

Rousseau Was Wrong

The freedom-promoting foreign policy of the Bush administration rests on the assumption that democracy is the natural condition of human beings and that

undemocratic societies are survivals of a past that progress has not yet corrected.

Everyone understands that energy supplies, geopolitical security, corporate interests and ideology, and the demands of domestic political constituencies all are factors in the administration's policy decisions. The president and his men would nonetheless claim that the principle driving American policy is the promulgation of democracy—encouraging “liberty on the march!” in one of Bush's favorite oratorical exclamations.

This is meant to be highly edifying, and would be, were it not for the fact that the assumption is false. Near the end of his long life, the American diplomat and historian George Kennan wrote: “To have real self-government, a people must understand what that means, want it, and be willing to sacrifice for it.” He said that there always will only be a few democracies, and he was right.

He added—with stony realism—that the other societies must be left “to be governed or misgoverned as habit or tradition may dictate, asking of their governing cliques only that they observe, in their bilateral relations with us and with the remainder of the world community, the minimum standards of civilized diplomatic intercourse.”

The second president of the United States, John Adams, wrote, “There never was a democracy that did not commit suicide.” That judgment obviously remains open concerning today's democracies—even the United States.

The Bush “march of freedom” has begun badly in Iraq. It is not doing very well in Georgia and Ukraine, either. The struggle of clans and personalities has already betrayed some of the grand expectations held a year ago. Those two “revolutions” were actually elections precipitated by persistent popular demonstrations against existing regimes, carried out under international observation, placing pro-American figures in office. The popular movements promoting these elections usually were led by young democracy activists, often trained in Washington, with funds and equipment supplied by the U.S. government or one or another of the dozens of American pro-democracy NGOs. However, power tends to continue in the hands of clan alliances, with politics manipulated, if more subtly than before. One hopes that this will not last, but it is likely to do so.

Democracy is not the natural condition of society. It is produced by values learned from historical experience or philosophical speculation. It is difficult to achieve and hard to maintain. It depends not on free elections but on a series of developments in civil society. These include general acceptance of the principles of majority government and alternation of power and that political differences must be settled or accommodated non-lethally. It means agreement that civil law must prevail in disputes involving even the powerful, that the distinction between public and private property must be defended, and that speech and the press must be free. This

democratic culture is the consequence of experience and education. It is not a political program easily imported.

The idea that democracy is inherent reflects that naïve confidence in predestined human progress that came out of the Enlightenment and inspired the French and American revolutions.

Aristotle, in antiquity, condemned democracy as easily destroyed by demagogic corruption. Montesquieu and Hegel, in the 18th and 19th centuries, considered democracy already a system of the past, proven inherently too unstable to provide good government. Only the direct or indirect intellectual descendants of the romantic political and social theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau still believe that man in his natural state is virtuous and altruistic, born a democrat. Unfortunately, those children of Rousseau include most of the most powerful people in the United States today, from the Bush White House and the neoconservative think tanks to their Democratic Party counterparts, including the liberal intelligentsia of American universities.

They fail to understand that this is a doomed program. It rests fundamentally on the destruction of stability, yet it is incapable of installing lasting democratic order. Iraq was intended to be the paradigm for the democratization of the Middle East, then of the peoples of the former Soviet Union, and then Russia itself—and perhaps beyond.

Instead, Iraq has proven the prototype for what is likely to happen elsewhere. The old order, whether good or bad, will be destroyed, usually at heavy cost to the people. What follows, more often than not, will be chaotic disorder. ■

William Pfaff writes from Paris. Copyright the International Herald Tribune.

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Munich]

Executioner's Song

By Steve Sailer

CONSERVATIVES HAVE MUCH reason to complain about the movie industry, but it could be worse. For example, the critics' darling is the morally irresponsible Quentin Tarantino, yet within Hollywood, he is treated as an amusing lightweight. Instead, the most prestigious and influential figure is the director, producer, and former executive Steven Spielberg.

An Eagle Scout who earned a remarkable 48 merit badges, Spielberg's lack of alienation from traditional American values has always disturbed the culturati, who assume that *épater le bourgeois* should be the essential goal of any artist. Indeed, Spielberg may have been the most effective critic of the sexual revolution. The son of divorced parents, Spielberg's favorite theme has been the pain caused to children by their parents' self-indulgence. (He is on his second wife, actress Kate Capshaw, but perhaps his private life, like Ronald Reagan's, should be judged by Hollywood's standards.)

As Paul Johnson noted in his *History of the Jews*, it's common for assimilated, crowd-pleasing Jews to turn back toward Jewish questions as they age. This process has added depth to the later work of Spielberg, who at age 59 describes himself as a moderately observant Jew.

Spielberg's softheaded politics, while slightly right-of-center for Hollywood, are very much in the mainstream of Jewish liberalism. I've come to appreciate them more over the last few years as we've seen the damage done by the neo-conservative and neoliberal war hawks.

Spielberg might bear some indirect responsibility for America's pointless wars in Kosovo and Iraq. Few 1990s movies had more emotional influence on the Washington punditariat than "Schindler's List" and "Saving Private Ryan." The former made baby boomer policy wonks want to fight genocide like Schindler, and the latter left them feeling distressingly inferior to their fathers of the "The Greatest Generation." Thus, the neolib and neocons went looking for their own Hitlers to fight—well, they didn't want to fight them personally, but they definitely wanted other people's sons to go smite Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein for them.

"Munich," though, is being denounced by the neocons for the crime of ambivalence about Israel. Unlike the smug leftist tract "Syriana," an unfunny "Fahrenheit 9-11" that blames all the troubles of the Middle East on Big Oil, "Munich" reflects the centrality and complexity of Israel's role.

"Munich" begins at the 1972 Olympic games, where eight Black September terrorists massacred 11 Israeli Olympians. Golda Meir's government then authorized the assassination of Palestinian leaders who might, or might not, have been involved, but the subsequent details remain in dispute. The movie follows George Jonas's uncorroborated 1984 book *Vengeance* about a purported five-man death squad sent by Mossad to Western Europe. Eric Bana, the tall, sensitive, and ineffectual-looking Croatian-Australian actor who played Hector in "Troy," stars as their leader.

"Munich" skips the 1973 mistaken identity fiasco in Lillehammer, Norway, where Mossad agents gunned down an innocent Moroccan waiter. Moreover, the film, like Jonas's book, attributes the wetwork gang's inside dope on the location of their targets to a business arrangement with "Le Group," a preposterous French family firm of freelance spies, presumably to distract us from the more plausible ways that Mossad might have obtained leads, such as torture.

Still, Spielberg views revenge as a dirty job, where much can go wrong. Four of the agents become conflicted. Should Jews, of all people, they agonize, take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth? Only one killer is so cold-blooded and ethnocentric as to snarl, "The only blood I care about is Jewish blood." And to underscore the near-Nazi reprehensibility of this view, Spielberg cast the blond-haired, blue-eyed, Teutonic-looking Daniel Craig, the English actor recently hired to be the next James Bond.

To express his queasy uncertainty about the murder mission, Spielberg trades-in his usual bluish-gray color scheme for a sickly greenish-gray cast. "Munich" is grim and often grueling, but just when you begin to lose patience, Spielberg inserts some brilliant bits of entertainment.

Nonetheless, "Munich" is unlikely to please a large audience. The true believers on both sides will be infuriated by Spielberg's evenhandedness. And those without a dog in this fight may feel that while they approve of vengeance in the abstract, they no more want to watch it being carried out than death-penalty supporters want to attend public hangings. ■

Rated R for strong graphic violence, some sexual content, nudity, and language.