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### History Repeats Itself in the Chaos of the War on Terror

By Joshua Crowther

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Two and a half years ago, as Coalition forces progressively wiped every effigy of Saddam Hussein off the face of the earth and George W. Bush stood under an immense banner boldly stating “Mission Accomplished”, the Western world congratulated itself on another successful campaign against the forces of despotism, fundamentalism and terror.

Many believed that another vile regime had been abolished and that, in its place, would arise a peaceful, progressive and secular democracy which would in time provide inspiration to all Middle Eastern nations and ensure the steady advance of democracy in the region. The protagonists of this grand design used as its foundation the assumption that Middle Eastern populations desired democracy with the same fervour as those of the West and that Middle Eastern society, culture and religion could adapt to the principles of modern democracy.

This view, however, ignored the fact that all aspects of society in East and West had evolved in entirely separate ways and that an ideal in one society is an anachronism or an absurdity in another. To understand the complexity of the situation we must closely analyse the differences between the societies and the historical misunderstandings which now threaten to repeat themselves.

Religion is, of course, a central matter, as not only do the two societies radically differ on the topic, but it also inspires the terrorism which threatens to undermine the principles of Western democratic society. The difference can essentially be reduced to the issue of how closely the church should interrelate with the state. The West has, since the Enlightenment, attempted to separate the two institutions and ensure that Western society has remained relatively secular over the past three centuries. In the Islamic world, however, religion is considered to be the most important and dominant factor in a person's life and their politics. This reality has been utilised by terrorists in their campaign of recruitment. Osama bin Laden and others have sought to present their war as being one of zealous, patriotic Muslims fighting infidel crusaders.

The major differences between the two cultures stem from the fact that they perceive theocracy in entirely different ways. The West remembers the theocracies of the Middle Ages and the Inquisitions, witch hunts, tyrannies and ignorance associated with them. Consequently, the West considers the time of theocracies prior to the Enlightenment to have been a time of barbarism and feudalism and the concept of theocracy has come to represent this. In the Islamic world, by contrast, the Middle Ages saw a great flowering of the arts, science and literature. The inhabitants of the Islamic world therefore see theocracies as representing the greatest achievements of their civilisation.

So when the advocates of the recent Western involvement in the Middle East unwisely assumed that the Middle Eastern populace would be overwhelmed with joy at the overthrow of the theocracies which ruled them they committed the fatal error of assuming that the views of the West were shared by the inhabitants of the Middle East. This assumption was, in retrospect, based on an ill-informed belief which has led to the forces of terrorism gaining a crucial advantage as the cultural differences enhanced by hatred and mistrust between the secular Christian West and the Islamic East are being repeated in a similar form to that which they occurred in medieval times. The usage of the term "Jihad" by Muslim extremists, when referring to the war against the West, is indicative of this.

The other concept grossly misunderstood by the advocates of the Western Middle Eastern campaigns is the requirement in the successful growth of democracy that it develops over a lengthy period of time and with the full support of populace. To attempt to impose democracy on to a people who have been governed by autocrats over a considerable time is fraught with difficulties since they are not used to the demands it imposes, the complexity of its political relationships or the slow pace by which it governs. In post-World War I Germany, for example, the fast-paced conception of a democratic system after centuries of autocratic rule led to the creation of a sickly, corrupt government which was vulnerable to being undermined both from internal agitators and from foreign powers. In Germany's case it was the former, as the Nazi Party took advantage of the indecisiveness of the Government and weakened its foundations to the point that its authority was non-existent and it collapsed, allowing a new autocracy to be founded.

This seems to be the major danger in the occupied nations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Both have long histories of autocratic government, both are ruled by newly established weak democracies and both are menaced by powerful foes, foreign and domestic, who are easily capable of overthrowing them. It seems that the disastrous fate of the Weimar Republic and its catastrophic consequences could be repeating themselves.

The coalition forces advanced into the Middle East in this new century with the aim of bringing peace and happiness to its inhabitants and to eradicate the theocracies and dictatorships which hold power in the region. Instead, through ignorance and misunderstanding they have spread religious hatred, similar to that of the intolerant years before the Enlightenment, and political uncertainty, similar to that of the early 20th century. Looking to the future, we have much to fear from the most volatile region on Earth.



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