



From Tyranny to Freedom

By Michael A. Ledeen

History reveals that freedom and democracy can grow among peoples liberated from tyrannical regimes. While some would argue such political transformation depends more upon a slow and lengthy process of change than on military intervention, nothing so effectively discredits tyranny as its defeat in war, as the collapse of Nazism and Japanese imperialism so clearly demonstrate.

Recent acts of barbarism against coalition forces in Iraq have revived an old and enormously important debate: are these terrorists the products of fanatic tyrannies, or are the tyrannies the logical expression of the true nature of the peoples of the region?

This is not an academic exercise, for many argue that our foreign policy depends on the answer. If we believe that the barbarism is the result of the likes of Saddam Hussein and the Iranian mullahs, then the war against terrorism should concentrate on regime change. Once the tyrants are removed, the terrorists will be deprived of their sustenance, and greater freedom and democracy can be expected. But, it is said, if fanaticism and barbarism are part and parcel of the region's culture, mere regime change cannot possibly eliminate this sort of terrorism. Some way would have to be found to change the culture, and only then could terrorism be truly defeated and a political transformation succeed.

Ancient and Modern Examples

It is an ancient and highly instructive debate. It is featured in the book of Exodus in a lively confrontation between Moses and the Almighty. In one of the many uprisings against Moses, the

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Jews demand new leaders who will lead them back to Egypt. God reacts with disgust, tells Moses that these people are unworthy of the divine mission, and announces his intention to kill all but a small remnant, the few people deserving of freedom and the Holy Land. Moses insists that they can be taught, and achieves a compromise: they will be spared, but will have to remain in the wilderness for forty years. Thereafter a new generation will create Israel. Were the rebellious Jews created by Egyptian tyranny, or were they the sort of people who preferred tyranny to freedom?

The newly freed slaves of Egypt were not quickly transformed into freedom-loving democrats, despite their exceptional leaders. But in time they and their children learned the habits of mind of free people.

The greatest modern political thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli, observed that it is as difficult to bring freedom to a people accustomed to tyranny as it is to crush freedom in a free society. Yet Machiavelli knew that both had been accomplished, even though he took a very dim view of human nature ("man is more inclined to do evil than to do good").

At the end of the Second World War, the leaders of the Great Generation pondered the disposition of Germany and Japan. Many believed it was impossible to bring freedom to people who had embraced fascism and its attendant culture of death

(from Japanese suicide bombers in their kamikaze aircraft to SS fighters on the ground celebrating heroic death). The renowned George F. Kennan, then the chief of the State Department's policy-planning staff, was convinced that there were no potential democratic leaders in Germany, and that we should retain the Nazi bureaucracy. At least they knew how to manage a modern state. And in Japan, many of our wisest men insisted that the only hope for Japanese democracy was the total extirpation of the Imperial culture; the Emperor had to go.

But there were democrats in Germany who proved excellent leaders of a free country, and the emperor still sits on his throne in democratic Japan.

The Challenge in the Muslim Middle East

To those who say that democracy cannot be introduced in the Muslim Middle East, where it has never existed, there is an easy answer: if that were true, then there would be no democracy at all, since tyranny is older than democracy, and oppression has been far more common than freedom for most of human history. Every free people lived under tyranny before it became free; freedom has had to be wrested from the hands of kings, caliphs and nobles, and imams and priests—and it has invariably been a tough battle. But that is quite different from saying it cannot be done at all.

The history of the Muslim world abounds with examples of successful self-government, from the high degree of autonomy granted to some of the lands of the Ottoman Empire to the remarkably modern Iranian Constitution of 1906, and the contemporary Middle East is currently bubbling with calls for greater freedom, often from surprising sources (such as the son of Libyan tyrant Muammar Gaddafi). It is hard to believe that the peoples of the Middle East are bound and determined to remain oppressed when millions of Iranians have demonstrated for freedom, and, just within the past few months, pro-democracy demonstrations have erupted in Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Yet those in Iraq who are killing us and our allies, along with Arab civilians—and even themselves and their own children—are also part of the culture of the Middle East, and they draw upon it to justify their actions and inspire others to do likewise. Do we not have to change at least those elements of the region's culture? Can we expect to defeat terrorism without also discrediting the ideas and passions that underlie it? And does that not automatically mean a long process, in which political and military weapons are largely irrelevant?

I do not think so. Nothing so discredits an idea as its defeat in the real world. Had we not defeated the fascists in World War II, the heirs of Tojo, Hitler, and Mussolini would most likely still rule Japan, Germany, and Italy, and some version of fascism would most likely remain a potent force in many other societies, just as it was in the twenties, thirties and early forties. But our victory in war defeated both the enemy regimes and their evil doctrines, and fascism is no longer an inspiration. If we defeat the terrorists and remove the regimes that support them, we are likely to find the appeal of bloody jihad dramatically reduced. There is undoubtedly a connection between the pro-democracy demonstrations (and Libya's surrender) and the liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The barbarians in Fallujah are part of a culture that is both bloody and peaceful, just like the Western culture that produced fascism and communism. The central issue in this war is which elements in that culture will prevail. You do not have to be a Hegelian to believe that ideas rise and fall with the people that embrace them, or that culture is linked to the success and failure of its advocates. We may not know the answer to the academic question: whether the culture favored tyrants or if the tyrants imposed a culture favorable to their domination. But we do know the answer to the policy question: tyranny and terror, along with the culture that favors them, can be defeated, to the benefit of freedom and even democracy.