



History is Back. But whose side is it on?

(Published in *Real Clear Politics*, May 15, 2008)

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Colaboraciones n° 2311

May 28, 2008

Is democracy on the march or is it in retreat? I put that question to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice this week. I suggested the answer was, at best, uncertain: Elections in Gaza have led to the creation of a terrorist mini-state ruled by Hamas; freedom in Lebanon is under intense assault by Hezbollah, also a terrorist group; Russia is more authoritarian now than it has been at any time since the fall of the Berlin Wall; and Islamist Iran is as tyrannical as ever.

Secretary Rice argued, with vehemence and eloquence, that freedom does not advance on a steady trajectory -- setbacks and detours should be expected. She noted that for 30 years, Syria had dominated Lebanon, but now Syria has pulled out, and many Lebanese are bravely standing up to Hezbollah (which

takes its instructions from both Syria and Iran). She pointed out that Iraq -- for all its woes -- has never been as free and democratic as it is today. And she noted that Hamas "has always had power. Now it has responsibility as well." All this, she said, signals progress. "We've planted seeds," she said.

Cogent arguments: Are they correct? After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was widely believed that liberal democracy had become, self-evidently, the only rational way to organize society. If that was so, it meant the greatest ideological debate of all times was settled. Francis Fukuyama famously called that "the end of history."

Now Robert Kagan has a new book entitled: "The Return of History and

the End of Dreams." In particular, he writes, "autocracy is making a comeback," with Russia and China the most significant examples. In other words, it's not - as another senior State Department official told me last week - that Russia's rulers have been "backsliding" in practice from a democratic ideal they embrace in theory. Rather, they believe in autocracy. They see it as an alternative that is not just viable but superior.

Vladimir Putin, Russia's strongman, uses the term "sovereign democracy" to describe a governing model that has little tolerance for either opponents or critics. And he may not be incorrect in perceiving that given a choice between freedom, on the one hand, and power, order and stability, on the other, most Russians prefer the latter.

In China, too, it is may be that most people are content to keep their noses out of politics in exchange for a higher standard of living and not having those noses removed from their faces by the authorities.

Where do Iran and other militant Islamist regimes fit in? They are autocratic, yet different, in ways both obvious and subtle. Nevertheless, as Kagan writes, the "willingness of the autocrats in Moscow and Beijing to protect their fellow autocrats in Pyongyang, Tehran and Khartoum increases the chances that the connection between terrorists and nuclear weapons will eventually be made."

This is what frightens me -- more than it does Kagan, with whom I talked at some length this week. He worries more about Russia and China, the "great autocratic powers," than he does about Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas and other Islamist regimes and groups. He argues that these radical theocrats cannot achieve their dreams. I agree, but think that begs this question: Can they destroy ours? That is their intention. Can we prevent them from acquiring the capability? I don't know. Are we doing everything possible to stop them? I am convinced we are not - the ACLU, MoveOn.org, and Nancy Pelosi are only some of the reasons why.

Russia and China and other non-Islamist autocracies want to prosper - and survive. For them, peaceful coexistence with the democracies is an option. By contrast, the Islamists believe they have a religious obligation to fight, humiliate and, eventually, reduce the West to ashes. The more revolutionary and devout among them, as the eminent Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis has observed, regard "mutually assured destruction" not as a deterrent but as an inducement - a path to martyrdom and eternal rewards.

So perhaps the most important question to ask is not whether democracy is advancing or retreating. Perhaps it is this: Will the world's free peoples, having defeated two mass-murdering enemies of freedom in the 20th century, find the unity, strength, courage and determination to defend themselves from

21st century Islamists and their autocratic allies/enablers? Or as Kagan puts it: "History has returned and

the democracies must come together to shape it or others will shape it for them."

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