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A Tale of Two Free Countries

by Anthony Gregory

It isn't the best of times, but hey, at least it isn't the worst.

That's the way the warhawks are defending the torture in Abu Ghraib prison and the disaster of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Sure, Americans are reportedly riding war captives like domesticated animals, subjecting them to electric shock, smearing them with what appear to be feces, force-feeding them pork, compelling them to denounce Islam, kicking them while they're tied up, fondling their genitals, sodomizing them with sticks, and making them retrieve their food from the toilet — but at least they're not dipping them into acid baths, as Saddam used to do. Sure, the U.S. government has machine-gunned innocent civilians, closed down Iraqi newspapers, isolated towns in barbed wire, subjected peaceful Iraqis to curfews, racked up a five-digit civilian death count — and may have even shot up a wedding, but at least it's not as bad as what Saddam used to do.

When Saddam did his worst, embroiling his country in a war with Iran that killed a million people, gassing thousands and thousands of defenseless people with poison, the United States viewed him as an ally and assisted his efforts with funding, weaponry, and military intelligence. Nevertheless, say the apologists of U.S. brutality in Iraq, Saddam himself was guilty of these grave crimes and it was the right, maybe even the duty, of the U.S. government to intervene, even when Saddam's regime was at its weakest in history. The U.S. government's atrocities, we read in the news, are necessary evils in a righteous war to free the Iraqi people.

George W. Bush has even said the Iraqi people are now free. Of course, he also once said that “free nations are peaceful nations. Free nations don't attack each other. Free nations don't develop weapons of mass destruction.” Under this definition, America is not a free nation. Perhaps Bush should fix that by liberating us the way liberated the Iraqis.

We can probably ignore this inconsistency, and attribute it to Bush's inability to say what he means or mean what he says. So maybe we can assume that he would also say America is free.

By what measure do we construe a people as free? The Iraqis were probably always better off than the Cambodians were under Pol Pot, and so are we. Is this freedom? If the only good thing

we can say about this war is that the Iraqis were worse off under Saddam, perhaps the only way we can say the Iraqis or Americans are free is by comparing their conditions to those of people who have suffered worse persecution.

Here in America, we certainly have lost some fundamental freedoms. But at least it's not as bad as it could be. Sure, we have a socialist education system to subjugate our youth, a socialist retirement system to manipulate the elderly, and a socialist tax system to rule everyone in between. Sure, we have an oppressive drug policy that incarcerates hundreds of thousands of peaceful people and subjects many of them to rape, a growing surveillance leviathan that treats us like lab rats, and a central banking scam that steals our wealth with the printing press — but at least we're not North Korea.

Our standards of what a free society should look like appear to have been thrown in the toilet along with the war prisoners' food. No wonder the politicians in D.C. can look into the camera with straight faces as they speak of the freedom in Iraq and the freedom here at home.

Those who idolize government power tend to have severe difficulties in applying absolute principles consistently. They usually have little trouble agreeing that individual persons shouldn't rob or cheat each other, but they break down completely when applying the principle to government. The nationalists among them usually decry the horrendous acts of mass slaughter committed by foreign governments, and yet they pardon their own government if it commits similar offenses.

At no time does this hypocrisy come through more clearly than during war, or when contemplating past wars. Every evil perpetrated by the U.S. government, no matter how demonic and inhumane, can be excused as being better than those evils done by the enemy.

In reflecting on the most glorified U.S. war, World War II, there is no end to the moral relativism and hypocrisy. Did the U.S. government drop nuclear weapons on more than 100,000 defenseless Japanese civilians? Yes, but the Rape of Nanking was worse. Did the United States assist Britain in the fire-bombing of Dresden? Yes, but the Nazi Holocaust was worse. Did Franklin Roosevelt put 110,000 Japanese Americans into concentration camps? Yes, but at least he didn't kill them.

Even if we buy the argument that these U.S. policies were necessary to win the war — which I do not — it speaks of the sheer brutality of war that the commission of a million wrongs may be necessary to ensure a right. Certainly, if going to war means abandoning moral principles to such a degree as to excuse the killings and oppression of so many innocents, war itself must be avoided at all possible cost. On the other hand, if these atrocities are not necessary, and yet are nevertheless widely committed and tolerated, we must likewise avoid war at all possible cost.

John Quincy Adams affirmed the noninterventionist foreign policy America inherited from its Founding Fathers, and boasted that the United States “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.” Some think that his wisdom has become obsolete, but I think it has more truth to it

than ever. The world is full of monsters as bad as or worse than Saddam Hussein. Virtually all nations in the Middle East are ruled by murderous despots. Much of Asia is still plagued by Communist regimes. Much of Latin America suffers under neo-Marxist kleptocracies, Africa is infested with warlords, and even most of Europe's freest countries still suffer under socialist governments and corrupt politicians that do not satisfy the standards of even the least libertarian of America's Founding Fathers.

The world is ruled by monsters, and the U.S. government does not need to search very far to find them. Given the tendency of American hawks to excuse any level of domestic repression and any number of civilian casualties abroad so long as the foreign adversary appears to inflict even greater pain on its subjects, we see the most compelling reason for the United States to return to its noninterventionist foreign policy. For the foreseeable future, there will very likely always be governments in other countries that make our country look free and peaceful by comparison. We risk seeing this distinction narrow sharply every time America goes to war to destroy a monster, of which there is an endless supply on earth.

And no matter how much freedom and moral decency we lose in our government's wars, there will be some who say that it is worth it, and that the wars themselves deserve credit for the freedoms we still enjoy. Indeed, almost every American war, from World War II to Vietnam, is championed as a war to defend American freedom, in spite of all the economic and civil liberties and American lives lost in the waging of those wars.

I don't know how many more wars to defend freedom America can endure, and I am not looking forward to finding out.

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