

[who would be free]

Spread Democracy—at Home

Before remaking the world, Americans should check the state of their own liberties.

By Fred Reed

WHILE THE UNITED STATES is freer and more democratic than many countries, it is neither as free nor as democratic as we are expected to believe, and is becoming rapidly less so. Indeed, we seem to be specialists in maintaining the appearance without having the substance. Regarding the techniques of which, a few thoughts:

(1) Free speech does not exist in America. We all know what we can't say and about whom we can't say it.

(2) A democracy run by two barely distinguishable parties is not, in fact, a democracy.

A parliamentary democracy allows expression of a range of points of view: an ecological candidate may be elected along with a communist, a racial-separatist, and a libertarian. These will make sure that their ideas are at least heard. By contrast, the two-party system prevents expression of any ideas the two parties agree to suppress. How much open discussion do you hear during presidential elections of, for example, race, immigration, abortion, gun control, and the continuing abolition of Christianity? These are the issues most important to most people, yet they are quashed.

The elections do, however, allow the public a sense of democratic participation while having the political impor-

tance of the Super Bowl. That is, elections serve chiefly to keep the people from noticing the absence of democracy. This is a remarkable concept, of great governmental utility.

(3) Large jurisdictions discourage autonomy. If, say, educational policy were set in small jurisdictions, such as towns or counties, a parent could but-thonhole the mayor and have a reasonable prospect of influencing his children's schools. If policy is set at the level of the state, then to change it that parent has to quit his job, marshal a vast expensive campaign, and organize committees in dozens of towns. It isn't practical. In

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America, local jurisdictions set taxes on real estate and determine parking policy. Everything of importance is decided remotely.

(4) Huge unresponsive bureaucracies somewhere else serve as political flywheels, insulating elected officials from the whims of the populace. Try calling

the federal Department of Education from Wyoming. Its employees are anonymous, salaried, unaccountable, can't be fired, and don't care about you. Many more of them than you might believe are affirmative-action hires and probably can't spell "Wyoming." You cannot influence them in the slightest. Yet they influence you.

(5) For our increasingly centralized and arbitrary government, the elimination of potentially competitive centers of power has been, and is, crucial. This is one reason for the aforementioned defanging of the churches: the faithful recognize a power above that of the

state, which they might choose to obey instead of Washington. The Catholic Church in particular, with its inherent organization, was once powerful. It has been brought to heel.

Similarly the elimination of states' rights, now practically complete, put paid to another potential source of

opposition. Industry, politically potent in the days of J.P. Morgan, has been tamed by regulation and federal contracts. The military in the United States has never been politically active. The government becomes the only game available—and is determined to remain so. Any attempt to weaken the central power will arouse implacable hostility.

For example, the persecution of those engaged in home-schooling has nothing to do with concern for the young. The public schools have little interest in education and for the most part seem to have little idea what it is. The opposition to home-schooling is simply the response of those with a monopoly of power to the specter of superior competition.

(6) Paradoxically, increasing the power of groups who cannot threaten the government strengthens the government: they serve as counterbalances to those who might challenge the central authority.

For example, the white- and male-dominated culture of the United States, while not embodied in an identifiable organization, for some time remained strong. The encouragement of dissension by empowerment of blacks, feminists, and homosexuals, and the importing of inassimilable minorities, weakens what was once the cultural mainstream.

(7) The apparent government isn't the real government. The real power in America resides in what George Will once called the "permanent political class," of which the formal government is a subset. It consists of the professorate, journalists, politicians, revolving appointees, high-level bureaucrats and so on, who slosh in and out of formal power. Most are unelected, believe the same things, and share a lack of respect for views other than their own.

It is they, to continue the example of education, who write the textbooks your children use, determine how history will be rewritten, and set academic

standards—all without the least regard for you. You can do nothing about it.

(8) The U.S. government consists of five branches that are, in rough order of importance, the Supreme Court, the media, the presidency, the bureaucracy, and Congress.

The function of the Supreme Court, which is both unanswerable and unaccountable, is to impose things that the

restaurants, in living rooms and on long flights. It is the national babysitter. For hours a day most Americans watch it.

Perhaps the key to cultural control is that people cannot not watch a screen. It is probably true that stupid people would not watch intelligent television, but it is certainly true that intelligent people will watch stupid television. Any television, it seems, is preferable to no

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Congress fears to touch. That is, it establishes programs desired by the ruling political class that could not possibly be democratically enacted. While formally a judicial organ, the Court is in reality our Ministry of Culture and Morals. It determines policy regarding racial integration, abortion, pornography, immigration, the practice of religion, which groups receive special privilege, and what forms of speech shall be punished.

(9) The media have two governmental purposes. The first is to prevent discussion and, to the extent possible, knowledge of taboo subjects. The second is to inculcate, by endless indirection, the values and beliefs of the permanent political class. Thus, for example, racial atrocities committed by whites against blacks are widely reported, while those committed by blacks against whites are concealed. Most people know this at least dimly. Few know the degree of management of information.

(10) Control of television conveys control of the society. It is magic. This is such a truism that we do not always see how true it is. The box is ubiquitous and inescapable. It babbles at us in bars and

television. As people read less, the lobotomy box acquires semi-exclusive rights to their minds.

Television doesn't tell people what to do. It shows them. People can resist admonition. But if they see something happening over and over, month after month, if they see the same values approvingly portrayed, they will adopt both behavior and values. It takes years, but it works. To be sure it works, we put our children in front of the screen from infancy.

(11) People can be free only to the extent that they are independent.

(12) Finally, people do not want freedom. They want comfort, 200 channels on the cable, sex, drugs, rock-and-roll, an easy job, and an SUV. No country with really elaborate home-theater has ever risen in revolt.

An awful lot of people secretly like being told what to do. We would probably be happier with a king. ■

Fred Reed's writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Harper's, and National Review, among other places.

A Few Good Voters

Despite Iraq, the military is still reliably Republican.

By Daniel McCarthy

IN THE WEEKS leading up to Saddam Hussein's capture many in the press began to predict that President Bush might be in danger of losing the support of voters in the military. Stories ran in the *Washington Monthly*, *Salon.com*, *Business Week*, and elsewhere cataloging the armed forces' growing discontentment with the administration: the stop-loss orders retaining personnel who were due to leave the services, the extended deployment of reservists and National Guards accustomed to serving one weekend a month, and the litany of criticisms coming from retired officers blasting the administration's Iraq policy—retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, for example, called the whole thing a “brain fart.” All of this, taken together, suggested that Iraq might be on the verge of doing to the Republican Party what Vietnam had done to the Democrats.

Fewer such stories have appeared since the deposed Iraqi leader was pulled out of his hole in the ground last December. Even before that, however, there was little real chance of Bush losing the affections of the nation's men and women under arms. The Military Times company—publisher of the *Army Times* and other newspapers for each of the services—surveyed its active-duty readership between Nov. 3 and Dec. 17, providing a rare insight into political opinion within the military. The study found that 67 percent of servicemen and women generally approved of the president's job performance. 57 percent identified themselves as Republicans; 53 per-

cent said they were either conservative or very conservative. By contrast, only 13 percent were Democrats, and just 7 percent called themselves liberal or very liberal. Despite the strain the Iraq war has imposed on the services, the military remains a Republican stronghold.

But Iraq *has* been a strain, the poll found. Fewer respondents approved of the president's handling of Iraq—56 percent—than approved of his overall performance as president. And an overwhelming 77 percent agreed or strongly agreed when asked whether today's military is stretched too thin to be effective. In light of such sentiments, Peter Feaver, a political science professor at Duke University who studies the military, says that Bush may not have as tight of a lock on the armed forces' vote in 2004 as he did in 2000. “The war on Iraq has been mixed enough that it dampens some of the one-sided positive evaluations that Bush would get, but it hasn't been such a negative that it's like the Vietnam War,” he says.

The military vote is small but significant. In 2000, it made a president. George W. Bush won the Florida recount by 537 votes. He picked up a net gain of 739 votes in that state from overseas absentee ballots, most of which are sure to have come from military personnel. Barring an exact reprise of the 2000 deadlock, there is little chance that the military vote's direct effect on the race this year will be so dramatic. But it has a larger importance out of proportion to its electoral weight. For one thing, other, larger segments of the

voting public look to the military's relationship with the two major political parties before casting their own ballots. These groups include veterans, of whom there are some 27 million, and an even larger number of “national security voters” without any military experience, but for whom defense is the paramount issue at the polls.

Taking notice of these demographics, Democrats across the country have lately sought to burnish their credentials on military issues, usually to little effect. In 2002, Democrat Bill McBride, running for governor of Florida, campaigned aggressively on his background as a veteran, only to lose in a landslide to Jeb Bush. That same year in Georgia, Democratic Sen. Max Cleland, a decorated veteran, lost the endorsement of the Veterans of Foreign Wars—as well as the election—to Republican challenger Saxby Chambliss. This year, of the top contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. John Kerry and retired Gen. Wesley K. Clark both have considerable military experience, although in General Clark's case his appeal to the uniformed services may be qualified by his icy relations with many of his past colleagues.

But whether or not the Democrats can deprive President Bush of any significant portion of the military vote this year may depend less on what they do than on what missteps the president makes. There are plenty of opportunities for those. In going to war with Iraq, the president has created a political