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Robert Scheer:

In a Democracy, Liars Can Never Be Liberators

It takes stunning arrogance for a president to invade an oil-rich, politically strategic country on the basis of demonstrable lies, put his favorite companies in control of its economic future, create a puppet regime to do his bidding and then claim, as George Bush did last week in a speech, that this is all a bold exercise in spreading democracy. "Iraqi democracy will succeed, and that success will send forth the news from Damascus to Tehran that freedom can be the future of every nation," the president said. "The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution."

Bush even invoked the blessing of a divine power, the "author of freedom," suggesting that he is not merely an overambitious imperial president but rather a modern Moses armed with smart bombs and Black Hawk helicopters come to liberate an enslaved people.

Bush presents his vision as bold and new when it is nothing of the sort.

His predecessors in the White House similarly claimed the mantle of democracy as justification for establishing American dominance in the Mideast over the last half a century. They used lies and secrecy and the lives of young Americans to create, nurture and protect dictatorships that served narrow U.S. interests above the needs and rights of their own people.

His buddies at Bechtel, Halliburton and the giant oil companies have been ripping off the profits of Mideast oil for decades while seeking and gaining protection from the CIA and whatever other parts of the U.S. military-industrial complex were needed to prop up "our guy" — the dictator of the moment. Despotism in the Mideast flowered on our watch, often succeeded by fundamentalist or nationalist regimes of great violence, or both. Every Mideast despot exists only because his power has proved tolerable to the economic interests that former Halliburton Chief Executive Dick Cheney and his defense-industry friendly counterparts in previous Republican and Democratic administrations have placed at the top of the American agenda.

Democracy is the most wonderful notion ever conceived, but Washington considers it a dangerous threat when the people in fledging democracies vote against U.S. interests. That's when the CIA steps in, as it did in Iran in 1953, overthrowing democratic secularist Mohammad Mossadegh and launching Iran into decades of madness.

Or how about the cynical support under presidents Carter and Reagan of the fundamentalist mujahedeen in Afghanistan, which morphed into the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The CIA gave these "freedom fighters" shoulder-fired rockets, perfect for terrorism, and Ronald Reagan declared a day of national support for them in the U.S. Unfortunately, as the quarter of a century since has proved, we have neither the means nor the will to bring democracy to Afghanistan.

People make their own history, and though the U.S. can help, it cannot impose.

Bush is not really interested in meaningful democracy in Iraq — just as the U.S. wasn't in Afghanistan or earlier in Iran. In Iraq, the U.S. will not tolerate any opposition to the U.S. occupation. But that excludes democracy, which will not cater to the whims of U.S. foreign policy.

Meanwhile, the chaos and bitterness of postwar Iraq continues without break, all the more tragic for its predictability. In fact, we would not be in such a mess today if the president had listened to his own father.

"Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq ... would have incurred incalculable human and political costs," co-wrote the senior George Bush in the 1998 book "A World Transformed."

"Furthermore, we had been self-consciously trying to set a pattern for handling aggression in the post-Cold War world," he continued. "Going in and occupying Iraq, thus unilaterally exceeding the United Nations' mandate, would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish. Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land."

Unfortunately, because of George W. Bush, it is just that.

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