

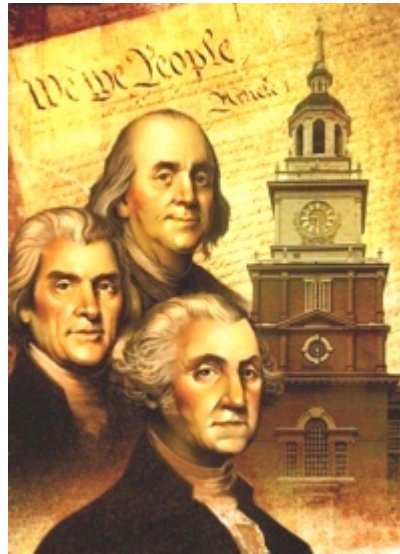


Written by on September 21, 2010

“Democracy Still Matters” — But Should It?

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen wrote an op-ed piece for his paper’s September 20 issue entitled “Democracy Still Matters,” in which he lamented the fact that “democracy has lost its luster.” In his article, the writer attempted to solve the “mystery” of why democracy has declined in the first decade of the 21st century.

Cohen, who traveled throughout the Middle East in the early 1970s and later started his journalism career with Reuters, attributed some of the decline of democracy’s appeal to the fact that “the lingering wars waged partly in democracy’s name in Iraq and Afghanistan hurt its reputation.”



Implicit in Cohen’s look at the still badly governed or ungovernable society in post-liberation Iraq is the assertion that so-called democracy has failed to deliver what was promised, and the people have taken notice. Likewise, prospects for Afghanistan do not seem more favorable.

The writer also contrasts the relative economic condition between the democratic West and nondemocratic China, with the latter currently prospering, apparently because it is “unencumbered by the paralyzing debate of democratic process.”

Russia, however, having evolved into a supposed post-communist stage, receives a different analysis, with Cohen quoting Bulgarian-born Ivan Krastev, a fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, who said: “Regimes like the one in Russia are stabilized by the fact that they have no ideology. There is really no ideological means to attack them.”

Though Krastev experienced firsthand the brutal ill effects of communist rule, he has apparently not yet advanced to the point where he realizes that communism (except in the writings of hack political theorists like Marx) never was about ideology, but about the consolidation of all political and economic power by an elite clique of megalomaniacs. The transition of the old Soviet Union to post-Soviet Russia did not represent an abandonment of communist ideology (which was only adhered to faithfully by mid-to-lower level Communist Party bureaucrats), but, rather, a brilliant rebranding scheme to convince the West that communism was dead and no longer a threat.

Since the supposed collapse of the Soviet Union, all of the key centers of power — political, economic, military, intelligence — in Russia and the other “former” Soviet states have remained in the hands of lifelong communists. Current President Dmitry Medvedev’s mentor, Vladimir Putin, joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union when he was a law student at Leningrad State University. He joined the KGB while young and served the Soviet spy agency until 1991. In 1998, President Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin head of the FSB (one of the successor agencies to the KGB). In 1999, Yeltsin appointed Putin acting Prime Minister of the Government of the Russian Federation. Putin was elected President in 2000 and was reelected in 2004. Unable to serve for a third term, Putin was replaced by his hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, who subsequently appointed Putin Prime Minister of



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Russia.

Cohen goes on to observe:

Having grown up in Communist Bulgaria, [Krastev] believes democracy was oversold in the 1990's. All good things, at the Cold War's end, were shoveled into the democratic basket: prosperity, growth, peace. When democracy stopped delivering in these areas, it suffered. Too little was said about democratic values, including freedom.

While Cohen identifies the failures of the West to market the product packaged as "democracy," he misses the point by blaming democracy's demise on its well-publicized failure to rescue Russia and other nations from political and economic malaise. He notes: "Democracies seemed blocked, as in Belgium, or corrupted, as in Israel, or parodies, as in Italy, or paralyzed, as in the Netherlands."

He also includes the United States under Barack Obama among the "democracies" in apparent need of life support:

There were exceptions, particularly the heady mass movement that brought Barack Obama to power in 2008. But Obama soon found himself caught in the gridlock of the very partisan shrieking he had vowed to overcome. Less than halfway through his presidency the prospect of legislative paralysis looked overwhelming. The world's most powerful democracy, its promise so recently renewed, seemed mired once more in its frustrations and divisions.

In hammering home his case that democracy is in trouble and that "It's important to stanch the anti-democratic tide," Cohen pays homage to a man he obviously regards as a brilliant historian — the late Tony Judt: "Nobody knew better the repressive systems that create captive minds. Nobody wrote more persuasively about the struggle against them for pluralism, liberty and justice."

A perusal of Judt's biography, however, indicates that for such a cerebral giant, Judt took a rather roundabout and laborious path to becoming an expert on which political structures most enhanced human freedom. [Wikipedia's essay](#) about him notes:

A Marxist Zionist as a young man, he dropped his faith in Zionism after youthful experience in Israel in the 1960s and came to see a Jewish state as an anachronism, and moved away from Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s. In later life, he described himself as "a universalist social democrat.

Whatever one may think of the movement called Zionism, it is — unlike Marxism — not the antithesis of human freedom. One wonders why it took Judt decades to see through that conspiratorial totalitarian blueprint camouflaged as a "liberating" philosophy. And his final reinvention as a "universal social democrat" indicated he had become just another one-world Fabian socialist.

Cohen's most egregious blind spot, however, is in failing to recognize that the West's failure to make "democracy" viable enough to market overseas may not be a marketing flaw, but a result of the fact that the product is simply no good. He is cognizant of the fact that "the lingering wars waged partly in democracy's name in Iraq and Afghanistan hurt its reputation," but misses the obvious point that were democracy such a panacea for the world's ills, a much softer sell would suffice.

Rather than placing so much stock in Marxist-turned-"social democrat" Tony Judt's analysis of history, Cohen could have done himself and his readers a service by reading what America's founders, and a few other sage historians, had to say about democracy — a system they explicitly *rejected*. A few examples on the short list of anyone interested in the foundations of our Republic should include:



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"It had been observed that a pure democracy if it were practicable would be the most perfect government. Experience had proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity." ?— Alexander Hamilton

"We are now forming a Republican form of government. Real Liberty is not found in the extremes of democracy, but in moderate governments. If we incline too much to democracy, we shall soon shoot into a monarchy, or some other form of dictatorship. — Alexander Hamilton

"Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."? — James Madison, *Federalist*, No. 10 (arguing in favor of a constitutional republic)

"Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."? — John Adams

"Between a balanced republic and a democracy, the difference is like that between order and chaos."? — John Marshall, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court

"I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty or civilization, or both." ?— Thomas Babington Macaulay

"The one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority, or rather of that party, not always the majority, that succeeds, by force or fraud, in carrying elections."? — Lord Acton



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