

Losing Our Best Allies in the War on Terror

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An Asian human rights activist proudly introduced herself to my class as a threat to national security: her commitment to democratic values put her so at odds with two Southeast Asian governments that she had to travel clandestinely. Yet, as our seminar on democratic culture came to an end earlier this month in Cracow, Poland, she, of all people, declared: "I have doubted a simple assertion for years, but I am now convinced that American democracy requires the repression of democracy in the rest of the world."

Worse still, she was expressing the consensus of the students. These young people, moved by values of human rights and democracy, have become convinced that the existence of these rights in America is predicated on their repression elsewhere.

Every January, I travel to Cape Town, South Africa, to teach in a program on democracy and diversity. Every July, I travel to Cracow, Poland, to teach in a parallel program. Advanced graduate students, professors, human rights activists and young public policy advisors are brought together by the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies of the New School University. The program has its origins in the Democracy Seminar, a clandestine intellectual exchange between Budapest, Warsaw, and New York in the 1980's, organized by Adam Michnik and me. Democratic oppositionists and New School scholars became colleagues as they read and discussed classics in political theory and the pressing problems of the day. The students attending our seminars - from Southern Africa, Eastern and Central Europe, the nations of the former Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, and North and South America - continue this discussion.

What I observed last January in Africa and just a few weeks ago in Central Europe among young opinion leaders from around the world has been alarming. Anti-Americanism is not just a hysterical judgment popular on the political fringe. It has become a principle of some committed democrats and this, unfortunately, makes a great deal of sense when it comes to the war on terrorism.

In my seminar last January, we started our deliberations with reflections on the Sept. 11 attacks. I was shocked by the class discussion. With the exception of one young professor from Nigeria, all the students in Southern Africa were focused not on confronting Al-Qaeda but on the American war on terrorism. It seemed that the participants could not imagine that the Americans were victims. They could only understand our power and condemn our excesses.

Whereas I understood the American operation in Afghanistan as fundamentally a liberation, my South African co-teacher and our students understood it as superpower bullying. Whereas I wanted to understand the mindset of those who would kill thousands of innocents, including one of my dearest friends, in a suicide bombing, they could only see the horrors of collateral damage of the war on terrorism.

In Cracow, I waited until the end of the seminar to open the discussion to Sept. 11 and its aftermath. Before Sept. 11, anti-Americanism in Europe was a mild affair and a key part of the love-hate relationship between the French and the Americans. In the aftermath of the September attacks and with the war on terrorism in full swing, it could not be more serious.

One of the students explained why they must focus on the reaction to the attacks and not on the attacks themselves. It is the war on terrorism that is being used as a cover by dictators around the world to justify crackdowns on democracy advocates. Suddenly the rights of Muslims in the Philippines and Indonesia - or of the democratic critics of the authoritarian

“Asian way” in Singapore, Malaysia and Burma - are not important to the Bush administration. Suddenly the strategic resources of Central Asian dictatorships are more important than the lives of human rights activists. Suddenly the defense of the American way of life and our democracy seems to be predicated upon a lack of concern for the democratic rights of people in less advantaged countries.

As a rule American democracy does not depend on the frustration of the democratic prospects in the rest of the world. At times we have played crucial roles in supporting democratic activists, as in Poland. But we did sometimes let the struggle for democracy play a secondary role in our geopolitical calculations during the Cold War, and we are doing this again.

When I think about my students, it seems to me that the young Muslim from Indonesia, the Burmese dissident living in Thailand, the democrat returning to Burma, the feminists in Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Indonesia are the keys to victory against dogmatism and its terrors. Only they are actually capable of presenting the alternatives to terrorism to their compatriots; that work cannot be done from afar. They are on the front lines of the antiterrorist struggle. Any war that undermines their position - and they convincingly report that it is doing so - is self-defeating.

I believe that my Asian activist student is wrong when she posits a necessary connection between American democracy and foreign dictatorship - and that she wants to be convinced that she is wrong. Warriors on terrorism should be advised. If the war on terrorism is to be a success, people like her must be on our side. We must face military threats on military terms, yet we must realize that the struggle for democracy and against terrorism demands that we listen with great care to the world's democrats and act accordingly.

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