

CHAPTER I

Is Freedom for Everyone?

There is a myth that though we love freedom, others don't; that our attachment to freedom is a product of culture; that freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law are American values, or Western values. . . . Ours are not western values, they are the universal values of the human spirit. And anywhere, any time ordinary people are given the chance to choose, the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny; democracy, not dictatorship; the rule of law, not the rule of the secret police.¹

THESE ARE THE WORDS of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, spoken to a joint session of the United States Congress in the summer of 2003. Over the last few years, similar sentiments have been expressed by U.S. President George W. Bush, who has reiterated on numerous occasions his fervent belief that “freedom is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity.”

The conviction that freedom is a universal desire is not the property of any political camp. Its proponents cannot be neatly divided into Left and Right, Democrat and Republican, or even American and European. Its detractors are equally diverse, coming from all sides of the political spectrum. Because this conviction transcends party and ideology,

it can potentially gain an enormous following. Yet those who hold it remain a precious few, outnumbered many times over by the skeptics who don't.

For many years, the question of whether freedom is for everyone was relegated to the sidelines of the debate in the democratic world. It might have made for a fascinating academic thesis or an interesting topic of conversation, but its answer was not thought to affect our lives or our futures.

Then came September 11.

Suddenly, the nature of nondemocratic societies halfway across the globe, from what their state-controlled media were broadcasting to what their schools were teaching to what their religious figures were preaching, was on everyone's agenda. For some world leaders, the Twin Towers were not the only things that collapsed on 9/11. So too did the conception that what took place inside foreign countries was not relevant to international security and peace.

Before that horrific September day, the question of a democratic Middle East was on few radar screens. Policymakers across the world saw the Middle East as a huge swathe of despotism that could not, should not, and would not be changed any time soon. What was important in this rough and brutal region, the conventional wisdom went, was to maintain "stability." That could be achieved, it was widely believed, by seeking accommodations with "moderate" nondemocratic regimes.

But the attacks on Washington and New York and the global War on Terror that was launched in their wake changed all that. The stability of the pre-9/11 world was

not a stability with which America could live. That something had to be done was clear. Still, had the American government responded to the attacks on its homeland differently, perhaps the question of whether a democratic Middle East is possible would have remained consigned to the ivory towers of universities and the lecture halls of a handful of think tanks. But within days of 9/11, President Bush declared a global War on Terror whose *strategy* was based on the assumption that freedom is for everyone.

The War on Terror was not billed as a war only against Al Qaeda. True, Al Qaeda, an international terrorist organization led by Osama bin Laden, was behind the attacks in Washington and New York and had also been responsible for the bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998 and the strike on the USS *Cole* in 2000. But the declared objective of the war was far broader: to neutralize the threat posed by terrorism—mainly Islamic fundamentalist terrorism—to the safety and security of the free world. The war would end, President Bush declared, only when “every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”²

Does achieving this objective, in which there is wide agreement across the political spectrum, require building free societies in the Middle East? For President Bush, Prime Minister Blair, and many (though by no means all) of those prosecuting the War on Terror, it does. To them, building free societies has in fact become a key element in what appears to be a two-part strategy to win the War on Terror.

The first part of that strategy is to end *state support* for terrorism. In his initial speech to the American people after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush said that his government would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”³ In other words, instead of focusing only on bringing individual terrorists to justice and using all available means to dismantle the terror organizations, now the *regimes* sponsoring terror would also be targeted. These regimes would not be allowed to provide money, weapons, training grounds, diplomatic cover, ideological backing, and other support to terror groups. By severing the link between the terror network and their state sponsors, it was thought that the terror organizations could no longer indoctrinate their recruits, hatch their plots, and wage their murderous campaigns with impunity.

The second part of the strategy, even more controversial than the first, was to replace terror-sponsoring regimes with democratic governments. Why this strategy would be so controversial is easy to understand. It is one thing to topple the Taliban and Sadaam and install new strongmen in their place. That has been tried many times before. It is quite another to replace those brutal tyrannies with free societies. For this, there are fewer precedents.

This strategy is a radical departure from traditional foreign-policy approaches that are essentially unconcerned with the internal affairs of other countries. Whether a non-democratic regime respected the human rights of its own subjects was almost always less important to democratic

policymakers than whether that regime's ruler was "for us or against us," or, as a less-than-subtle President Lyndon Johnson once put it, whether the ruler was "*our* son-of-a-bitch." Rather than turn a blind eye to the internal polices of others, this new strategy is based on the assumption that the breeding ground for terror is tyranny and that building an open society is the best way to drain the swamp. As President Bush himself argued, "freedom and democracy are critical to defeating terror" because "free nations that respect human rights will help overcome hatred, resentment and the ideologies of murder."⁴

Many have argued that one or both aspects of this strategy for fighting the war are unnecessary and, ultimately, counterproductive. Some maintain that the free world, led by the United States, can use its power to target the terrorist organizations, dry up their financing, and punish their leaders, without having to topple regimes. And if regimes must be toppled, they should only be toppled when they are directly responsible for an attack. Such a policy, it is argued, is a prudent method to fight terrorism and to restore deterrence against threats from rogue regimes. Anything beyond that is seen as either immoral or dangerous or both.

Many other critics of the strategy do not accept the premise that terrorism is primarily a function of the absence of democracy. Some think the root cause of terror is poverty or that it is the product of a desperate effort to redress political, economic, or social grievances. Naturally, those who think that terror is largely unrelated to nondemocratic rule will not be convinced that the War on Terror can be won with the

advance of liberal democratic values. They might argue instead for waging war on poverty or redressing the grievances that ostensibly drive terrorists to commit their savagery.

Still, it is hard to imagine many who would contend that if the region's tyrannies were transformed into *genuinely* free societies, the world would not be more secure. Surely, few would argue that the successful transformation of the nondemocratic regimes of the Middle East into governments that respect the rule of law, protect individual rights, cherish human life, and dedicate themselves to improving the well-being of their citizens would not be better for everyone.

But proving what would be good in theory is not the same as proving what can be achieved in practice. As George Will, the influential and erudite columnist for the *Washington Post*, warned, "the premise—that terrorism thrives where democracy does not—may seem to generate a duty to universalize democracy. But it is axiomatic that one cannot have a duty to do something that cannot be done."⁵ No doubt, we would all agree that a democratic Middle East that provides its population with freedom and opportunity would be preferable to a despotic Middle East that oppresses its subjects at home and exports terrorism abroad. But is Will right that it cannot be done? Do all peoples really desire freedom? Are some societies simply unfit for democracy?

A HOPEFUL HISTORY

The idea that there are certain peoples and societies unsuited to democratic life is certainly not new. In 1934, the

renowned historian Arnold Toynbee saw the rise of fascism in Italy as clear proof that democracy was a “special local growth which could not be guaranteed to acclimatize itself in alien soil.”⁶

[N]o parliamentarian can close his eyes to the significance of the portent of Fascism in post-war Italy; for Italy lies near the heart of our western world; she has made one of the greatest single contributions made by any country to our common western civilization; and in the nineteenth century her adoption of Anglo-French parliamentarism seemed to be the essence of her national resurrection. In these circumstances, her repudiation of “democracy” (in our conventional use of the term) has made it an open question whether this political plant can really strike permanent root anywhere except its native soil.⁷

Similarly, sixty years ago, most people would have considered the claim that Germany could become a thriving liberal democracy absolutely preposterous. Germany had spawned the most fanatical regime in history, which in little more than a decade in power murdered millions of its subjects, terrorized tens of millions more, and waged war against the democratic world, indeed, against the very idea of democracy. Writing in 1943 and expressing the conventional wisdom of the age, one expert scoffed at the notion that democracy could succeed in Germany.

To go back and create a liberal Germany, as most emigrants from Germany want to do, is likewise impossible. It did not succeed the first time. How can anyone think that after these new outbursts the Germans can become democrats overnight? Is there a democratic serum which one can inject and thus immunize a people against militarism, against desire for world domination, or passion for submission to superiors in uniform? Such a serum has not been invented.⁸

In fact, during the darkest days of World War II when anti-democratic forces had cast a shadow over much of the civilized world, some scholars questioned whether democracy could survive *anywhere* in the West.

In Western Europe, where the religion of democracy was nurtured through its hazardous childhood, it is today engaged in a great struggle for survival. In Germany, Italy, Fascized Spain—in fact, on the whole Continent—its very existence is threatened. And the threat will outlast Hitler, since Fascism itself is a mere end-product of deep-grained anti-democratic forces within the very texture of modern European thought, and of the whole industrialized West: forces which have penetrated into the altars of democracy, Great Britain, France and the United States: forces which unconsciously corrupt in large measure the liberal and radical thought that complacently leads the fight against Fascism.⁹

With a half a century of hindsight, what seems absurd is that anyone ever believed that democracy could *not* take hold in Germany, Italy, or elsewhere in Europe. Today, Germany and Italy are liberal democracies with governments that protect the rights of their citizens and peoples who live at peace with their neighbors. Hundreds of millions of Europeans have no memory of life without democracy, and would surely pooh-pooh the claim that there is something inherent in European thought and life that makes the Continent unsuitable for democratic life.

Still, some people may believe that the success of democracy in Europe tells us little about the chances of democracy succeeding elsewhere. After all, the democracies based in Rome, Berlin, and the other capitals of Europe are said to rest on the strongest of foundations: broad middle classes, thriving civil societies, and highly educated populations. Others will correctly point out that these democracies were not built on entirely unfertile ground. The Germans had a brief, albeit unsuccessful, experiment with democracy before the rise of Hitler. Republics flourished on Italian soil for two thousand years, and in the nineteenth century, Italians fought for four decades for their liberty.

These arguments cannot be ignored, and had democracy only taken root in the Anglo-Saxon world and on the European Continent, they might be hard to refute. But democracy has spread elsewhere, both to cultures that have almost no experience with democratic life and to places that do not possess what are thought to be the natural building blocks of democracy.

Take Russia for example. For hundreds of years, the Russians were believed to be “different” from their European cousins. When the French political theorist Jean Bodin visited Russia in the sixteenth century, he observed that the czarist regime’s absolute power stood in sharp contrast to the more limited rule of European kings and emperors.¹⁰ Unlike the Russians, who were thought to prefer subservience to freedom, the people of Europe would never tolerate such absolutism, Bodin wrote. When the Marquis de Custine traveled extensively in Russia in 1839, he wrote that whereas other nations tolerated the oppression of their rulers, the Russians “loved it.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, when the czar’s absolutism was replaced by Soviet totalitarianism, it only confirmed for many that Russians were not cut out for democracy. As Richard Pipes, a leading expert on Russia, put it, “[I]t’s no coincidence that Marxist ideas developed into a reformist social democracy in many places around the world but evolved into the most extreme forms of repression in Russia.”¹²

To be sure, there were many substantive reasons to believe that Russia was not cut out for democracy. As scholars like Pipes pointed out, Russia has no tradition of limited government, no institution of private property, and a history that shows little regard for the rule of law.¹³ Moreover, Russia’s civil society was weak, its middle class nonexistent, and, unlike some European nations, the subjects of the Russian empire did not share a common faith, culture, or language. Simply put, judging by its culture and traditions, there was little reason to believe that democracy could take hold in Russia.

In fact, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the setbacks on the road to democracy in Russia today—some of which are very troubling—leave many doubtful that democracy there will stand the test of time. The skeptics are more likely to see the current climate in Russia as evidence that the country is consigned to a future in which “long stretches of absolutism are briefly interrupted by fleeting periods of reform.”¹⁴

But we should keep things in perspective. Compared to a Soviet Union in which millions worked for the KGB, millions were in prison, tens of millions lost their lives, and hundreds of millions lived in fear, present day Russia is a bastion of freedom. We must also remember that Russian democracy is in its infancy. Comparing it to mature democracies that are centuries in the making is misleading. Twelve years after a revolution occurred in France in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity, its people lived under a dictatorship. Did that mean that French society could not abide democracy? More than eighty years after the American Revolution, African-Americans were still slaves. Did the practice of slavery in the nineteenth century mean that Americans were incapable of building a democratic society? Surely, the fact that democratic societies are not built overnight is not evidence that they cannot be built at all.

The breathtaking collapse of the Soviet Union should have been proof enough of the Russian people’s powerful thirst for freedom. Up until the very last moment of Soviet totalitarian rule, various experts on Russia were predicting it would continue. But like the Poles, Hungarians, Czechs,

Lithuanians, Romanians, and the rest of the peoples of Eastern Europe, the Russian people replaced tyranny with a democratic government. Nonetheless, little more than a decade later, some still question whether Russians really want to live in a free society. For them, the bumps on Russia's road to democracy are evidence of a deep longing by its people to return to an authoritarian past. Here is how one journalist, writing for the *New Statesmen*, put it:

What conjures up the Gulag for many of us is for many Russians a present comfort. KGB members were an elite successfully promoted in the post-Stalin years as protectors of the fatherland rather than as terrorists of the population. Now, the memory of a time in which the KGB was the backbone of order is precious.¹⁵

Only those who have no understanding of tyranny could take such nonsense seriously. Russians do not want to return to totalitarianism. To believe that the Russians long for a return to a totalitarian past because of the difficulties they have encountered in the present is like believing that African-Americans who suffer from unemployment and poverty long for a return to slavery. Even those Russians who claim to want to go back to the "Russia of old" do not want to return to a world where people are arbitrarily killed, where family members can be suddenly arrested or imprisoned, or where the government controls nearly every aspect of life.

If the example of Russia leaves readers unconvinced,

then Japan's transition to democracy should quell any doubts that democracy cannot "acclimatize itself in alien soil." When World War II came to an end, there was little to suggest that Japanese democracy would work. Japan had been isolated from Western influence for centuries, and its hierarchical society, authoritarian political system, and conformist culture should have made it impervious to a democratic transformation. Joshua Muravchik, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, points out just how strange the idea of democracy was to the Japanese: "When the concept of rights was imported into Japanese politics in the late nineteenth century, it was so foreign that it was not easily translated into Japanese: It required a compound word consisting of four characters to express it."¹⁶

In 1938, Japan's ambassador to Rome proudly noted that it makes Japanese hearts "warm" to see totalitarian ideas that have influenced the Japanese for centuries embodied in the systems of the modern states of Europe.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, few people in those years believed a democratic transformation of Japan was possible. Employing arguments that will sound familiar to those who follow the contemporary debate about whether democracy can spread to the Middle East, many experts at the time were certain that Japanese civilization would prove inimical to democratic life. Here is what one of those experts wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1941:

We should be deceiving ourselves if we thought that the present day Japanese are fundamentally opposed to autocratic forms of government and are awaiting the

day when they can reverse the current political trend and set up democratic institutions. . . . The truth seems to be that what we in our country call a democratic outlook is organically related to Christianity; and perhaps it is not seriously falsifying the picture to say crudely that the essential difference between Japan and Western democracies is that Japan is not a Christian country.¹⁸

In May 1945, State Department official Joseph Grew explained to President Harry Truman that “the best we can hope for in Japan is the development of a constitutional monarchy, experience having shown that democracy in Japan would never work.”¹⁹ Even in 1952, when the seven-and-a-half year occupation of Japan was coming to an end and after democratic rule had gained a solid foothold there, another expert observed, in an article entitled “Why Asians Hate the West,” that democracy in Asia was in inevitable retreat. Western liberals, the author cautioned, should take a “more realistic view of the short-term prospects of democracy outside the relatively small part of the world where it is well rooted.”²⁰ Of course, history has proven these predictions wrong. Japan has maintained its unique tradition and culture, but has at the same time built a strong democracy that has stood the test of time.

Yet even Japan’s remarkable transformation will not silence all the skeptics. For one *National Review* writer, a half century of democratic rule is still not enough proof of the long-term viability of democracy outside the Anglo-Saxon world.

Other cultures can fake it for a few decades, as France, Germany and Japan are currently doing, but their hearts are not really in it and they will swoon gratefully into the arms of a fascist dictator when one comes along.²¹

“BUT THE ARABS ARE DIFFERENT”

I suspect that the above argument will only go so far with those who believe that freedom has no future in the Middle East. True, democracy has been established in a wide range of cultures, and many different peoples have shown that they possess a deep desire for liberty. But leafing through history's pages, we will not find incontrovertible proof that freedom is for everyone. The skeptics were wrong about whether democracy could take hold in Italy, Germany, Japan, Spain, Latin America, Russia, and many other places, but who's to say they are wrong about whether it can take hold in the Middle East? When President Bush says that “the hundreds of millions of people in the Middle East are not condemned by history to live in despotism”²² or that Islam, the faith of one-fifth of humanity, “is consistent with democracy”²³ why should we believe him? Perhaps the people in the Middle East are condemned to live in tyranny. Perhaps democracy cannot find a home there. It would certainly be comforting to think that the freedom cherished by the democratic world is cherished by everyone. It allows us all to imagine a world where all nations can live together in peace based on shared values. But is it true?

On September 11, 2001, nearly 3,000 Americans were

massacred by nineteen fanatical Muslims. A few hours later, when mourners were holding vigils in the streets of London, Tel Aviv, and Seoul, Muslims were dancing in the streets of Ramallah and Baghdad. Overnight, a mass murderer like Osama bin Laden became a hero to tens of millions of Muslims. How then can we honestly say that freedom, democracy, and human rights are the “universal values of the human spirit?”

At first glance, the case against democracy taking hold in the Middle East is a powerful one. It is not without reason that *The Economist*, a magazine not known for its anti-Muslim prejudices, asked whether there was something “hard-wired” into Islam that made it “incompatible with democracy.”²⁴ In democracies, *The Economist* tells us, men make laws. But Islam contains in the Koran a set of God-given laws dictated to Mohammed that are not open to revision, leading many to conclude that Islam is not compatible with democratic rule.²⁵ While this can be said of all orthodox faiths that have “God-given” laws, it appears especially true of Islam because of its unique history. As the eminent scholar Bernard Lewis has pointed out, there is no separation of church and state in Islam, as there is in Christianity. Christians were told to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things which are God’s. By having this public-private distinction as part of its theology, Lewis explains, Christianity paved the way for the separation of church and state that is generally considered a central pillar of modern, democratic life. But Mohammed, unlike Jesus, was a soldier and statesman who founded an

empire as well as a faith. Therefore, Lewis notes, for Muslims, religion and power are so inextricably linked that the very idea of a separation of church and state is meaningless, since there are no two entities to separate.²⁶

The Islamic faith is not seen as the only strike against democracy emerging in the Middle East. Many also see the treatment of women in the Muslim world in general, and in the Middle East in particular, as a force militating against democracy. While the West still has a long way to go before full equality between the sexes is realized, most people would consider it light years ahead of the Muslim world. Pointing to what they believe is the systematic discrimination against women in the Muslim world in every sphere of life, two scholars write that “the real fault line that divides the West and the Muslim world is attitudes toward women.”²⁷ If, as many believe, a basic notion of equality is a precursor of modern democracy, many find it hard to imagine how Islamic society can fit the bill.

Moreover, the cultural gap is about much more than women. Many Muslim societies that revolve around “shame and honor” appear incomprehensible to those living in the democratic world. When an Egyptian man murders his own daughter for shaming the family with her sexual “promiscuity” or an adulterous Palestinian woman becomes a suicide bomber to restore her family’s lost honor, many people conclude that democratic life in those societies doesn’t stand a chance.

As for the features that are believed to be critical to sustaining a liberal, democratic order, here too, the countries of

the Middle East are seen as ill equipped for democracy. They have little in the way of civil societies, small middle classes, widespread poverty, and rampant illiteracy.

Of course, all of these obstacles can be countered by pointing out that freedom has spread in the Muslim world. Freedom House, an organization that monitors the extent of freedom in countries around the world, did precisely that in one of its recent reports.

Recent history shows that Islam is not inherently incompatible with democratic values. Indeed, if we take into account the large Muslim populations of such countries as India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey and the Islamic population of North America and Western Europe, the majority of the world's Muslims live under democratically constituted governments.²⁸

But these reports will not erase the doubts. It will be pointed out that the Muslim populations of Western Europe and North America are small minorities who are forced to live in democratic societies and that, though there are over one hundred million Muslims in India, they too are a minority living among nearly a billion Hindus. Others will surely argue that the democracies in Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Indonesia are merely passing episodes in a history full of military coups, authoritarianism, and despotism, or that in Turkey, the military effectively rules the country and has shown that it is prepared to oust any democratically elected government that threatens the secular nature of the state.

An even stronger point could be made as well. While it may be conceded that it is possible for Muslims to govern a democratic society, one could still say that Arabs cannot. It could be plausibly claimed that in the broader Muslim world, in countries that were once exposed to Western values, democracy might have a chance, but that in the Middle East, antidemocratic features tempered elsewhere are far more resilient.

The absence of freedom in the Arab world is so acute today that even Arab scholars, who are not generally known for their willingness to confront the failings of their own societies, prepared a document under the auspices of the United Nations that was critical of the “freedom deficit” in the Arab world. With uncommon candor, the Arab Human Development report concluded:

The wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s and Eastern Europe and much of Central Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s has barely reached the Arab States. This freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development. While *de jure* acceptance of democracy and human rights is enshrined in constitutions, legal codes, and government pronouncements, *de facto* implementation is often neglected and, in some cases, deliberately disregarded.²⁹

The release of this report, which noted the critical link between human freedom and human development, might be

seen as a welcome sign that there is already increasing awareness inside the Arab world about the need to build free societies. Moreover, within that world, the demands for freedom are growing. Syrians, Egyptians, and even Saudi Arabians have witnessed pro-democracy protests in the last few years.

Still, the protests of a few hundred Arabs in the Middle East out of a population of a few hundred million is not likely to sway the skeptics. The case against democracy in the Middle East appears compelling. While democracy has spread across the globe, the Middle East remains a sea of tyranny. There are twenty-two Arab states and not one of them is democratic, even by the weakest of definitions. Moreover, there has *never* been an Arab democracy, and with the exception of a handful of tyrannies around the world, the world's most repressive regimes are in the Middle East. So while President Bush may "know" that freedom is the "future of every nation,"³⁰ many others can be forgiven for disagreeing.

The arguments offered by the skeptics, then, are not entirely unpersuasive. The doubts they express and the difficulties they raise frame the extent of the challenge each country will face in making the transition to democracy—a transition that will be easier for some than for others. But though the journey may vary in every society, I am certain that democracy is not beyond any nation's reach.

The source of my confidence that freedom truly is for everyone is not only that democracy has spread around the world, allowing so many different cultures and peoples to

enjoy its bounty, my confidence also comes from living in a world of fear, studying it, and fighting it. By dissecting this world, exploring the mechanics of tyranny that operate within it and analyzing how individuals there cope with it, one can understand why modern history has witnessed a remarkable expansion of freedom. There is a universal desire among all peoples not to live in fear. Indeed, given a choice, the *vast majority* of people will always prefer a *free* society to a *fear* society.