

When Democracy Becomes Tyrannical

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It has often been said that the world should be made safe for democracy, but the problem now is that democracy is no longer safe for the world. A good example is the current (2003) U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, in spite of the disapproval of the UN Security Council and many protests around the world.

As the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said some weeks ago, the U.S. invasion constituted a violation of international law, since, in accordance to the UN Charter, all member states (which include the U.S. and Iraq) are sovereign equals and no interference in the internal affairs of a member state is allowed by another member state. The only exception in the UN Charter is the clause for self-defense, as a threat to world peace, but even here the interference (by force in this case) must be approved by the UN Security Council. But the U.S. did not obtain the approval of the UN Security Council, and many of the major members (including some U.S. allies like France and Germany, and others like Russia and China) disapproved the military action. And for the first time since the Vietnam War, there have been unprecedented protests against the war, not just at home but also around the world. The point here is that, for many people (except the Nazis, the fascists, and others along that line), “might” does not make “right” (even with the best intentions).

There are therefore two important questions to be asked here, firstly, how exactly has the Bush administration done to manipulate public opinion in order to justify this blatant violation of international law, and secondly, what then are the consequences for the long term interests of both the U.S. and the world? Let me first answer the first question and then the second.

In the first question, the Bush administration has engaged in various tricks of disinformation, especially (though not exclusively) for domestic consumption. Hereafter are three major familiar tactics.

•*Trick #1: Anti-War Protestors Give Comfort to the Enemies.*

In accordance to this tactic, if you do not support the war, you must be called unpatriotic (which means “bad,” as it allegedly gives comfort to the enemies) or anti-American (which also means “bad”), so this “black or white” mentality does not take the pain to think about other desirable alternatives (e.g., neither on the side of Bush’s violation of international law nor on the side of Hussein’s dictatorship). As Jamin Raskin, a scholar of constitutional law, once pointed out, there is a distinction between “fanatic” (or debased) patriotism and “constitutional” patriotism. In the former, one does whatever the government tells one to do, whether right or wrong, as the slogan goes, “Right or wrong, this is my country,” whose stupidity invites Samuel Johnson to rebuke that patriotism of this type is the last refuge of scoundrels. Individuals who call themselves patriotic like this often do not bother to think too much, with potentially devastating consequences to their own countries in the long term.

By contrast, in constitutional patriotism, critical thinking is regarded as a first duty for a patriot to do, especially with the lessons from WWII. As David Mikkelson reminded us, shortly after WWII, Herman Goering, the notorious Nazi Reichsmarshall and Luftwaffe-Chief, at the Nuremberg trials allegedly confessed: “Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger.” This was exactly how, though in a way, the Nazis dragged their own people into WWII.

This “black or white” mentality does not allow other options, and a good instance in the current case on Iraq is to give the UN more time to resolve the conflict. And the fact is that much

progress had been made right to the last minute; for instance, since the Gulf War, Iraq has not been able to invade any country nor to engage in ethnic cleansing against the Kurds. In addition, Iraq has not been able to produce much of any weapons of mass destruction, and what has been found so far is tiny as compared with what Iraq had before the war. This is enormous progress, in a way, and this temporary “good behavior” of Iraq (to borrow a phrase from criminal justice for inmates who receive lesser sentences because of temporary “good behavior” in prisons) should be put into the right perspective.

•Trick #2: *Iraq Has Weapons of Mass Destruction and Intends to Use Them Against Us.*

Many countries want to have weapons of mass destruction, since the U.S. has the world’s largest stockpile of them (often the most sophisticated ones, which often mean the most destructive), and almost all of the weapons of mass destruction in the world have been produced with American and European technologies. The U.S. has never been willing to get rid of its own stockpiles, so why should other countries not be allowed to have likewise? A typical excuse is that the U.S. has the weapons with “good” intentions, but other countries want to have them with “evil” purposes.

Ironically, the only country which has ever used nuclear weapons in the entire human history so far is the U.S. itself. Remember the atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima? And worse, many of the weapons of mass destruction which have ever been used in battlefields are primarily used by the major powers themselves. Major European countries used them during the world wars, and the U.S., for instance, used Napalm bombs and Agent Orange in Vietnam, and President Nixon even told Henry Kissinger and his close advisors, “I’d rather use the nuclear bomb...The nuclear bomb....We want to decimate that goddamned place. North Vietnam is going to get reordered....It’s about time, it’s what should have been done long ago.”

And only some days before the beginning of the bombing, the Bush administration threatened to exercise pre-emptive strikes against Iraq with weapons of mass destruction. But if the U.S. is so willing to threaten others with this military advantage, how should other countries not have the motivation to get some of these weapons themselves? Yet, even more ironically, Iraq, both in 1991 and now in 2003, did not use weapons of mass destruction even with the U.S. troops attacking inside their territory (as was 1991) and unto their own capital (as is now), in spite of our attribution to them with these “evil” intentions. On the other hand, our so-called “good” intentions have often been translated instead into massive bombings of other countries (days and nights for weeks and months, without any mercy, as in “carpet bombings”). Yet when some terrorists bombed the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the U.S. got mad like hell, but when the U.S. does the same (many times of magnitude over) to other countries, it is taken as naturally “good.” It is no wonder that there is so much anti-Americanism abroad these days.

•Trick #3: *We are There to Liberate the Iraqis from Hussein.*

“Down, down U.S.A. – don’t stay, go away!” chanted Ahmed Osman, a teacher among many other Iraqis protesting in front of the Palestine Hotel (down Baghdad), where the U.S. troops now stay as their headquarters, as reported in *the New York Times* (03/15/03). Bush has never consulted ordinary Iraqis about what to do for their country and simply imposed his will (by force) on them. The brutal truth is that the U.S. is more interested in the creation of pro-American puppets by force for oil and geopolitics of the region than in the ordinary Iraqis (whose lives are not regarded as worth much).

We have often forgotten that Saddam Hussein used to be an important ally of the U.S. against Iran, and the U.S. had supported him for years, in spite of his brutality at home and abroad; he was an important “CIA asset” at the time. Ironically, the same story can be told about Osama bin Laden, whom the U.S. also supported for many years in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.

To say that the U.S. is there to liberate the Iraqis from Hussein is a major twist of the tongue in foreign policy, since this reminds me so many times that tyrants often use the same excuse to invade other places. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and installed a pro-Soviet regime under Babrak Karmal, their excuse was that they were there to liberate the Afghans

from the oppression of the previous regime, even with the “invitation” of Afghanistan. Of course, the rest of the world did not buy this shameless Soviet propaganda then, neither does it believe this time either in the U.S. propaganda. The U.S. has a long history of treating the lives of foreigners simply as “collateral damages.” Even Colin Powell, when questioned about Iraqi casualties (in one’s estimate, 1/1000 ratio when compared to American ones) during the Gulf war, simply replied: “That is really not a matter I am terribly interested in,” so it is no wonder that many abroad consider this American tendency “a reckless disregard for human life [i.e., foreigners as worth little],” as H Zinn put it. And A.Gandhi once reported that “for more than ten years we have continued to wreak havoc....[A]n estimated 50,000 children die very year because of sanctions that we have imposed – and it hasn't moved us to compassion. All this is done, we are told, because we want to get rid of the Satan called Saddam Hussein.”

The U.S. has a long history of empire building, constantly invading, bombing, and occupying other countries, just as it is involved in overthrowing other regimes at will and setting up a puppet after another. Even here in the states, several states in western and southwestern parts of the country used to be part of Mexico but were annexed by the U.S. in its history of imperial expansion, and the Native Indians were almost exterminated. Abroad, many of the regimes the U.S. has supported over the years have notorious records of human rights violations, and the list includes infamous figures like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, Ariel Sharon in Israel, Nguyen Van Thieu in South Vietnam, the last shah in Iran, Augusto Pinochet in Chile (who was later charged for “crimes against humanity”), Manuel Noriega in Panama, and Ferdinand Marcos in Philippines in the past, just to cite some instances. And, now, the different regimes (e.g., Pakistan, Jordan, and Egypt) which the U.S. is supporting in the Middle East were even listed in the 2001 *Human Rights Report* by the U.S. State Department as failing to defend human rights.

Each time when the U.S. bombs and invades a country, it then proceeds to set up a new regime, often with the accomplice of major mass media showing on TV and elsewhere the pictures of local people celebrating and welcoming the U.S. forces. The Soviet troops did the same in Afghanistan before, with Soviet evening news at home showing pictures of local Afghans celebrating and welcoming the so-called Soviet liberators. And the Nazis did the same in conquered territories of Europe, with the Nazi mass media showing pictures of local people welcoming and celebrating the Nazi “liberation” of them from their own oppressed rulers.

In the second question, the issue now is the consequences of this violation of international law in international affairs. Even President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, himself a key U.S. ally in the Arab world, said the other day that the U.S. invasion of Iraq does not lessen the long term security concerns, since it helps to incite the age-old resentment against American and European invasion and hegemony in the region, and one consequence is the emergence of “100 more bin Ladens” in the future (figuratively speaking, of course).

When reason ends and power begins, legitimacy is in the eyes of the beholder. In other words, those who use power to force others to comply only create at best temporary order to their illusive satisfaction, because the weak have no choice but to yield in proportion to their lack of power. Yet simultaneously, what looms behind the scene is the formation of new balance of power for the next round of rebellion against the powerful.

So, might makes right only for those who conquer and invade, but for those who are on the other side of the fence, might (force) creates resentment, anger, and revenge in the vicious cycle of violence, as it has been since the beginning of human civilization. So continues the cycle, until the next round (e.g., of anti-American attacks in the current context), to be followed up by some more bombings abroad, with each side creatively giving it a beautiful name to its own liking, for instance, “Jihad,” “Operation Infinite Freedom,” “God Is On Our Side,” and you are welcome to add yours. I wish humanity good luck.

Note: Many of the citations here are from my book *The Future of Capitalism and Democracy* (MD: The University Press of America, 2002).