incommunicado, without charges, in America’s offshore penal colony in Cuba.

At home and abroad, in word and deed, from the 1940s until 2000, Washington demonstrated a devotion to rule of law. Granted, there were palpable blots. It took half a century for Congress to approve reparations for Japanese-Americans interned during the Second World War, and it took almost as long for the U.S. Senate to ratify the genocide convention. The Kennedy administration authorized covert schemes to

assassinate foreign leaders, Jimmy Carter gullibly toasted the Shah of Iran, and Ronald Reagan turned a blind eye to U.S. complicity with death squads in El Salvador, to cite only a moiety. Yet these misdeeds and missteps provoked protests, legal challenges, and investigations by Congress, all audible and visible to a watching world.

Especially important was the vigilance of centrist political figures like the late senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. While serving earlier as chief U.S. delegate to the United Nations, Moynihan established his reputation by excoriating Soviet trespasses and shaming the General Assembly into revoking its resolution equating Zionism with racism. During the Reagan years, as chairman of the joint oversight committee on intelligence, Moynihan pursued with bulldog persistence the lawless arming of contra rebels and the covert mining of Nicaraguan harbors. He took aim at the CIA's self-serving exaggeration of Soviet strength, reminding his colleagues that Russia was the only industrial nation where life expectancy continually shrank. It is hard to overstate Moynihan's influence. In books as well as speeches, Moynihan steadfastly made the case for American adherence to world law. He noted that the genius of the Helsinki Final Act was its reciprocity. When the Soviet press, with pious indignation, invoked Helsinki in taking up the case of Russell Means, an American Indian Movement activist jailed for his part in killing an FBI agent, the senator welcomed this chance to compare criminal justice systems, here and there. There is, regrettably, nobody of Moynihan's stature now serving as watchdog; the loyal opposition on Capitol Hill seems cowed and toothless.

What would Pat Moynihan say about an incumbent attorney general, who while serving as White House counsel, advised President Bush that the Geneva Convention barring torture was an anachronism? Or worse, can one imagine Moynihan's response to the astonishing and alarming practice of

"rendition," whereby foreign-born Islamic suspects are deported—in effect, outsourced—by U.S. officials to torture-ready interrogators in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt? And for that matter, what does Natan Sharansky think about using the war on terror to justify the reputed tolerance of torture in America's gulag? That such questions could even be posed speaks volumes for Washington's diminished luster as the avatar of liberty.

There are, fortunately, glimmers of hope. The courts have struck down the Justice Department's reprehensible contention that the president can lawfully detain an American citizen without charge for nearly three years. It is minimally reassuring that the latest annual human rights survey just issued by the State Department cites reports by Human Rights Watch that the U.S.-installed Iraqi government commonly permits torture of detainees by "beatings with cables and hosepipes, electric shocks to their earlobes and genitals, and food and water deprivation." At the least, it will be ever harder for prosecutors and police to claim ignorance about what constitutes torture as they continue to interrogate that new Orwellian adversary, the "unlawful combatant."

#### *The Warts of Democracy*

Only briefly and in passing does Sharansky address a second objection to his too-simple thesis. The objection is phrased succinctly by Fareed Zakaria in *The Future of Freedom*: "Young democracies have a very poor record of handling ethnic and religious conflict. Elections require that politicians compete for votes. In societies without strong traditions of tolerance and multiethnic groups, the easiest way to get support is by appealing to people's most basic affiliations—racial, religious, ethnic. Once one group wins, it usually excludes the other from power. The opposition becomes extreme, sometimes violent. This does not have to happen, but often does." It does indeed. Think only of recent events in former

Yugoslavia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Myanmar.

It is Zakaria who came up with the useful phrase “illiberal democracy” to describe countries holding pantomime elections in which some half-senescent liberator-for-life wins over and again, to the cheering chorus of a castrated press. This parody of democracy is hypocrisy’s tribute to the genuine article. Zakaria’s prose is excellent, his reading impressive, and his authority rooted in his own experiences as an Indian Muslim born of an upper-middle-class family in Bombay. The lessons he has distilled are different from Sharansky’s. He believes that moving toward capitalism is the surest path to democracy, and that politically difficult economic reforms can sometimes be best carried out in an authoritarian transition—as in Spain, Chile, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Portugal. A desirable result of market reforms has been to increase per capita income, expand the middle class, and lay the groundwork for rule of law—to which this democrat would add, but only thanks to sustained kicking and shouting by human rights advocates. On this point, Fareed Zakaria seems of two minds, sometimes giving transitional godfathers too much leeway, at others correcting his course, especially concerning the Islamic Middle East. Here is a specimen passage:

At the start the West must recognize that it does not seek democracy in the Middle East—at least not yet. We seek first constitutional liberalism, which is very different. Clarifying our immediate goals actually makes them more easily attainable. The regimes in the Middle East will be delighted to learn that we will not force them to hold elections tomorrow. They will be less pleased to know that we will continually press them on a whole array of other is-

sues. The Saudi monarchy must do more to end its governmental and non-governmental support for extremist Islam, which is now the kingdom’s second largest export to the world. If this offends advocates of free speech, so be it. It must rein in its religious and educational leaders and force them to stop flirting with fanaticism. In Egypt, we must ask President Mubarak to insist that the state-owned press drop its anti-American and anti-Semitic rants and begin opening itself up to other voices in the country.

All this sounds fine, but elections remain the crown of the democratic system. If Natan Sharansky appears to have too much faith in the democratic vocation of ordinary people, Fareed Zakaria at times seems to have too little. Elections are the sacraments of free government, offering the humblest voter a blessed chance to fire his or her ruler. Since *The Future of Freedom* first appeared in 2003, we have witnessed an exhilarating sequence of electoral regime changes in India, Indonesia, Georgia, Romania, Spain, Portugal, and most dramatically, in Ukraine. These votes have a contagious demonstration effect that Zakaria, so I sense, underestimates. The tremors of Kiev have already reached Russia, the former Soviet republics of Belarus, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and conceivably may spread to Lebanon and even Egypt. (If so, administration defenders will claim vindication for the invasion of Iraq—which seems to me to miss the point. The allure of democracy in Kiev and elsewhere exists *despite* Iraq, since polls everywhere show a diminution in U.S. prestige since March 2003.)

The same difficulty recurs in Zakaria’s examination of democracy’s warts in the United States—there’s too much populist direct democracy, he fears, and too few safeguards to enable leaders to take hard decisions, say, on reducing deficits or reforming

Social Security. Zakaria cautions that endless gridlock has been the offspring of well-intended reforms that have weakened the once-formidable powers of committee chairmen in the U.S. Congress. Well, maybe. My own life as a journalist began in Washington during the 1960s, and I authored a series of *Washington Post* editorials deploring the near-tyrannical authority enjoyed by long-serving committee potentates; they throttled every attempt to bring basic civil rights legislation to a vote. It took the assassination of two Kennedys and of Martin Luther King Jr., plus marches on Washington and into the Deep South, and the accession of Lyndon Johnson, the former master of the Senate, to defeat the fortified baronies in Congress and finally end the ignoble reign of Jim Crow. Hence I read with dry eyes Fareed Zakaria's lament that members of Congress are excessively attentive to public opinion and all its admitted vagaries.

Indeed, Zakaria seems of two minds on this very point. He recalls that during the 1990s an American scholar came to Kazakhstan on a U.S.-sponsored mission to advise the newborn republic on electoral laws. A Kazakh lawmaker remarked emphatically, "We want our parliament to be just like your Congress." As the visiting expert recalled, "I tried to say something other than the three words that had immediately come

screaming into my mind, 'No, you don't!'" To which Fareed Zakaria comments:

This view is not unusual. Americans in the democracy business tend to see their own system as an unwieldy contraption that no other country should put up with. In fact, the philosophy behind the U.S. Constitution, a fear of accumulated power, is as relevant today as it was in 1789. Kazakhstan, as it happens, would be particularly well served by a strong parliament—like the American Congress—to check the insatiable appetite of its president.

So will the real U.S. Congress please stand up? Is it a spineless assemblage of focus-group addicts, and as such incapable of taking imperative decisions? Or is it a strong parliament vested with the constitutional mission of checking the unbridled pretensions of a near-imperial president? One guesses that for my esteemed fellow editor, it is both. Like the Pushmi-pullyu, the American system faces two ways. Possibly the best epigraph for these valuable books is the famous remark ascribed to Winston Churchill, that democracy is the worst system of government, save for all the rest. ●