

By Joel Bleifuss



Heil and smile?

Are there parallels to Nazi Germany and the U.S. today? Yes, a few.

To ready themselves for military conquest, both countries exhibited and enforced a zealous love of flag and country, as seen in this year's Superbowl halftime show and Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 propaganda classic *Triumph of the Will*.

The leaders of both countries—reacting to the respective humiliations of Vietnam and Versailles—further helped restore national confidence by building up and then deploying military forces, as was done in Grenada and the Rhineland, Panama and Austria Czechoslovakia, and Iraq and Poland.

As President George Bush said in November 1990, "To be very clear about these efforts to exhaust all means for achieving—all means for a diplomatic and political solution—I am not suggesting discussions that will result in anything less than Iraq's complete withdrawal from Kuwait, restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government and freedom for all hostages."

According to William Shirer in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, in May 1939, Polish Foreign Minister Col. Jozef Beck responded to Adolf Hitler's unilaterally determined terms by saying: "It is clear that negotiations in which one state formulates demands and the other is obliged to accept those demands unaltered are not negotiations."

In January 1990, Bush vowed that the U.S. would attack "sooner rather than later" and "that this will not be another Vietnam ... our troops will not be asked to fight with one arm tied behind their back."

In August 1939, Carl Burckhardt, a Swiss League of Nations Commissioner at Danzig, Poland, reported that Hitler told him "that if he had to make war he would rather do it today than tomorrow" and "that he would not conduct it like the Germany of Wilhelm II, who had always had scruples about the full use of every weapon."

In December 1990, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Nelson reported that administration officials had this to say about U.S. Gulf strategy: "Bush assumes that the American public will be mainly concerned about the number of U.S. casualties. Not the tens of thousands of Iraqis who stand to die or be maimed in a massive air assault and that even the killing of thousands of civilians—including women and children—probably would not undermine American support for the war effort."

In August 1939, Hitler made these remarks to his military commanders vis-a-vis Poland: "I shall give a propagandist reason for starting the war—never mind whether it is plausible or not: the victor will not be asked afterward whether he told the truth or not. In starting and waging a war it is not right that matters but victory. ... Be steeled against all signs of compassion. ... Whoever has pondered over this world order knows that its meaning lies in the success of the best by means of force."

Off limits and out of control

In January, I proposed that it was time to think about liberating major media outlets from their corporate owners. Robert W. McChesney, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, sent me a scholarly article he recently wrote, titled "Off-limits: An inquiry into the lack of debate concerning the ownership, structure and control of the mass media in U.S. political



Vera Saeedpour: Kurd advocate

By Laimdota Mazzrins

Vera Beaudin Saeedpour's Kurdish husband never wanted her to become politically active on behalf of his people, nor was this originally on her agenda. But because of what she calls "the responsibility that goes with knowing," this conscience-driven woman has become the leading U.S. advocate of the 25 million Kurds who are facing cultural annihilation in their divided Middle Eastern homeland. A one-woman operation for most of its 10-year history, the Kurdish Program has had an impact, through its activities on behalf of Kurdish survival, that is vastly out of proportion to its modest size.

Close to a million Kurds have been forced into exile by the governments of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Only a fraction of those—5,000, according to one estimate—have come to the U.S. And many of them fear that if they admit their ethnic identity or get involved in cultural activities here, this will lead to reprisals against their families back home.

One of the latter was Homayoun Saeedpour, a civil-engineering student whom Vera Beaudin met while working on her doctorate in education at Columbia University. Shortly after their marriage in 1975, he asked her to explain to him the definition of "Kurd" in the *Oxford Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, which read, "One of a tall, pastoral and predatory people." Vera Saeedpour, who had studied sociology as an undergraduate, was taken by surprise. She decided to take two weeks off to do research and find out whether or not she had married a predator.

The result was a scholarly article, "Killing Them Softly," and letters to Oxford and other publishers persuading them that their dictionary definitions were discriminatory. The definitions were changed.

Pieces of the pie: Saeedpour's research convinced her that the post-World War I parcelling out of what had been the Ottoman portion of Kurdish lands between Turkey and the newly created states of Iraq and Syria was the worst disaster to befall the Kurds in their 5,000-year history. The second worst was the first division of Kurdistan between the Turkish Ottoman and the Persian Safavid empires in the 16th century.

She says, "I felt that as the Kurds were a sizable population straddling those borders, they would be perceived as a threat by those governments as long as they had this consciousness of kind. And therefore it would be in the interest of those governments at least to assimilate them—or, failing that, to annihilate them as a culture."

"I couldn't see any evidence that the Kurds had tried to take over somebody else's land, and I assumed that the main reason they were being called 'predatory' was because they were reacting violently to being encroached upon themselves. You discover this in black studies, in Jewish studies, in the history of any kind of discrimination in the world where stereotypes have been used to present a negative image of a people in order to rationalize someone else's agenda."

Despite her husband's objections, Saeedpour became obsessed with the Kurdish cause. "Once I knew about the Kurdish issue," she says, "then it

really 'destroyed' my life."

Her father, an orthodox Jew and "a hippie kind of philosopher," had raised her to have an exacting conscience, she says. "I kept thinking that there's a responsibility that goes with knowing. The thing that was the kicker for me was my being a Jew. I had always complained that it wasn't fair to indict just the Nazis for what happened. It was all of the world that decided they had more pressing priorities. I thought, I have to do something about those people, because otherwise I will be like the silent people I've been indicting."

For the cause: A turning point came in 1981 when her husband died of leukemia. Saeedpour decided to keep his name and consolidate her efforts to bring the plight of the Kurds to public attention. She founded the Kurdish Program, a non-profit educational and cultural organization that gets its tax-exempt status through Cultural Survival Inc., an association founded by Harvard anthropologists to support endangered ethnic groups. Saeedpour's program, however, finances itself through private contributions.

From the beginning, the Kurdish Program has been as many-sided as its founder, serving as a public-relations clearinghouse, a resource bureau and a cultural center. It sponsors panels and lectures; publishes scholarly monographs and a semiannual journal, *Kurdish Times*; and supplies background reports to journalists, Congress members and international organizations. Lawyers from around the country contact the program for help with political-asylum and immigration cases. Further, the program runs an oral-history project and a Kurdish dance theater, has curated a traveling photo exhibition and maintains a museum of Kurdish costumes and ethnic artifacts.

"The more I worked at it, the more it grew, and the reward for that, of course, was more work, more responsibility," says Saeedpour, the program's director and for many years its sole volunteer worker.

With volunteer help the program expanded, and in 1986 Saeedpour and a friend bought a handsome brownstone in Brooklyn's multicultural Prospect Heights section. Its main floor now houses the Kurdish Library, the only one like it in the world. The library contains more than 1,500 volumes, 1,200 slides, a cassette and videotape collection, historical maps and newspapers, as well as special collections of photographs and historical documents. Last year Saeedpour established the Kurdish Heritage Foundation to support the library's ongoing work.

The library is both cozy and exotically luxurious. The narrow front parlor is crammed with glass cases displaying mannequins in Kurdish costumes of hand-loomed wool, brocade and velvet dresses from Iran and Iraq, headgear, snowshoes and musical instruments. The walls are covered with photos of Kurdish life, framed documents and faded historical maps of Kurdistan. In the back are the library proper and the computer and fax machine that connect the program with its users and supporters around the world.

Under one roof: Saeedpour, now 60, is modest about her success. "I have no right to speak for the Kurds," she insists, "but I certainly represent the point of view that any people in this world has the same right as any other people to exist."

The fact that the Kurdish Program is a purely American effort and does not compete with existing Kurdish organizations has won it the trust, if not the financial support, of Kurds of all political persuasions, as well as non-political Kurds who just need help.

One letter recently received from an Iraqi Kurdish refugee reads, "It has been 15 months now since the day we were driven out of our homes into exile and refugee camps in Turkey and forced to live a life that is less desirable than death itself. We have

been deprived of the most elementary necessities of life, let alone education and civic life. We lack even the elementary clothing to protect us from the heat of the blazing summer and the killing cold of the winter. ... You can see the hopelessness and utter depression in the eyes of all these luckless people who feel they would have been luckier to have been lost at sea and never heard from again." The letter is headed simply: "Written to Lady Vera."

This refugee is one of the "expendables," says Saeedpour. She says they are individuals who are exploited and destroyed as the world's leaders pursue their own geopolitical goals. Helping individuals has always been a major function of the Kurdish Program.

When she is not immersed in relief work, Saeedpour acts as an unofficial lobbyist for the Kurdish people. She is convinced that, despite the official pronouncements, the U.S., Turkey, Iran and Syria are backing the Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq, with the end goal the establishment of a limited autonomy such as that negotiated in 1970 between the Kurds and Saddam Hussein's predecessor.

"I am not sure that Bush is not interested in having a fragmented Iraq," she says. "I fear that the Iraqi Kurds will end up being used as the vehicles through which the geopoliticians can maintain the divisions made after World War I. The quid pro quo for Turkey's acquiescing to that autonomy would be that the Kurds would fall into a Turkish orbit in the context of the new security arrangements they are making in the Gulf. Turkey would have a lot to say about how that autonomy is exercised. Of course, the Kurds were very much for the war. They want revenge. They would do anything to get rid of Saddam Hussein. They see him as their greatest enemy. That is not true: geopolitics is Kurdish enemy No. 1."

Clear vision: Although she has spent the last decade dedicating her life to helping the Kurdish people, Saeedpour has also spent that time following the bloody Kurdish infighting. In recent weeks, she has been helping journalists get into Kurdistan, a job she does willingly, if with doubts. "I hope we don't bring the Kurds to the point where we glamorize them and romanticize them because they are the latest human-rights novelty. We have a problem in this society that is worrying me more every day—a tendency to look through rose-colored glasses at people we call 'victims.' Once we proclaim a group to be victims, we immediately suspend any moral judgment of their behavior. They are responsible for nothing but promoting themselves as victim," she says.

"The real victims are not those in the Kurdish diaspora who are living here or in Europe but the women and children in Kurdistan who are caught between the warring factions. It is when you lose sight of the suffering of the remote individual who has nothing that you have lost your humanity."

It is this humanity that Saeedpour sees as one of the casualties of the Gulf war. "It is wrong that we can take a whole people and make them less than we are. We really believe that people in the Middle East are less than us, that we have to show them how to be human," she says.

"That is the tragedy," she continues. "That we in the U.S. could go to war and not see that we have killed a couple hundred thousand victims of Saddam Hussein—that wasn't a volunteer army that we killed. And it is worse that, because of the technology, we didn't see the blood."

In the meantime, the Kurdish Program goes on. Saeedpour says her aim is "to stop the suffering. If I would say I have any agenda, it's that: to stop the suffering." (She is also desperate for horizontal architectural files in which to preserve rare Kurdish textiles and documents.)

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life." A drastically condensed and slightly edited version of "Off-limits" appears below. Those interested in the subject should read the complete edition, which will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Communication*, a journal edited by the University of Illinois College of Communications.

McChesney writes: "In many countries, the very issues of how the mass media are controlled, structured and subsidized are inexorably linked with issues of free expression and participatory democracy. Hence, debates over media policy are carried on in the political arena and can attract popular discussion. The U.S. has remained distinctly immune from this tendency. Despite having a media structure that has become concentrated in the hands of some two dozen enormous corporations that earn the lion's share of their revenues advertising the products of other major corporations, American political culture has failed to question whether this media system is compatible with democracy."

"There are three explanations why discussions about the institutional and structural arrangements of the mass-media system are 'off limits' in U.S. political culture."

"First, this inability to publicly debate the capitalist basis of the mass media is a function of the more general inability to fundamentally criticize capitalism itself in U.S. political culture...."

"The second explanation for the lack of debate is that the corporate media have actively and successfully cultivated the belief that the status quo is the only rational media structure for a democratic and freedom-loving society. As the late CBS President William Paley said in 1937, 'He who attacks the American system [of broadcasting] attacks democracy itself.' This 'laissez faire' media ideology has been internalized to such an extent that it has become an article of faith for anyone committed to democracy."

"Furthermore, commercial broadcasters and the major media corporations seek to establish two things. First, that the capitalist media setup is the best possible system. And second, that the status quo—unlike any alternative—is innately non-partisan and committed to the truth rather than any sort of ideological ax-grinding. This is a critical point that a highly concentrated media system must establish. Unless it can establish social neutrality, the very legitimacy of its system as a primary dispenser of political information is quickly, and rightfully, suspect. As they pursue their agendas, the major media corporations rely on the ideology of professional journalism—regardless of its merits—to legitimize the media oligopoly."

"Professional journalism legitimizes the system since it shifts responsibility for media performance from the economic context to the specific conduct of reporters and editors who, following a set of professional standards, operate within a pre-supposed broader context. Indeed, the logic of the ideology is such that the actual ownership and support mechanisms become incidental to explaining news-media performance. Interestingly, not only does the ideology of professional journalism exempt media corporations from public scrutiny, it exempts the journalists themselves. Beneath a shallow cover, professional journalists often exhibit contempt for public criticism of their conduct, regarding it as 'un-informed.'"

"Paradoxically, as far as any form of media criticism is palatable to professional journalists, it is criticism from the right that receives play in the mainstream press. Arguably, this is due to the flattering manner in which right-wing media critics stress the autonomy and power of the journalists and editors over the news product. The alternative situation of a press corps being roundly praised by conservatives for their subservience to the powers-that-be would hardly meet even the rudimentary standards for a profession and would cast the legitimacy of the entire media structure into doubt."

"The third explanation for the lack of legitimate debate regarding the ownership, structure and control of the media in U.S. political life relates to the nature of the corporate media themselves. Given the media's control over the flow of information, few politicians have any desire to antagonize the media industry as a whole, with the conceivable repercussions that might entail for their political careers and agendas. Further, the corporate media are in an ideal position to control the public perception, or lack thereof, of any possible debate regarding the control and structure of the mass media."

"These explanations are not intended to gloomily forecast that any alteration of existing conditions will be forever impossible. The American Century is literally and figuratively nearing an end. Eventually this may provide an opening in U.S. political culture for the criticism of capitalism. Any viable campaign to reconstruct the media system must be part of a broad-based mass movement to reform the basic institutions of U.S. society. Without this radical—or at the least, non-mainstream—political foundation, any effort at media reform will quickly be washed up."