
The Schizophrenia of American Democracy

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A dangerous form of schizophrenia affects the United States. On the one hand, when it subjects its domestic policies to democracy and its principles, a progressive expansion of political and civil rights is the result. On the other hand, it incessantly violates these rights in foreign affairs. Such schizophrenia has never been as remarkable as under the administration of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld. It is U.S. national policy to consider as anti-social, if not criminal, the lighting of a cigarette in public places, driving without seatbelts, the pulling of a cat's tail, or even using gender-discriminating nouns. Yet such quibbles are soon forgotten when U.S. policies assume a foreign dimension.

For instance, one democratically elected U.S. president narrowly avoids impeachment for lying about his relationship with an intern, but another remains unscathed for lying about whether his enemy has weapons of mass destruction. Even over matters of terrorism, double standards prevail. When on April 18, 1995 the Oklahoma City bombing claimed the lives of 168 civilians, inquiries, tribunals, and investigative committees were quickly set up to identify and convict those responsible. In contrast, the U.S. responded to the 9/11 attacks by bombing and invading an entire country.

Undoubtedly, 9/11 claimed many more lives than the Oklahoma City bombing—almost 3,000 people are thought to have died in the fall of the Twin Towers. But does this justify the killing of a greater number of Afghan civilians? According to Marc W. Herold, at least 3,000 to 3,500 have been killed. Would the U.S. public have tolerated the police killing a number of American civilians equal to those killed in the Oklahoma bombing?

The U.S. is proud of its judicial system. It's even become a worldwide form of big- and small-screen entertainment. In the U.S., even serial killers and Mafia members are granted the right to defend their position in court. Yet prisoners of war have been denied this right. Still today, in violation of the oldest international conventions, hundreds of presumed Taliban terrorists (among whom are many minors) are being kept confined within the Guantanamo camp, deprived of legal representation and oblivious to the charges against them.

Nevertheless, detention in Guantanamo seems like a privilege compared with the fate of the six presumed terrorists incinerated in Yemen by a CIA RQ1 "Predator Drone" on November 4, 2002. While the CIA claimed that one of the victims might have been Abu Ali al-Harithi—an al-Qaeda member accused of complicity in the October 2000 terrorist attack against the *USS Cole*—the identities of the other five remain uncertain. The U.S. government divulged the

news with excitement, to the amusement of the media. The development of an unmanned drone capable of hitting a target with precision, without jeopardizing the lives of American soldiers, was celebrated as a great technological conquest. But when and where was the trial for the six presumed terrorists, and which tribunal sentenced them to death? Yemeni intelligence authorities provided the CIA with the exact coordinates of the presumed terrorists' location. If they had that much information, then why not simply arrest and extradite the suspects?

In the absence of certainty about the identity of the victims, how could they possibly be found guilty? Evidence of guilt is a necessary precondition for the U.S. judicial system. Obviously the norms and considerations in the Yemen case differed significantly from those applied to O.J. Simpson. Yet the U.S. government claims the Yemen episode was a legitimate act of war, even though the Geneva Convention specifically forbids the killing of disarmed combatants.

The massacre of the Taliban prisoners in the Mazar-e-Sharif Fort in Afghanistan provides another example of U.S. impunity. Several hundred Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners were killed by the Northern Alliance with the support of U.S. and U.K. aviation troops. According to international treaties—such as Article 12 of the Geneva Convention—prisoners of war fall under the protection and guarantee of the winning parties, which consequently places a share of the responsibility on the shoulders of the United States.

In July 1995 the world's public opinion was shocked by the killing of 8,000 unarmed men by Karadzic and Mladic Serb-Bosnian paratroopers in Srebrenica. European governments remained indifferent while the United States intervened. The similarities between the massacres at Mazar-e-Sharif Fort and Srebrenica are many. Yet unlike in Bosnia, the U.S. didn't set up an *ad hoc* tribunal in Afghanistan to judge crimes against humanity.

Cries for a fair judicial process were silenced by the bombs exploding on Iraq and the collateral damage has undermined the international rule of law. Wars of aggression—such as the invasion of states without UN authorization—are considered serious crimes and fall under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. If Bush, Rumsfeld, and General Franks did not hold American passports, they would have already been served by the same international warrant of arrest that was sent to Milosevic, Karadzic, and Mladic.

Despite this, the debate within the U.S. focuses not on the legitimacy of preventive wars—something that has been forbidden by international treaties since the seventeenth century—but rather on its implications for American soldiers. Polls reveal that the U.S. public's support for the Iraqi occupation is slowly decreasing as a result of two main considerations: the dissolving threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the number of American dead bodies being brought back into the country. The killing of innocent Iraqi civilians by the U.S. invasion is not even listed in the poll among the possible reasons for withdrawing troops from Iraq.

Yet the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq totals more than 850 victims, while Iraqi civilian victims number more than 9,000, with an unquantifiable additional number of dead Iraqi soldiers. (see <<http://www.antiwar.com/ewens/casualties.html>>, <<http://www.iraqbodycount.net/>>). United States occupying forces have been vested with the right to dispose of the

lives of the occupied peoples as they please, to the point where even counting them has become optional. For all those countries waiting to be “democratized” by the United States, it sends a clear message that American lives are superior to all others.

Of course, the United States is not the only country committing war crimes. Paramilitary troops, oblivious to international cohabitation rules, commit much more horrifying crimes in Africa and other continents. China continues its decennial occupation in Tibet; Russia engages in a ruthless battle with Chechnyan separatists; while a forgotten war in Liberia, that claims thousands of deaths every year, never makes the headlines. Even other democratic states, especially the old British and French empires, are known to have used methods deemed unacceptable within their old colonies, as any Indian or Algerian can testify.

Still, there is something very specific about America’s schizophrenia that makes the whole world uncomfortable. It is not solely the consolidation of its hegemonic powers, nor its double standards. What feels unsettling is its belief, or should we say claim, that each and every one of its actions is geared towards benefiting those aggressed by bringing them freedom, prosperity, and democracy. The war against Serbia in 1999 therefore should be seen as an act of protection towards the Albanians in Kosovo, as much as the democratization of a government that the U.S. deemed unrepresentative. The invasion of Afghanistan was to serve the purpose of destroying the infrastructures of terrorism as much as removing the terrifying regime instated by the Taliban. Similarly, the Iraqi occupation is justified by the need to destroy the—vanished—weapons of mass destruction as much as by the need to remove its bloody regime. Seen from this perspective, the above all become examples of America’s effort to export the principles of democracy and respect for human rights worldwide.

Of course, the removal from power of the Taliban or Saddam Hussein and the protection of the Albanian minorities in Kosovo are not wrong objectives. On the contrary, even moderate defenders of human rights must find themselves agreeing with these objectives. Yet, what needs greater reflection are not so much the ends as much as the means pursued. Shouldn’t democratic states apply the same principles of democracy to their domestic as to their foreign policies? What would the reason be for expending inalienable rights as soon as the US crosses another nation’s borders?

An influential American scholar, Larry Diamond, maintains that just one generation would be sufficient to transform all countries into democracies. Diamond may seem overly optimistic at first, but 121 of the world’s 192 countries already have an elected government today. We can argue about how democratic they all are in practice. Political experts, for example, have created the term “democradura” to account for the mixture of formal democratic and dictatorial practices within many African, Latin American, Asian, and Eastern European governments. But what are the legitimate mechanisms available to them for increasing the proselytes?

States with consolidated democratic systems have concentrated within their own hands an enormous power, which has permeated economic, political,

cultural, and—ultimately—military matters. These states are looked upon with both admiration and envy by billions of individuals who, legitimately, aspire to be able to choose their own government and who aim to see their own civil, political, and cultural rights respected. These are the same people who seek electricity and running water, and who will wish tomorrow for a television and a washing machine. Because rich states are also the ones with consolidated democratic systems, the idea that a better quality of life lies in an elected government cannot be deemed absurd. That's why the schizophrenia of democratic states is extremely dangerous. It promotes the belief that democratic states preserve for themselves (and themselves only) a determined set of values, which they are not prepared to share with others.

Robespierre warned against forcing happiness onto people, and America's obsession with democratizing the world through undemocratic means must therefore come to an end. This is to suggest that democratic states should not try to extend their own political system to those 71 countries still governed by autocrats. There are strong reasons to believe that most of the people in these nations want to elect their own governments. Since Anschluss and its fatal plebiscite—with which Austria voted its annexation to the Third Reich—there has never been an analogous referendum through which citizens have pronounced themselves contrary to the institution of a democratic system.

Those who wish to promote democracy and its principles can do so legitimately on behalf of those individuals who have been deprived of the possibility to do so, as long as democracies use means that are compatible with their ends.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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