The Promotion of World Peace and Harmony. Is the "War on Terrorism" Endangering Democracy?

> The story of America is the story of expanding liberty; an ever-widening circle, constantly growing to reach further and include more.[1]

The American-led war on terrorism has had two professed goals. First, the goal of self-defence deemed necessary in the wake of September 11th; and second the goal of democratisation, attempted through the removal of repressive regimes that encourage the development of terrorist groups. The war's practitioners argue (like practitioners of war before them) that a war on terror is the only means for peace. Not only will it secure the safety of Americans, it will spread the American dream. It is the means by which every individual across the globe will participate in a democratic society, will have the right to free speech and freedom from persecution. According to George W. Bush, "by promoting liberty abroad we will build a safer world. By encouraging liberty at home we will build a more hopeful America".[2] Freedom, it would appear, is worth fighting for.

But there are many who feel that the war on terror is endangering the very principles it professes to protect. That far from promoting democracy, it is in fact democracy's biggest threat. This essay will examine this argument through the use of two analytical strands. The first strand will be threats to democracy *in principle*, and will focus on the new regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. If we must adapt our concept of 'democracy' in order to apply it to these new systems, it will pose a threat to democratic principle. The second

---

[1] George W. Bush, *http://boycottliberalism.com/Bush-quotes.htm*
[2] Ibid.

strand will be threats to democracy *in practice*, and will focus on recent anti-terrorism legislation in Western countries. If this legislation appears to compromise democratic rights, a threat will be posed to democratic practice. The final section will assess the implications of the war on terror and draw some conclusions about the survival of democracy in the face of current dangers.

Dangers to Principle of Democracy

Diamond and Morlino identify five minimum requirements necessary for democracy to exist. These are universal adult suffrage; recurring, free, competitive and fair elections; more than one serious political party; alternative sources of information; and some degree of civil and political freedom beyond the electoral arena.[3] Diamond and Morlino also outline several dimensions through which to assess democratic *quality* of different regimes, but stress that the above requirements are necessary for the most basic of democratic system to survive. This provides a useful criterion by which to examine the new regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. If they fail to display these characteristics, we are endangering the principle of democracy by terming them thus.

The initial picture in Afghanistan appeared to be one of resounding success: the repressive Taliban regime had been ousted; many al-Qaeda terrorists had been decimated; a representative interim government was in place; and a multi-national peacekeeping

---

[3] Larry Diamond & Leonardo Morlino, 'An Overview', <u>Journal of Democracy</u>, p. 21

force deployed.[4] But these successes do not by themselves ensure the success of a democratic regime. Milan Vaishnav argues that the reliance on Afghani warlords during combat has since consolidated their power, a situation that undercuts the authority of any central government.[5] As testament to the prevalence of organised crime, Afghanistan's share in global opium production rose from 12% to a staggering 76% after the fall of the Taliban in 2002.[6] Lack of financing has also been a problem, as the US spent eleven times more money on defeating Taliban remnants than it did on civilian reconstruction.[7] And all this has been in addition to the fact that Afghanistan is a 'vast country with scarce resources, a fractionalised populace, and non-existent infrastructure'.[8]

Iraq poses even more of a problem. One does not need to look far to see evidence of dissent and insurgency, combated by violent military measures. While 'political conflicts and social riots are the inevitable consequences of the fall of any authoritarian regime'[9], they are likely to be even more protracted and enduring in Iraq. Iraqi society is incredibly complex and is divided along ethnic, religious, tribal and class lines: the Kurds are uniting to make demands for an independent Kurdistan; the Shi'a (forming 60% of the Iraqi population, but divided many times over amongst themselves) are likely to push for an Islamic state, something the US has already declared it will not tolerate; and the Sunnis, favoured under Saddam Hussein have little interest in participating in the new

---

[4] Irving Brecher, 'Terrorism, Freedom and Social Justice: The War in Afghanistan', International Journal, p. 142
[5] Milan Vaishnav, 'Afghanistan: The Chimera of the 'light footprint'' in Robert C. Orr (ed.) *Winning the Peace*, p. 245
[6] Ibid. p. 249
[7] Ibid. p. 245
[8] Ibid. p. 244
[9] M. V. Naidu, 'Crises in post-Saddam Iraq', in Peace Research, p. 2

system.[10] Members of all these and other ethnic and religious groups have resorted to violence as a protest against the American occupation.

The above factors make the creation of viable democracy at best extremely unlikely. Evidence of new governing strategies makes it even more so. The Iraqi governing council was eventually set up in July 2003 and comprised 25 Iraqis, handpicked by the US-led Coalition Provincial Authority (CPA). Its lack of legitimacy was compounded by the fact that the CPA retained an ultimate veto over decisions made, and that the lines of authority between CPA and council were never clearly articulated.[11] Despite recent Iraqi elections, legitimacy is still lacking. In predominantly Sunni regions turnout was desperately low - in the Al-Anbar region, which includes Falluja and Maladi, it was a miserable 2%.[12] Although the Shi'a alliance won 48% of the vote, London-based Iraqi Shi'a Adnan Hussein argued that it could be a 'major mistake' if the Shi'a political alliance 'misreads and misunderstands the results of the elections by imagining that they had achieved a landslide victory in clean elections.'[13] The use of draconian security measures, excessively complicated ballot papers and the fact that most candidates were too afraid to be seen in public were just some of the problems. According to columnist Salim Lone,

---

[10] Ibid. p. 2-4; also see Michael Albert (interviewer), 'Noam Chomsky on Iraq War' in Peace Research
[11] Bathsheba N. Crocker, 'Iraq: Going it Alone, Gone Wrong' in Robert C. Orr (ed.) *Winning the Peace*, p. 273-4
[12] The Guardian, 'Shi'a Delight', Feb 14th 2005, www.guardian.co.uk/leaders/story/0,,1412127,00.html
[13] The Guardian, 'Arab World Remains Divided', Feb 14th 2005 www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1412212,0.html

> 'the election fell so completely short of accepted electoral standards that had it been held in, say, Syria or Zimbabwe, Britain and America would have been the first to denounce it'.[14]

It is hardly necessary to state that both Afghanistan and Iraq fall short of the minimum requirements for democracy. Whilst elections have taken place in both countries, it would be difficult to describe them as 'free, competitive and fair'. Most importantly there is a lack of legitimacy, which makes the democratic developments appear absurd. In Afghanistan it is still the ancient warlords that hold the reins of power, and in Iraq, the level of violence and accompanying security measures have essentially created a police state. Valerie Bunce lists a 'continuing and constitutionally sanctioned role of the military in politics' as one of the biggest threats to the survival of democracy.[15] If we are to describe post-war Afghanistan and Iraq as democracies, we must alter what we perceive democracy to be.

Dangers to Practice of Democracy

The war on terror is unique. Unlike traditional wars between nations, it has not been concluded with the successful removal of target regimes. It is a war fought on many fronts and a war with no definitive end (save the elimination of all terrorists from the planet, which even for the United States seems an impossible task). It has therefore involved change in policy within Western borders to clamp down on possible terrorist

---

[14] Salim Lone, 'An Election to Anoint an Occupation', Jan 31st 2005
www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1402181,00.html
[15] Valerie Bunce, 'Comparative Democratisation', Comparative Political Studies, p. 720

activity. America, Britain and Canada among others have all enacted anti-terrorist legislation in the wake of September 11th.

America's 'Patriot Act' involved sweeping new powers regarding the surveillance of American citizens, as well as the ability to arrest and detain Americans without charge.[16] Its initiation and implementation was so rapid, it was described by the American Civil Liberties Union as:

> 'an offence to the thoughtful legislative procedures necessary to protect the Constitution and the Bill of Rights at a times when the rights of so many Americans are being jeopardised'[17].

The Canadian counterpart, bill C-36, whilst similar in nature was more thoroughly debated and under pressure included a 'sunset clause'. Still, it was rushed through parliament with a haste that was largely unnecessary.[18]

Many people have argued that the new legislation, particularly the Patriot Act, is so vague that there can be no meaningful safeguard against its abuse.[19] The possibility of indefinite detention without charge is reminiscent of Apartheid South Africa as well as of other repressive regimes. But proponents of the legislation argue that compromises to democratic practice are necessary in order to ensure security. They believe that liberty is important, but security more so. That freedom can be 'curtailed to the extent that the

---

[16] Scott Ritter, *Frontier Justice,* p. 192
[17] cit. Alex Mazer, 'Debating the Anti-terroris m Legislation: Lessons learned', <u>Canadian Parliamentary review</u>, p.30
[18] ibid.
[19] see Laurence H. Tribe, 'We Can Strike a Balance on Civil Liberties', in Etzioni & Marsh (eds.) *Rights vs Public Safety after 9/11* p. 16

benefits in greater security outweigh the costs in reduced liberty'.[20] George W. Bush is not alone in taking the argument further[21] - Douglas Kmiec argues that:

> …the possibility of abuse [of the new laws] should not obscure the present need and the supposition of trust that one must have *if our democratic order is to be safeguarded* from those outside our borders who wish to subvert it.[22]

To curtail liberty for the purpose of ensuring security is at least rational. To curtail liberty for the purpose of ensuring liberty is not. This contradiction in the pro-war logic has caused unease amongst many in the western world.

Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter regards developments in American domestic policy as very concerning. He goes so far as to argue that 'the America of today has drifted dangerously close to oligarchy, and if not stopped, runs the risk of becoming a neo-fascist state'.[23] Drawing comparisons between America and Nazi Germany he quotes Nazi henchman Herman Goering:

> 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 peacemakers for a lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.[24]

The quote, whilst controversial, is startlingly applicable. Since September 11th, America has behaved in many ways similarly to Germany after the burning of the Reichstag.[25] If

---

[20] Richard A. Posner, 'The truth about our liberties' in Etzioni & Marsh (eds.) *Rights vs. Public Safety After 9/11* p. 26
[21] see footnote 2
[22] Douglas W. Kmiec, 'Confusing Freedom with licence – Licences Terrorism not Freedom' in Etzioni & Marsh (eds.), *Rights vs. Public Safety after 9/11*, p. 50 my emphasis
[23] Scott Ritter *Frontier Justice,* p. 186
[24] Herman Goering, cit. ibid. p. 189
[25] see ibid. p. 189-90

one needs more justification to make such a comparison, we need only turn to the grave situation in Guantanamo Bay.

Despite protest from the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, international legal authorities and even from Britain – America's closest ally – the United Sates has refused to call prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay 'prisoners of war'. Referred to as 'unlawful combatants' they have consequently not been subject to the Geneva Convention.[26] Prisoners have been deprived of their basic senses by blacked out goggles, facemasks, ear-cups and shackles. They have been shaven of their hair and beards – a vital part of their religious identity - housed in concentration camps, exposed to the weather and forced to sleep on concrete slabs.[27] They have been denied access to legal representation, and have not been sentenced by a court. If this represents the freedom America is attempting to export, the rest of the world can be forgiven if it elects to refuse it.

Canada has been a vocal critic of conditions in Guantanamo Bay. Those in Canada tend to believe that *Canadian* democracy is strong enough to endure challenges that it might face. Many feel that the opposition and debate surrounding Bill C-36 for example, displays the strength of the Canadian democratic character: 'The fact that opposition to various anti-terrorism measures has not been seen as 'un-Canadian'… is a sign of strength, perspective and maturity in Canadian democracy'.[28] But, Canada should not be too quick in its judgement. Opposition to new legislation has not been termed 'un-Canadian' because the attacks of September 11th were not against Canada. Angelo

---

[26] Douglas Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War: the Dangers of the Bush Legacy*, p. 178-10
[27] ibid. p. 178
[28] Kent Roach, *September 11th, Consequences for Canada*, p. 131

Persichilli lists many instances in which Canada, perceiving itself under attack, has violated human rights. During the Second World War for example, 3,000 Canadians of Italian origin were interned for three years without trial or formal charges; in 1970, then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act in response to terrorism perpetrated by the Front de Liberation du Quebec – 'whose actions amounted to a drop in the ocean when compared to the attacks on the twin towers'.[29] Instead of leading us to denounce the United States, September 11th must act as an important reminder that every democracy is fragile.

Understanding the present situation

George W. Bush would like us to perceive the war on terror as a crusade of good against evil. For the average thinking person however, this explanation leaves much to be desired. It is hard to regard America as spearheading the "civilised world" when it 'plunges into major war instead of following the means prescribed by international law.'[30] Compromises to democracy both in theory and in practice necessitate a different, more complex analysis.

Critics are beginning to draw comparisons between the ideology of the United States and that of the force it professes to be fighting. Jewett and Lawrence are not alone in arguing that the war on terror is actually a conflict between two closely related forms of religious

---

[29] Angelo Persichilli, 'No lectures about human rights please: Canadian political history stained by injustices to human rights as well' The Hill Times p. 8-9
[30] Noam Chomsky, *9/11,* p. 80

fanaticism.[31] According to their study, there are six fundamental similarities between the American, Christian based war on terror and Islamic Jihad"

1) Both sides believe they have God on their side

2) Both sides see the opponent as 'absolute evil' and any compromise as thus immoral

3) Mourning over the deaths of opponents is thus illogical

4) Both believe their own violence is redemptive, and that the violence of the other is senseless and unjust

5) To concede defeat is to abandon faith itself

6) Every enemy action is seen to 'desecrate the holy' and overcoming such desecration is the only means for peace[32]

These similarities give a new perspective on the war on terror – enabling us to view it not as a battle between democracy and dictatorships, justice and injustice, but as a clash of two civilisations. As such its professed goals can be appropriately disregarded and the reality of the situation accepted. We are witnessing an almighty battle that shows no sign of ending. It is a battle that no amount of democratisation will appease.

Implications for Democracy

As we have seen, the war on terror is compromising both the theory and practice of democracy. Whilst this essay has divided these incursions into two separate categories,

---

[31] Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil,* p. 22; see also Tariq Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, p. 3p; and Douglas Kellner, *Theorising 9/11*, p. 44
[32] ibid. p. 24-5

they are closely linked and examples in both sections are in most cases interchangeable. To bring the two together we can ask the most poignant theoretical question that arises from this analysis: If *compromises* to democracy are necessary to *protect* democracy – then what *is* democracy and is it worth fighting for? If the United States is democratic, then 'democracy' allows violations of Human Rights. Without the right to trial, civil and political freedom – a minimum requirement for democracy – is severely curtailed. If America wishes to set a precedent for democratic practice across the globe, it must accept that the precedent it is setting is not in keeping with democratic theory.

This contradiction seems so significant that it is hard to understand why there is not more outrage at the behaviour of the United States. How can thinking people possibly accept such a flawed logic for all-out international war? The unfortunate but simple reason is that none of this is new. This is not the first times the United States has cited reasons of security for clamping down on civil rights. The McCarthy era targeted 'communists' rather than 'terrorists' but the effect was largely the same. In Canada, human rights violations during the Second World War and in the 1970s were also undertaken as a matter of course.

In theoretical terms too, compromise and adaptation are nothing out of the ordinary. The word 'democracy' is so broad that all kinds of regimes can be incorporated into it. The terms 'semi-democracy', 'virtual democracy', 'electoral democracy', 'pseudo-democracy', 'illiberal democracy', 'semi-authoritarianism', 'soft authoritarianism' and 'electoral authoritarianism' are applicable to much of Africa, post-communist Eurasia,

Asia and Latin America.[33] Iraq, Afghanistan and the United States are not the first to challenge democratic definitions.

Conclusion

Far from promoting world peace and harmony, the American-led war on terror is presenting an ever-greater threat to democracy. It is not democracy's first threat and is unlikely to be its last, but its degree of *irony* is quite unprecedented. Having overcome the threat of communism in the cold-war period, America appears to have adopted much of its logic – Stalin's vision was for worldwide "proletarian democracy", Bush's is for worldwide "liberty". The definitions of both visions are fluid, and Bush, like Stalin before him accepts human rights violations as necessary in achieving his goals. As we have seen, comparisons can also be drawn with Nazi Germany and with Islamic Jihad. However we understand the war on terror, we cannot see it as a battle between good and evil.

The United States is the most powerful country in the world and head of a vast empire. As members of the international community it is our responsibility to ensure that the power of this immense beast is moderated. Most importantly, we must retain perspective in the face of the war rhetoric, and take care not to lose sight of what we perceive to be core democratic values. Democracy as a concept will never have one fixed definition on which all can agree. But if there are core rights and values we can identify as necessary in

---

[33] Steven Levitsky & Lucan A. Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', <u>Elections without Democracy</u>, p. 51

a democratic society, we can take care to see that they are limited as little as possible. We must accept that even Canada is susceptible to incursions on democracy, and there is reason to believe that, under attack it would behave similarly to the United States. Ultimately we must attempt to understand the complexity of war and international inequalities, and remind ourselves of the similarities between our side and theirs.

Bibliography

Albert, M. (interviewer) (May 2003) 'Noam Chomsky on Iraq War' in Peace Research, Brandon: Vol. 35, Iss.1

Ali, T. (2002) *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, Verso: London, New York.

Brecher, I. (Winter 2002) 'Terrorism, Freedom and Social Justice: The War in Afghanistan', International Journal, Toronto: Vol. 57, Iss.1

Bunce, V. (Aug/Sep 2000) 'Comparative Democratisation', Comparative Political Studies, Vol. 33 No. 6/7

Bush, G. W., 'George W. Bush Quotes, http://boycottliberalism.com/Bush-quotes.htm

Chomsky, N. (2001) *9/11,* Seven Stories: New York

Crocker, B. (2004) 'Iraq: Going it Alone, Gone Wrong' in Robert C. Orr (ed.) *Winning the Peace*, CSIS Press: Washington, D.C.

Diamond, L. & Morlino, (2004) L. 'An Overview', <u>Journal of Democracy</u>, 15.4 20-31

<u>Guardian, The</u> (Feb 14th 2005), 'Shi'a Delight', www.guardian.co.uk/leaders/story/0,,1412127,00.html

<u>Guardian, The</u> (Feb 14th 2005) 'Arab World Remains Divided', www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1412212,0.html

Jewett, R. and Lawrence, (2003) J. S. *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil,* William B. Eerdsman Publishing: Michigan, Cambridge U.K.

Kellner, D. (2003) *From 9/11 to Terror War: the Dangers of the Bush Legacy*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York, Oxford

Kmiec, D.W. (2003) 'Confusing Freedom with licence – Licences Terrorism not Freedom' in Etzioni & Marsh (eds.), *Rights vs. Public Safety after 9/11*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York, Oxford

Levitsky, S. & Way, L.A. (April 2002) 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', <u>Elections without Democracy</u>, Vol.13, No.2

Lone, S. (Jan 31st 2005) 'An Election to Anoint an Occupation', www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1402181,00.html

Mazer, A. (Summer 2002) 'Debating the Anti-terrorism Legislation: Lessons learned', <u>Canadian Parliamentary review</u>, Ottawa: Vol. 26, Iss.2

Naidu, M. V. (May 2003) 'Crises in post-Saddam Iraq', in <u>Peace Research</u>, Brandon: Vol. 35, Iss.1

Persichilli, A. (Dec 2004 – Jan 2005) 'No lectures about human rights please: Canadian political history stained by injustices to human rights as well' <u>The Hill Times</u>, Iss.768

Posner, R.A. (2003) 'The truth about our liberties' in Etzioni & Marsh (eds.) *Rights vs. Public Safety After 9/11,* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York, Oxford

Ritter, S. (2003) *Frontier Justice,* Context Books: New York

Roach, K. (2003) *September 11th, Consequences for Canada*, McGill University Press: Montreal & Kingston

Tribe, L.H. (2003) 'We Can Strike a Balance on Civil Liberties', in Etzioni & Marsh (eds.) *Rights vs Public Safety after 9/11,* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York, Oxford

Vaishnav, M. (2004) 'Afghanistan: The Chimera of the 'light footprint'' in Robert C. Orr (ed.) *Winning the Peace*, CSIS Press: Washington, D.C.