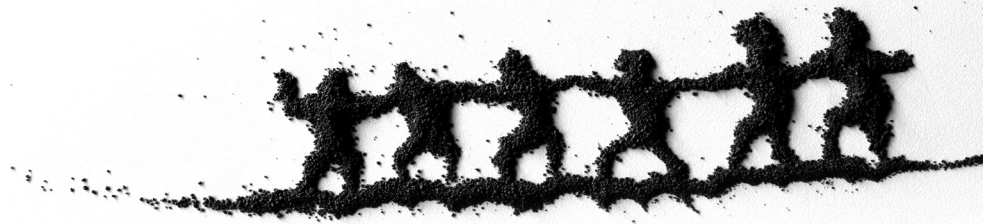


In defence of more freedom

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The wild-eyed diatribes of Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad register as extreme even by the hothouse standards of the Middle East.

First, the Iranian president denied the Holocaust. Then, so as to leave nobody in doubt, he threatened to wipe Israel off the map.

To my knowledge, only one other world leader in the past 60 years has advanced seriously the notion of obliterating another nation. That was Cuba's Fidel Castro during the missile crisis of the early 1960s, when he urged the Soviets to launch pre-emptive nuclear strikes against the United States. Thankfully, Khrushchev would have none of it.

That Iran's president has been prepared to speak so publicly, so ghoulishly, of his ambition to reduce Israel to nothingness says something about the dangers of strategic weapons in the possession of the fevered minds of zealots. For while there may have been a bleak genius to the Cold War calculus of mutually assured destruction, this remained so only for as long as those in command of the doomsday technology were rational actors.

Ahmadinejad, elected one year ago, styles himself as the authentic voice of a great nation of 70 million. In fact, he represents a tight circle of power within Iran, a radical clerical elite which masquerades cynically as a democracy. Yes, Iran has an elected assembly, but it is the Council of Guardians which determines who is — and, more often, who is not — eligible to stand. It is this same shadow state that controls the secret police and Revolutionary Guards. It is this Iran that sponsors international terror. It is this Iran that has been pursuing nuclear weapons for 20 years in blatant defiance of the international protocols. It is this Iran that is making mischief through its proxies in Iraq.

To that extent, the advent of Ahmadinejad has helped to crystallize the great challenges to global security early in the 21st century — the risk that one day not too far away a megalomaniac will get his hands on a weapon of mass destruction. This is the emerging security threat George W. Bush has gone to great pains to stress in world forums since the September 11 attacks on America. It represents

the broad strategic underpinning for all that has happened since, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, global efforts to hunt down terror networks, the attempt to put some punch back into nuclear non-proliferation and the tense diplomatic stand-offs with North Korea and Iran.

Most ambitiously of all, it is driving the US president's project to liberalise the politics of the greater Middle East. For too long, the region has been brutalised by the notion that power is won, and preserved, only through fear and subjugation. Alarming, with radical Islamism on the march, this violent narrative now has been stamped for worldwide export.

Bush's place in history will be defined by his progress on this agenda. He has bet the ranch on two propositions: first, that the people of the Middle East are willing to make great sacrifices to wrest back control of their lives from the demagogues and dictators; second, that his fellow Americans, and their allies, will continue to make great sacrifices to help win the freedom of others. Neither outcome is assured.

The president argues the expansion of freedom's frontier is the best — perhaps the only — long-term cure for the social deprivation and economic backwardness in the Middle East. Social and political reform, after generations of misrule by a motley crew of despots, princes and potentates, constitutes the only likely antidote to the tide of radicalism in the region so worrying for global security. Yet, approaching five years into this campaign, it has to be said Bush is struggling desperately to cut through with this message.

There have been concrete advances wrought by the demonstration effect of US actions. The milestones include elections in Iraq, an orderly transfer of power in Lebanon, pardons for jailed democracy activists in Saudi Arabia, the enshrining of women's rights in Kuwait, tentative concessions to political freedoms in Egypt and even Libya, and massive protests in Morocco and Jordan against the ultra-violence of al-Qaeda. Is anyone suggesting the return of girls to the classrooms of Afghanistan is other than a good thing?

Don't imagine for a moment the intervention in Iraq has not had a ripple effect. In societies governed by corrupt elites, those who have enjoyed unchallenged privilege have much at stake. For them, demands for popular sovereignty will summon to mind Albert Camus' reference to freedom as "that terrible word inscribed on the chariot of the storm".

Across the world, a host of authoritarian regimes are throwing up the barricades, playing a waiting game, and calculating that the next incumbent at the White House will have neither the mandate nor the nerve to take them on. They are hoping a collapse of popular support for the Bush strategy in the US, and among its allies, will see this extraordinary moment of American interventionism come to a screeching halt. Despairingly, it is not inconceivable that they might just be right.

For whatever progress is made in the Middle East, the Western media is submerged in a plague of self-doubt. Amid much mudslinging, many have rushed to pronounce the democratisation project wrong-headed and doomed to failure.

During his recent visit to Australia, Britain's Tony Blair told federal Parliament that divisions today were between societies open to the world and those fearful of a changing world. This might explain the wails of "Western imperialism" from those with most invested in the grim status quo in the Middle East. But why, Blair asked, was this refrain taken up so slavishly and strenuously by critics of Bush in America, Europe and Australia: "Their case is that democracy is a Western concept we are forcing on unwilling cultures. The problem we have is that a part of opinion in our own countries agrees with them."

The Bush Doctrine is a harrowing and confronting agenda. No doubt about

it. In the US, the president's slump in approval, despite a resurgent economy, suggests increased anxiety in middle America about the wisdom of persisting with the course set by his administration, especially in an Iraq consumed by shocking sectarian conflict. At both ends of the political spectrum, second-guessing Bush has become not only the fashion, but an obsession. In Europe, notably in France, it verges on hysteria.

How did it come to this? To hear the shrill voices opposing the Bush strategy to combat extremism in the Arab and Islamic worlds, you begin to wonder when, where, how and why democracy became such a dirty word. What is so wrong, so threatening, about open societies and open minds?

What exactly is there to fear from freedom?



In 1941, the Atlantic Charter signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill laid down the template for a postwar international order. Still facing the twin threats of Nazism and Japanese militarism, they spoke of aspiring for a peace under which "all the men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want." The noble sentiment of this text would later be incorporated in the United Nations Charter.

But whatever the altruistic fervour at the time to prevent a repeat of the horrors of world wars, the attempts to fashion a new and more liberal international system ran headlong into Cold War rivalries, while, in the developing world, the freedom agenda soon came to be overshadowed by power struggles between authoritarians of the right and left.

Here, there were no winners, only survivors. When ultimately the key citadels of communism collapsed at the end of the 1980s, there was fresh hope again for a more stable and peaceable world order. But this, too, was soon to flounder, amid ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, violent tribal, ethnic and sectarian divisions in Africa and the Balkans, and the emergence of a virulent strain of religious extremism in the Islamic world, culminating in al-Qaeda's mega-terror assault on the US in September, 2001.

A year later, against the backdrop of commemorative services to mourn the victims in New York and Washington, Bush announced a revised national security strategy, revisiting the themes of the 1940s: "The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single, sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise."

Confronting a dangerous new foe, which had shown a readiness to resort to the worst excesses of "total war", Bush implored Americans to accept the role of global leadership in this ongoing struggle. His speech carried unmistakable echoes of Churchill's famous Harvard address of 1943: "The price of greatness is responsibility. If the people of the United States had continued in a mediocre station... absorbed in their own affairs... they might have remained forgotten and undisturbed beyond their protecting oceans. But one cannot rise to be in many ways the leading community in the civilized world without being involved in its problems, without being convulsed by its agonies and inspired by its causes. The people of the United States cannot escape world responsibility."

In a subsequent speech to the UN General Assembly in September, 2004, Bush went further still, offering a blunt admission on the failings of US postwar foreign policy towards the Arab world: “For too long, many nations, including my own, tolerated, even excused, oppression in the Middle East in the name of stability. Oppression became common, but stability never arrived. We must take a different approach. We must help the reformers of the Middle East as they work for freedom, and strive to build a community of peaceful, democratic nations.”

For an American president, this was a signal departure from the crude realpolitik of the Cold War years. It marked belated recognition that the practice of coddling corrupt rulers in the Middle East, either in the name of stability (or, as often, in the cause of Cold War one-upmanship) had succeeded only in producing a greater sense of grievance and disillusionment among the Arab citizenry. As a statement of contrition on behalf of the superpower, as a frank admission of past mistakes, this speech should have been welcomed intuitively by progressive liberals everywhere. Predictably, it wasn't.

In fact, the speech brought forth only scorn. Some denounced the Bush project as an impossible dream — disruptive, delusional and downright dangerous. Others spoke of cultural imperialism, accusing Washington and its allies of trying clumsily, arrogantly, to superimpose Western values on societies with different traditions, interests and priorities.

It has to be said this critique involves curious logic for anyone who holds to the notion of universal human rights. Why should political freedoms extended to our own citizenry remain exclusively a Western construct? To argue the consent of the governed is not, or cannot be, a universal value is to say, in effect, that some humans might prefer to live in subjugation. There can be no proposition more objectionable, more defeatist. The point was made best by Lincoln, in his address to the Indiana regiment: “I have always thought that all men should be free; but if any should be slaves, it should first be those who desire it for themselves, and secondly those who desire it for others. Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

There can be only a handful of explanations for the fact that freedom, as an aspiration, seems so undervalued by so many in the West who enjoy its benefits and privileges in their own lives. One is that they deem the people of the Middle East temperamentally unsuited to function in open, pluralistic societies. This would be old-fashioned racism. Another is that they believe it is best not to interfere if people on the other side of the world want to go about killing each other. This would be old-fashioned isolationism. A third explanation is that it's better to leave the people of the region to the mercy of the brutes running some of these societies rather than risk unnecessary confrontation. This would be old-fashioned appeasement. A fourth is that they don't care so much about what happens to the people of the Middle East as long as the Americans take a beating. It's not the first time we've come across that odious phenomenon, either.



During the Cold War years, there were many cheerleaders for Marxism-Leninism, duped into the belief that Soviet society offered a superior economic and political model, and that Western-style capitalism was the greater evil. The formidable French polemicist, Jean-Francois Revel, captured the tragedy of this collective idiocy. “Even in the best-informed societies, there exists a domestic third world of ignorance,” he wrote in his landmark work, *The Totalitarian Temptation*. “Having been told over and over that the free societies of the industrial West are history’s most horrendous cases of oppression and misery, any change (is seen as) preferable to the awful present. But from the moment people are in a position to evaluate totalitarian rule from their own experience, they no longer have the ability to abolish it, or criticise it, or alter it, or even to escape it.”

Thus were more than 300 million eastern Europeans consigned to a massive prison block for almost five decades. Apologists in the West insisted these people were not coerced into servitude, but were willing champions of the proletarian revolution, forsaking individual liberties for the advantages of centrally-planned development. It was an obnoxious hoax. Yet despite the implosion of the Soviet empire, the utterly shameless defenders of this defunct ideology have lost none of their animus towards Western “values” or, more particularly, American leadership. We heard it during the wars in the Balkans. We heard it again during the campaign to oust the Taliban. We hear it on Iraq.

Although Revel himself started out as a man of the left, he never forgot or forgave those who had so willfully misread the lessons of Cold War history. Before he died at the end of April, he offered one last scathing critique of the post-Marxist narrative:

The simplistic article of Marxist faith that capitalism is absolute evil, and that it is incarnated in and directed by the United States, may be the most important principle shared by the current crop of anti-globalisers, having learned nothing from the socialist catastrophes and absurdities of the last generation...Even in nations like China where political communism has artificially prolonged its existence, it has done so only by thoroughly expunging economic socialism through privatization, appeals to foreign investors, deregulation of commerce, and establishment of cross-border trade agreements. Only Cuba and North Korea have clung to economic collectivism, with utterly disastrous results. (Yet) what we end up with... is a topsy-turvy situation in which those seeking to destroy democracy appear to be fighting for legitimate aims, while its defenders are pictured as repressive reactionaries.

For all his fears about this self-destructive tendency within Western intellectual circles, Revel might well have taken heart from the myriad inspiring examples in recent history of peoples and nations celebrating the rites of freedom. Sixty-seven dictatorships have fallen since 1972. The beneficiaries of this wave of liberation have included not only the eastern Europeans but another 700 million people across Africa, Latin America and East Asia. A billion individuals emancipated from tyranny in one generation. One corollary of this growing pool of democracies is greater peace and prosperity. There is not one instance in history of a democracy launching a war of aggression against a fellow democracy. This is the peace dividend of freedom. It is one of the strongest arguments in Bush’s armoury, and one of the most piercing retorts to those who ritually, religiously, adopt the nay-saying predisposition the French call quaintly *alter-mondiale*.

Of course, not everywhere has moderation triumphed over extremes. Several former Soviet states fail abysmally the legitimacy test. Russia under Vladimir Putin has gone into reverse gear. And suspicion of behind-the-scenes involvement by US-based groups like Freedom House in the “color revolutions” in

Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan has led to a backlash. Politicians from China to Zimbabwe have placed restrictions on Western aid to human rights activists and opposition groups. In Latin America, a new breed of leftist populists have come to power. Most prominent among them is Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, who cites US democracy promotion as part of a Bush Administration campaign to oust him. Chavez blocks American aid, and uses his nation's oil riches to support anti-American candidates in the region, in the hope of spreading what he calls his "Bolivarian Revolution."

These same regimes are never busier than when myth-making about the ruthlessness of American power. Just as it was fashionable to besmirch Britain's history as a coloniser (ignoring, for one thing, the pivotal role of its naval might in bringing an end to the evils of slavery) so it is fashionable now to pillory American stewardship of the war on terror. Some will argue the US has only itself to blame, that Guantanamo Bay, for example, has soured perceptions of its human rights agenda. And although two reservists are serving prison sentences for abuses at Abu Ghraib, Washington is still paying hugely for the impact of that scandal on international opinion.

Iraq provides the crucial test



Nowhere is there a more critical litmus test for the broader initiative to promote democracy than the campaign to add Iraq to the rollcall of free societies. It was inevitable that any war and occupation to end one of the world's most despicable dictatorships was going to bring violence and upheaval. But that process has uncorked three decades of repression, lifting the veil on profound ethnic and religious divides within Iraqi society. Some say the sectarian fires ablaze in Baghdad represent a signpost to the imminent collapse of the Bush project.

The stated mission in Iraq is to help create a stable, pluralist, democratic, unitary state with strong constitutional protections for minority rights. As a goal, this is entirely unobjectionable — which, of course, is why so many of its critics scour the periphery in search of ulterior motives. But the task of pacifying, then rehabilitating, so brutalised a society was always a huge ask. From the beginning of Arab-Muslim history, Iraq has been ruled by cruel oppression. The standard was set as long ago as the eighth century, when the emissary sent from Damascus to govern the rebellious provinces, al-Hadjadj ibn Yusuf, forewarned of a never-ending reign of terror: "By God, O people of Iraq, people of discord and dissembling and evil character ... I shall strip you like bark, I shall truss you like a bundle of twigs, I shall beat you like stray camels ... I swear by God that you will keep strictly to the true path, or I shall punish every man of you in body."

The downfall of Saddam has provided one of the few openings in Iraq's history to clamber free of this brutal history. Most Iraqis say they want democratic government that works in the interests of all, regardless of ethnicity or sect. They have voted three times, in ever-increasing numbers, for such an outcome. The significance of this cannot be gainsaid: no longer can a dictator present to the world a counterfeit version of the nation's aspirations; today, the Iraqis speak for themselves.

Tragically, however, radicals and hotheads from rival traditions have taken up arms and launched a frenzy of tit-for-tat killings. The conflict in the streets of the capital, Baghdad, can hardly be dismissed as a pocket of anarchy. In such a climate, will there ever be sufficient cohesion to allow the evolution of democratic institutions that will protect the rights of all Iraqis? Or must the nation's future, like its past, be forged in blood and fire?

These are profoundly troubling questions and it is at this moment we usually hear the familiar refrain that it could all have been so much easier, so much less costly, that the lives of the Iraqis would have been better, if only we had left Saddam Hussein in power. Wrong. Anyone still tempted to delude themselves that the former regime was somehow more tolerable than the war of intervention to remove it might wish to peruse *Le Livre Noir de Saddam Hussein*. Written by Arabs, Americans, Germans, French and Iranians, it is the most comprehensive work to date on the former regime's war crimes.

Contributors include Archaeologists for Human Rights, which has catalogued the discovery so far of 288 mass graves. "There is no secret about these mass graves," they write. "Military convoys crossed towns, full of civilian prisoners, and returned empty. People living near execution sites heard the cries of men, women and children. They heard shots followed by silence." We are hearing more of this sordid tale at the trials of Saddam and his henchmen for crimes against humanity at Dujail and Halabja.

Furthermore, knowing what we know now of the sleazy backroom games in and around the UN, it requires an extraordinary leap of faith to persist with the assertion that Saddam and his psychopathic sons might have been contained indefinitely by sanctions and inspections. The far greater probability would have been the erosion and ultimate collapse of the sanctions regime, and an Iraq free to resume its weapons programs.

The US military has begun the process of releasing the mountains of official Iraqi documentation collected since the fall of Saddam. Combined with the interrogation of former high-ranking Iraqi officials, including Saddam's deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Perspectives project has shed fresh light on what was happening in the shadows of those fateful UN debates in 2002. Many more documents are to be released in the coming months. Not only can we expect to learn more about the double-dealing at the UN but there is the likelihood we will learn more—much more—about Saddam's connections to international terrorism.

Much of the world remains in denial about the extent of the nexus between Saddam's Iraq and the spear-carriers of Islamic radicalism, almost as if a regime notorious for crimes against humanity somehow deserves the presumption of innocence. In fact, we know Saddam had no philosophical aversion whatsoever to the notion of using proxies to launch attacks, at home or abroad. We know the Iraqi Intelligence Service had regular contacts with a range of militant groups across the region, and was heavily involved in financing and training terrorist operatives. We know of the cheques paid to the families of the "martyrs" of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Much more is still to be learned.

But we also have the historical record of what the Iraqi strongman said himself. It is worth reflecting, more than 15 years later, on that terse conversation between Saddam and US Ambassador, April Glaspie, in June, 1990, only days before he launched his invasion of Kuwait. Much of the reporting of this meeting has focused on the suggestion that Glaspie gave Saddam the 'green light' to proceed with the annexation of a small, oil-rich neighbour. The transcript as recorded by Iraqi note-takers doesn't sustain that charge. What it does tell us is that Saddam was acutely conscious of the risk of US intervention, and that

he was intent on warning Washington to back off: "If you use pressure, we will deploy pressure and force. We know that you can harm us although we do not threaten you. But we too can harm you... We cannot come all the way to you in the United States, but individual Arabs may reach you." These words must have been ringing in the ears of US intelligence agencies after the first attack on New York's World Trade Centre in 1993. It would be astonishing if they did not also resonate after September 11.

From the moment of his defeat in the Gulf War, there had been strong elements of strategic contiguity between the Iraqi dictator and the brand of Sunni extremism that would give rise to al-Qaeda and its offshoots. Both were sworn enemies of the House of Saud. Both saw the US-led action against Iraq as an attack on Arab, particularly Sunni Arab, sovereignty. Both saw removing American influence from the region as critical to their interests. Both sought to generate popular support by demonising (and attacking) Israel. Both used religious chauvinism opportunistically to advance their political aims. And just as Saddam had lined his bookshelves with the thoughts of Stalin, so, too did radical Islamism spill off the same conveyor belt of totalitarian excess. Like fascism and communism, radical Islamism is a predatory, punitive and expansionary ideology. It is all of these things because it cannot ever be seen to admit the possibility of alternatives to domination of mankind by one all-embracing belief-system. And, like Saddam, it has no compunction about monsterring and mauling any who stand in its path.

The anti-western threat



History reminds us it is crucial to understand the brutal logic that underpins such a mindset before the awful midnight arrives when terror turns up on the doorstep. Yet, remarkably, despite the jihadis inflicting vicious attacks on civilians from New York to London, Madrid to Moscow, from Bali to Beslan and back again, many in the Arab world, and some strands of Western society, seem unconvinced of the nature of the beast.

For Hannah Arendt, who so powerfully documented Nazi war crimes, it is the capacity for wholesale, indiscriminate destruction that distinguishes totalitarian ideology as so radically evil, so desperately mad. As she asked: "Why should lust for power... suddenly transcend all previously known limitations of self-interest ... not only to kill whoever is in the way of further power but also innocent and harmless bystanders?" We should ask this same question as we study the nail bomb attacks at a Cairo bazaar, or in London's tube and bus network. We should ask this same question as we wonder how many more assaults on the impoverished people of Bali or Baghdad will it take to end the ludicrous efforts by so many to apply conventional Marxist class warfare analysis to Islamist terror.

In tracing the origins of Arab and Muslim grievance, it is germane to consider the history of the Islamic world's relative decline, the impact of colonialism, the partition of Palestine, and economic deprivation and corruption in modern Arab society. But do these factors together establish a "root cause" (hence, somehow a justification) for the carnage and crimes against humanity being perpetrated in the name of the downtrodden of the Arab and Islamic worlds? Emphatically not. Nor should the deliberate, calculated mass murder of civilians ever be

excused by the sort of post-Marxist silliness that would have us define (and, in some grotesque cases, defend) terrorism as “a weapon of the weak.”

Using ambulances to carry out suicide bombings is not a weapon of the weak. Bombing school buses is not a weapon of the weak. Beheading civilian hostages is not a weapon of the weak. None of these are weapons of the weak. They are weapons of the wicked. International law should say so. No ifs, buts or maybes.

Nor should so much of the reflexively anti-Western rhetoric in this debate be allowed to deflect attention from where it matters most. For what is too often forgotten is that the main targets for the Islamic radicals are the moderates of the Muslim world. This is the crux of the struggle, and it is creating difficult dynamics for societies such as Indonesia.

Traditionally, Islam in South-East Asia has been peaceable and inclusive. Over the centuries, it was able to integrate the secular and sacred. Communities in Indonesia came to understand the constraints of a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society. However, over 20 years, more than \$US100 billion has been spent by wealthy Arabs spreading an austere version of the Muslim faith across Asia. Increasingly, this chauvinistic version of Islam has become active at the intersection of religion and politics in places like Java, as young radicals take their inspiration from the likes of Sayyid Qutb, and borrow their war-fighting techniques from al-Qaeda. Sooner or later, progressive Indonesians are going to have to grapple with this for, as the Muslim feminist, Irshad Manji notes, colonialism is not the preserve of people with pink skin. There is such a thing as Islamic imperialism.

In some respects, the nation-building task facing Indonesia is not so dissimilar to those faced by Middle Eastern societies such as Iraq. Indonesia, too, was ruled by a dictator, as recently as eight years ago. After the fall of Suharto, it, too, suffered tens of thousands of deaths in sectarian violence. While Indonesia is further advanced in the task of establishing democratic institutions, nobody should underestimate the ongoing challenges, given the combustible ingredient of religious zealots preaching revolutionary violence.

It takes resolute political leadership, and often a great deal of international support and understanding, to create a consensus among rival communities for institutional and legal settings that allow for representative politics, a public sector rid of corruption, and constitutional protection for civil and minority rights. It also requires altruism on the part of individuals to assume mutual responsibility for melding together a viable society.

More than 10 years after the signing of the Dayton accords, and five years after the fall of Slobodan Milosevic, 25,000 NATO troops remain stationed in Bosnia and Kosovo. Is this not a benchmark against which to measure expectations, in Iraq or elsewhere? The lesson is that liberating and rebuilding nations fractured by ethnic and sectarian divides is not about overnight miracles. Progress is patchy, with as many setbacks as advances, until local actors commit to the principles of a rules-based society. Often, it takes extraordinary courage to stand up to the bullies, bigots and gunmen. This might seem a big ask today for, say, the average citizen of Baghdad. But not impossible.

In Belfast, it is arguable five sisters have done as much as anyone to hasten the obsolescence of the Irish Republican Army. Following the IRA murder of Robert McCartney in a pub, his sisters spoke out fearlessly against the bullying gunmen. This shattered a decades-old tradition in the back alleys of West Belfast – a strict code of unquestioning loyalty to the paramilitaries. Slogans of insurrection on the streets of the neighbourhood were soon supplanted by a new injunction: “IRA scum out.”

This was a victory for civilised rule. No wonder the sisters were invited to the White House. President Bush needs many more such examples. For, in all of this, the worst of all outcomes would be a superpower chastened by its Iraq experience, and forced into retreat. There is already a popular backlash against the foreign policy activism of Bush. If the trend continues, will this see the return of a more inward-looking America, seeking solace in isolation? As the mystics say, be careful what you wish for.

Feeding off the expectation that the Bush strategy will not survive beyond the Bush presidency, America's enemies are biding their time, waiting anxiously to celebrate that Saigon moment, when the last departing US chopper flies out of Baghdad. Lest some think this too melodramatic, it is worth recalling what Ahmadinejad told leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah at a recent meeting in Damascus. Insisting the US does not have the stomach for protracted conflict, he predicted Washington would soon revert to its traditional policy of "running away," leaving Afghanistan and Iraq, indeed the whole of the Middle East, to be reshaped by Iran and its allies. His argument was that once Bush is gone, the UN will become more pliable, and Iran will be able to do pretty much as it pleases: "They can pass resolutions until they are blue in the face."

Ahmadinejad's defiance is proving contagious.



With the help of some cut-price oil and soft loans, Ahmadinejad has convinced Syria's Bashar al-Assad to dig in his heels over the UN investigation of the murder of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri. There are signs Saudi Arabia may be having second thoughts about a dialogue on political reform. In Qatar, talk of a new democratic constitution has subsided. And, in the Palestinian territories, the hardliners of Hamas have surged to power, more grist to the mill of those who have warned that democracy will produce more perversity than diversity in a region with little or no history of rule by consensus.

In Iraq, concerns the US will not remain as committed to the project has prompted some Shi'ites to turn to Tehran and for some Sunni leaders to have second thoughts about their decision to join the political process. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Kurds view suspiciously efforts to bind them closer to the Iraqi state. Again, they claim they have to "take precautions in case the Americans run away."

Will the Americans run away? I, for one, hope and trust they will not. But one of the sacred joys of living in an open society is that, ultimately, it is not the rulers, but the ruled, who get to have the last word. If Bush is judged to have failed in his strategy (and it is far too soon to even begin to make such a call) the Congress, a robust media, and the American people, will combine to deliver a reckoning.

In democracies, leaders don't write their own history. Sadly, no such protections, no such checks and balances, are available to those forced to endure the claustrophobia of one party states, official state-run media, and the habitual use of violence to entrench in power the hard men at the top. One consequence of this disparity is that mistakes made by governments in open societies can be so magnified, so distorted, that we see characterisations of Guantanamo Bay as a

gulag, or of Bush as a Hitler. Meanwhile, gangster regimes get on with their corrupt and murderous ways, unburdened by scrutiny.

For all that, it is hard to see how the shrinking club of tyrants will survive indefinitely the tidal wash of globalisation, with its unrelenting flow of ideas and information, including the trademark Western concept described by Hannah Arendt as “the right to have rights”.

Of course, despotic regimes will kick and scratch and snarl in their attempts at self-preservation. They will bully opposing voices. They will trash international protocols. They will seek to engender fear and panic. Some may go so far as to sponsor terrorism.

All the more reason, as Blair explained to the Australian Parliament, for true progressives everywhere to be resolute in the struggle to defend the bedrock principles of freedom: “The strain of, frankly, anti-American feeling in parts of European and in world politics is madness when set against the long-term interests of the world we believe in.”

Blair is right to sound this warning. For if the message sent to the thugs and extremists is that the 21st century is theirs to keep, we had all better prepare for a reprise of the darkest horrors of the century just gone.



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The opinions expressed in this essay are his personal view.