

DISCUSSION OF GEORGE SOROS'S THE BUBBLE OF AMERICAN SUPREMACY

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George W. Bush talks a lot about fostering the spread of democracy and freedom in the world, and so does George Soros. The difference is that for Mr. Bush it is axiomatic that freedom and democracy are virtues of American civilization, and they can be expected to follow American influence wherever it goes. But for Mr. Soros freedom and democracy are mutable characteristics of a dynamic social system, and they cannot be achieved or even understood without a perpetual process of open questioning and wide multilateral debate. As a scholar, I'll admit that I have a vested interest in the idea that a worthy social goal requires perpetual analysis and discussion. But I really think that Mr. Soros is profoundly correct here.

One of the book's great strengths is the detailed discussion that Soros gives to the problems of how to cultivate freedom and democracy in the world of international relations. I would have like to see a similar discussion of detailed strategies that America could have applied in its mission to cultivate freedom and democracy in occupied Iraq. This central question has gotten almost no serious consideration by either the Bush Administration or its critics. But there is much that could be said, too much for my limited time.

As a short introduction to this urgent question, let me suggest first that there was too much talk about keeping power from "radical Islamists" and "Ba'athists". Freedom and democracy are not embodied in any particular kind of person; they are properties of the basic operating system of a society. The question should have been, how can such a democratic operating system be started in Iraq.

One of the first principles of democracy is that military forces must be subservient to elected leaders. You know that we were doing something wrong when we began building an Iraqi army before any elections.

If national elections were held in Iraq tomorrow, the winner would have every incentive to use his national power to begin suppressing opportunities for other political groups. Recognizing this, our occupation authority has settled in default for a safe colonialism. But

society is a complex system, and there were many other options besides (1) colonialism, or (2) installing a puppet strongman, or (3) clearing the way for an anti-American dictatorship.

Imagine what might have happened if, within a few months of the war, we had allowed local and provincial councils to be freely elected throughout Iraq. Provincial leaders would have much more incentive to respect democratic civil rights, in hopes of building a reputation that could appeal to voters throughout the country. Ambitious politicians could begin to build their reputations by responsible government that provides public goods, rather than by extremist rhetoric or paramilitary activity.

Unfortunately, émigré leaders had no incentive to advocate such a decentralized start for democracy, and American administrators had little inclination to think seriously about alternative strategies. As George Soros has argued, we need to stop confusing America with freedom and democracy, and begin the hard task of thinking carefully about what freedom and democracy really mean.

In his book, George Soros persuasively argues that America would be better off defining its role as "the leader of the free world" rather than "the world's only superpower." To be leader of the free world is to negotiate partnerships of trust with other free nations. Such partnerships must be based on mutual acceptance of constraints by all partners involved.

American diplomatic strategy between 9/11 and the war in Iraq was not merely heavy-handed; it was based on a systematic refusal to admit any constraints on America's unilateral use of force. Many arguments were offered to justify our invasion of Iraq, but none depended on any validation outside the leadership in Washington. As George Soros rightly emphasizes, the idea of self-imposed constraints seems alien to the thinking of the American supremacists who define our foreign policy today. I see this as a classic error. In decision theory, a person never gains by imposing constraints on himself. But in game theory, a constraint on one player's behavior may change others' behavior in a way that ultimately benefits them all.

Unfortunately, the President knows that it is hard to explain why accepting international restraints can make America safer, that this argument is hard to sell in sound-bites of an election campaign. But it is still true. In the long run, America's status as an unrivaled superpower will persist only as long as the other nations of the world accept it without challenge. Their

acceptance must be based on a confidence that American military dominance does not threaten their security. We must not take their confidence for granted. When American forces invade one country after another, people everywhere must ask what keeps them from becoming another American target. In countries where there is no clear answer to this question, politicians will seek military deterrents against America, because people everywhere demand leaders who can promise security.

The greatest danger is, as it always has been, military conflict between great nations. In the 1990s, as in the 1890s, this danger seemed mercifully remote. But international military rivalries, once started, are notoriously difficult to control. George Soros talks about fertile fallacies. Let me mention another one that has been overdone in the past 60 years: "the danger of being weak like Neville Chamberlain." Perhaps in 2004, we should also recognize "the danger of being arrogant like Kaiser Wilhelm II." Bismarck understood that a country with overwhelming military superiority can become more secure by accepting some constraints from the international community, to reassure its neighbors. But Wilhelm ignored this simple fact disastrously at the turn of the 20th century, and he provoked a counter-force against himself that became World War I. When we worry about the safety of our civilization in the 21st century, this may be a more relevant analogy for Americans think about in 2004.

<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/soros.pdf>