

On Democracy

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With one nasty Middle Eastern dictator down and several more to go, Mr. George W. Bush is calling a halt, for now. A looming election and a comfortable lead in the polls following the invasion of Iraq have encouraged him to throw a spanner in the neocons' dreams of taking out Syrian dictator Bashar al-Asad next. Perhaps if there's a second term and the economy is still going to pot, a little adventure in Syria might be just the antidote he will need. But for now, Mr. Bush is calling it quits while he's still ahead.

In the meantime, emboldened by the coming of democracy to Iraqis—patriotically engaged in destroying their own museums, libraries, and ministries other than those the US is interested in (Oil and the Interior, as Robert Fisk writes)—local enthusiasts have been running amok, implanting US flags on sundry mailboxes and trampling underfoot the plentiful “No war on Iraq” signs. The US trounces an emaciated nation abroad and war patriotism trounces free speech at home! It's a win-win situation all around for chest-thumping conservative and neoconservative hawks of various persuasions.

The real quandary for those not riding the giddy waves of war hysteria, however, is not how to protect antiwar signs from mangling, but how to hang onto democracy at home in the face of the Bush administration's determination to ship it abroad to Iraq, Afghanistan and eventually (given the difficulties of permanently nixing the neocon strategy of global rule) to a longish list of Middle Eastern Muslim states. Democracy these days is a finite and nonrenewable resource, like the oil that the Bush regime finally has gotten its hands on: for some to have it, others will be made to yield it up willy nilly.

In theory, democracy is a mode of governance by the people and for the people that is based in a set of inalienable civil and legal rights and safeguards, such as the freedom of speech, protection from arbitrary arrests and seizures, access to legal defense, and all those fine principles that are enshrined in the US Constitution and Bill of Rights. These are the paradigmatic testimonials to democracy that the entire world is taught to revere and which we immigrants who become naturalized citizens swear to defend with our lives even though, when the chips are down, our lives are cheap and expendable.

But, in practice these days, the civil rights and liberties on which US democracy is based have become cheap and expendable commodities as this administration goes through US society with a fine toothed comb in an attempt to weed out potential terrorists, who now are all assumed to be Muslim and/or Middle Eastern. And while this may seem natural and inevitable, following 9/11, it is neither. After all, a tragedy, no matter how profound, does not dictate one's response to it and nor is it clear that the only way to protect the “American way of life” against sabotage by terrorists is to throttle it oneself.

And, yet, that is slowly and inexorably what is happening. Even as US officials prepare to instruct Iraqis in the art of democratic governance, at home, “legalized racial profiling, surveillance, preemptive arrests and detentions, secret courts, and the denial of legal

rights not only to those accused of terrorism, but also those suspected of harboring hostile intent toward the US” are becoming the norm, as I said in a recent talk. And, there seems to be no end in sight to the fear and paranoia that seem to be driving such measures.

Consider the fate of Hasan Hasan, a Kuwaiti immigrant, who was twice arrested and imprisoned for a total of three months by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The first arrest happened on his campus where he was teaching a mathematics class. J.D. Lloyd interviewed Hasan recently and parts of that interview are worth reproducing verbatim (“Imprisoned by the Patriot Act,” In These Times, 4.4.03).

In response to Lloyd’s question about what happened the second time he was arrested, Hasan replies: “When the Long Beach police and the FBI came to arrest me on June 6, they questioned me especially about three paintings. One of them had tall buildings and lightning from the sky, and they asked me, ‘Is this New York, and does lightning mean attack from the air?’ I said that this is a new interpretation I never thought of, even though I made this painting four or five years ago.

Then they went to another painting which had an island within a lake or a river, and some buildings across from the canal, and they told me, ‘This seems kind of like Ellis Island. But we don’t see the Statue of Liberty. Are you planning to blow up the Statue of Liberty? Is this a kind of future projection?’”

One would think this was a scene from the film, “Minority Report,” in which people get arrested for “precrimes” they haven’t committed! But, cases like Hasan’s are becoming more common every day and yet there’s not much in the way of a popular protest against this assault on civil liberties in the world’s most vaunted democracy, perhaps because most US-Americans don’t believe that what is happening to Muslims and Arabs today might in the future happen to them as well.

This could turn out to be a pipedream at best and a nightmare at worst. As Hasan says in response to Lloyd’s question as to how he feels about the way the authorities treated him: “I fear that these authorities will not hesitate in the future to expand their campaigns to include all categories or slices of the society, regardless of color or origin. Maybe they will start with foreigners on visa from certain countries. Then maybe they will expand to the people who have green cards from certain countries. Then maybe they will move to American citizens who are originally from countries put on the blacklist after 9/11. Then later on maybe they will include any American, white or black or Latino, who has been seen hanging around with Middle Easterners, or who has just spoken to someone who is Middle Eastern or Asian. So I think the campaign will expand, will include everyone in the future. The people who feel they are safe—it will come to them.

In the long run, you protect yourself by getting involved. But if you say to yourself, ‘I don’t like politics, I don’t like to get involved, I want my quiet life—home to work, work to home,’ you will find nobody there to stand for you when the police or authorities arrest you.” For now, however, not many people are listening or worrying about the long run; they’re too busy celebrating the dawn of democracy in Iraq.