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Cynthia E. Ayers

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Iraqi Resistance to Freedom: A Frommian Perspective

CYNTHIA E. AYERS

Iraqi civilians were dancing and singing in the streets of Baghdad on the morning of 9 April 2003, while the American military consolidated efforts to secure the city. On that day it was obvious that Saddam Hussein had been deposed. In spite of the celebrations, however, coalition soldiers continued to meet opposition.

By then the world could clearly see that at least some Iraqis were happy to be free and eager to express their joy at the fall of the regime. But many within the coalition were surprised that these feelings had not been expressed throughout the preceding weeks of Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹ US forces moving north across Iraq toward Baghdad had been “greeted [by civilians] with violent hostility in some cities, flat indifference in others, and [only later] in some places, with open arms.”²

In the days that followed the initial celebrations in Baghdad, media attention was drawn to Iraqis protesting the American presence as well as those who welcomed the coalition soldiers. A CNN special entitled “Inside the Regime” highlighted Iraqis who worked at, yet lived in poverty next to, the billion-dollar palaces of their former leader.³ Even those with firsthand knowledge of the luxurious life led by Hussein and his family remained skeptical of the benefits of liberation. They wondered if the “security” of the regime was not better than the “lawlessness” of their post-Saddam world. They wanted water, electricity, and an end to rampant criminal activity—and most of all, it seemed, they wanted Americans to leave their country.⁴

Why were Iraqi citizens—many, if not most, of whom were cognizant of the regime’s atrocities—so reticent to welcome freedom as the coalition forces succeeded in liberating cities and villages? Fear, according to leading Iraqi exiles, was the most probable reason,⁵ fear of having to face the anger of the regime should the Americans not succeed. Fear of immediate reprisal also played a part. Iraqi POWs told stories of being forced to fight advancing American troops while re-

gime elements and “Saddam Fedayeen” held guns to their heads and threatened the safety of their families.⁶ Reports from wounded Iraqi POWs, inspections of Iraqis who had been killed “in battle,” and live CNN coverage of refugees being fired at by Iraqi soldiers as they attempted to flee the cities lend credibility to these assertions. Fear, successful Iraqi propaganda, and a general disbelief in coalition capability to topple the regime and oust Saddam may have kept many from daring to hope for freedom.

These are all valid assertions, but they do not completely explain the willingness of some Iraqi military elements to continue to fight, even when they must have known there was no hope for the survival of the regime. Nor do they explain the enthusiasm displayed by Arab volunteers from other countries in declaring their intent to enter Iraq and fight for a regime that was known throughout the Arab world as abusive and cruel.⁷ Were they simply responding to the Arab community’s dislike of American intervention and Osama bin Laden’s call for recruits to the jihad?⁸ And how could the more moderate states of the Arab community claim to find Saddam’s government distasteful and murderous, yet publicize the war as an “imperial American invasion” and treat Saddam and his henchmen as if they were “champions” and potential martyrs?⁹ Why, when people are faced with a choice between pernicious, seemingly all-powerful dictatorships and liberty, would they fight to retain systems of oppression? Why would there be any question over the desirability of freedom?

Santayana’s famous warning (“those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”) may have been considered by war planners in seeking to predict Iraqi reactions to a liberating force, but the lessons to be learned in this case should not be limited to those gleaned only from conflict between Western elements and the country of Iraq, or even from East-West cultural differences. In September 2002, a group of Iraqi exiles boldly implied¹⁰ a comparison between Saddam’s regime and Nazi Germany.¹¹ Certainly, Pan-Arabism is a form of fascism and Saddam shared many qualities with Hitler—the two even had similar experiences in their formative years. If the comparison between the two rulers and regimes is indeed valid, perhaps the answers we seek can be found in an analysis of fascist tendencies in early 20th-century Europe.

Fear of Freedom: Submission and Conformity

German-born social psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm reported a phenomenon he called “fear of freedom” over 60 years ago. When Fromm published his theory (*Escape from Freedom*, 1941),¹² he was living and

Cynthia E. Ayers is the National Security Agency’s Visiting Professor of Information Superiority at the US Army War College. She has B.S. and M.P.A. degrees from Troy State University and is currently working on a Ph.D. from Walden University in criminal justice, focusing on counterterrorism.

writing in the United States, where European fascism was a predominant thought on the minds of many. Those who fought for freedom in World War I were undoubtedly frustrated by what seemed to be a European readiness to succumb to authoritarian regimes.

In analyzing socioeconomic and sociopolitical problems of Europe during the emergence of fascism, Fromm came to the conclusion that individuals, and therefore societies, have an innate tendency to revert to systems of political and cultural restraint rather than to take advantage of opportunities for freedom or emancipation—and that they may actually seek out governments to control them rather than face the prospect of individual freedom. Fromm's explanation for this type of reversion was seen in the following assertion:

If the economic, social, and political conditions on which the whole process of human individuation¹³ depends, do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality . . . [and] people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life that lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.¹⁴

The basis of Fromm's theory was his belief that societies, like individuals, progress through a series of feelings of security and insecurity during the process of growing. He likened an individual's dependence upon the society to which he or she was born to that of a child's dependence upon its mother. These dependencies are gradually lost, or "the primary ties are cut"¹⁵ as independence and freedom is sought. However, even as the desire for freedom encourages this separation, feelings of alienation, weakness, and insecurity are growing simultaneously.¹⁶ It is at this point, Fromm believed, that the individual forms a fear of the freedom that is so desired.

During the process of growing and establishing freedom from the ties of initial dependence, attempts are made "to overcome the feeling[s] of aloneness and powerlessness by completely submerging oneself in the world outside."¹⁷ If, however, the individual encounters suppression or oppression, the effective result is submission and fear of the process of achieving individuality and freedom.

Expanding on this assertion, Fromm maintained that the extent to which an individual develops (or individuation occurs) is largely dependent on the type of economic and social structure to which the individual was born. Behavior consistent with self-preservation within an individual's economic system or society explains the determination of an individual's character structure, which, in turn, substantiates and magnifies the character structure of the society, according to Fromm.¹⁸ In this circuitous manner, an explanation was proposed for societies with a seemingly predisposed willingness to submit to forms of authoritarian rule as opposed to those societies with a much more substantial resistance.

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succeeded in liberating cities and villages?”***

Fromm stressed the need for an individual to be a part of a larger whole as a factor in the formation of societal character. This need, according to Fromm, is a form of mental self-preservation, similar to the basic need for sustenance. “Even being related to the basest kind of pattern is immensely preferable to being alone.”¹⁹ Thus, as people gain a measured sense of individualism and freedom, they are pushed by an uncontrollable drive to join with others, thereby obtaining security in society, even at the expense of individual freedom. This was, according to Fromm, “the negative side of freedom” (or “negative freedom”).²⁰

Included in the concept of negative freedom was the societal constraint of conformity. Conformity encompasses all of the conscious and self-conscious actions and feelings experienced in the spirit of social assimilation. The fear of being unique, of thinking or acting differently, of standing out in a crowd, can be a debilitating fear—especially when “standing out” might mean torture or death of self or loved-ones.

For conformity and submission to exist within a society, there must be a corresponding need to find security in authority and power. For example, authority and power might be determined by ownership of land and wealth or by the accumulation of business or political strength. Those without land gain security by belonging to groups, organizations, or cultures, and may obtain a feeling of power by discriminating or oppressing other groups, organizations, or cultures. Those with land act in a manner that displays superiority to those without, but may feel inferior in regard to those with monetary wealth. The cash-rich may, in turn, feel inferior when compared to a high-level business executive, who may feel less than adequate when confronted with political power. The feeling of superiority over other persons or groups becomes the ultimate objective in the search for the security that is found in power. Limitations on power are dependent on societal character structure, which is (as previously noted) determined by behavior consistent with self-preservation within the socio-economic system.

Fromm believed that people live in bipolar societies. His characterizations of the individuals within a society might be anthropomorphically ascribed to sheep and wolves, with the wolves lined up on a spectrum of power lust or madness, from a category of good to bad. Sheep could be classified in categories from acquiescent to willing. All (sheep and wolves), according to Fromm’s the-

ory, are motivated by feelings of insecurity, alienation, powerlessness, isolation, and fear.²¹ Fromm's contention was that:

In any society the spirit of the whole culture is determined by the spirit of those groups that are most powerful in that society . . . partly because these groups have the power to control the educational system, schools, church, press, theater, and thereby to imbue the whole population with their own ideas; furthermore, these powerful groups carry so much prestige that the lower classes are more than ready to accept and imitate their values and to identify themselves psychologically.²²

Fromm pictured the masses (the sheep) as being overwhelmed by powerful propaganda (initiated by the wolves), which serves to increase the feeling of insignificance and powerlessness, and increase their willingness to submit.²³

In discussing what he considered to be an “escape” into submission to an authoritarian type of leadership, Fromm described the individual as exhibiting masochistic tendencies—an unconscious need to act in a manner that invites external control.²⁴ He depicted the sadistic tendencies of an authoritarian leader as stemming from the same escapist feelings. He postulated that the sadistic leader was attempting to gain strength and identity by creating an image of being bound to a greater whole, such as that of the state. Contrary to popular belief, the sadist and the masochist, according to Fromm, have the same character structure. Both exist in a symbiotic relationship that guarantees escape from freedom—because freedom elicits feelings of alienation and powerlessness.²⁵

Fromm portrayed fascism as a perfect example of the sadomasochistic symbiotic relationship that could be exhibited in the entire character structure of a society. He declared that there were “great parts of the lower middle class in Germany and other European countries [in which] the sadomasochistic character is typical.”²⁶ This type of society, according to Fromm, has a strong desire to submit to an overwhelmingly strong authority, while simultaneously needing to be seen and treated as an authority figure among other social groups, thus sustaining a hierarchy of power.²⁷

Adolf Hitler was seen by Fromm as the embodiment of the sadomasochistic authoritarian.²⁸ Fromm described how Hitler understood and used the need for security and the desire to escape from freedom via submission to a higher authority. He recognized Hitler's use of the domineering style of oratory as well as the brainwashing techniques that are now known to be used in conjunction with fear, physical exhaustion, alienation, subsequent group assimilation, and the formation of a social structure in which group superiority over others is emphasized.

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein and his “power-elite” used these techniques with the Iraqi people²⁹ (although perhaps with less sophistication). Fromm would have had no compunction in describing Hussein as a “sadomasochistic authoritarian” on a par with Hitler. Nor would Fromm have had any trouble depicting the Iraqi people as sheepishly submissive and compliant (to

their wolfish authoritarian leader)—but equally sadomasochistic in their willingness to conform to a social hierarchy in which feelings of superiority over others (such as the Kurdish minority internally or Americans and Israelis externally) were encouraged.³⁰

Fear of Freedom: Destroying That Which Is Feared

According to Fromm, feelings of alienation, isolation, and powerlessness can also result in destructiveness.³¹ In Iraq, this destructiveness is currently presented as opposition to those who have upset the status quo—those who liberated the Iraqi population from the security of a more-or-less constant (however oppressive) lifestyle. These liberators also upset the hierarchy of superiority—thus increasing feelings of powerlessness. The tendency to resort to destructiveness in order to alleviate unsavory insecure (or “unbearable”) feelings is irrational, can be obsessive, and may ultimately result in a desire for total annihilation.³²

Fromm described this simply in the statement, “I can escape the feeling of my own powerlessness in comparison with the world outside of myself by destroying it.”³³ After World War II, many imprisoned Nazi officers reported that Hitler’s destructive behavior caused him to pursue targets (regardless of common sense, human decency, and reason) when German military might was not yet up to the task and that “success” reinforced his belief in his own superiority over the general staff.³⁴ This same behavior kept him from obtaining correct information in reference to military matters, since the generals who reported to him feared for their careers (and often, their lives) if Hitler did not receive the information he wanted to hear. In August 1945, German prisoner of war General Lemelsen noted that Hitler “never clearly recognized that Germany alone would eventually . . . have to succumb to the superiority of its enemies and that he did not seek means when this became apparent to end the war, but rather delivered the people to complete destruction.”³⁵

The actions of and decisions made by Saddam Hussein before and during Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom were eerily reminiscent of the reports provided by Hitler’s officers. Although the Iraqi military was well-armed, Saddam obviously had been misinformed about his military’s effectiveness in battle. The cold-blooded killing of Saddam’s sons-in-law—Lieutenant-General Hussain Kamel al-Majid and his brother, Lieutenant-Colonel Saddam Kamel—after their return from defection in February 1996³⁶ as well as purges instituted by Saddam after his assumption of control in 1979³⁷ provide testimony of the fear that was no doubt felt by both military and civilian leaders. Reportedly, long before he took control of Iraq, Saddam’s world was characterized by an obsessively destructive nature. His early childhood of poverty, abuse, and neglect undoubtedly aroused feelings of alienation, isolation, and powerlessness, which were magnified by the culture in which he lived. These circumstances may have been a catalyst for the ruthless behavior he displayed in adulthood³⁸ as well as the deliv-

ery of his own people to what must have appeared to them to be certain destruction (just as Hitler had done). The intelligence organizations of the coalition obviously had this destructive tendency in mind while planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom's "race to Baghdad."³⁹ If Saddam did (as it was believed) have readily available weapons of mass destruction, the use of such would have been in keeping with Saddam's character profile (as proposed by Fromm).

Fromm delineated a particular type of destructiveness—a pernicious form of continual, subdued, fervent hostility that "waits only for an opportunity to be expressed"⁴⁰—that could be equated to terrorism.⁴¹ This, Fromm believed, evolves from a lack of individual empowerment, the inability of an individual to express self, and the absence of positive freedom.⁴² Fromm referred to it as a "thwarting of life."⁴³ Hitler's Nazi party manipulated and used this type of destructive behavior to further its aims. In utilizing Iraqi people as suicide bombers and front-line martyrs to his own cause, Saddam also was guilty of this practice.

This "thwarting of life" may be the biggest challenge to the new Iraqi government (temporary or permanent). Average citizens of Iraq have been without a sense of individual empowerment for most if not all of their lives.⁴⁴ Their newly found freedom will give them opportunities to express their destructive tendencies born as a consequence of severe oppression. Ironically, as Fromm noted, the destruction most likely will be aimed at those who offer freedom—the freedom which brings with it feelings of insecurity and powerlessness, the freedom of not knowing what to do or when to do it—fueled by resentment of a new structure that does not possess the power to instill the level of fear that the populous had lived with for many years.

Fear of Freedom: Destroying "Self"

Fromm also discussed a form of mental self-destruction. He noted that an illusory result of the hunt for escape from aloneness and anxiety was the deletion, or at a minimum, a strong suppression of one's real self and the subsequent replacement with what he called a "pseudo self."⁴⁵ This pseudo self or superficial self eases into the security of conformity, submission, and identity with a "larger whole." Fromm argued that conformity and submission of the pseudo self was evident in the "part of the [European] population [that] bowed to the Nazi regime without any strong resistance, but also without becoming admirers of the Nazi ideology and political practice."⁴⁶ This subset was made up "of the working class and the liberal . . . bourgeoisie."⁴⁷ These groups, while initially hostile to the Nazi party, collectively dropped their resistance in the interests of hiding within the security found in conformity and submission. Fromm cited a "state of inner tiredness and resignation."⁴⁸

Fromm noted that in Germany during the 1930s, the working class developed a strong "feeling of resignation, of disbelief in their leaders, of doubt about the value of any kind of political organization and activity. . . . Deep within themselves many had given up any hope in the effectiveness of political ac-

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tion.”⁴⁹ Thus they suppressed or destroyed their questioning, rebellious, hopeful selves. It is, perhaps, this feeling of doubt and hopelessness—and the conditioned suppression of self—that keeps much of the Iraqi people from embracing their liberators. In their minds, trading conformity and submission from one form of leadership (with which they are familiar) to another (with which they have no frame of reference) may have an associated cost that they are not willing, or do not have the energy and enthusiasm (or the remaining sense of “self”), to pay. Therefore, it becomes a matter of “better the devil you know”—and in this case, the devil is an authoritarian regime.

But resignation to a devil is one thing—actively fighting for him is another. Fromm observed that an interesting psychological aspect of the suppression of self is the individual’s transference of identity to a larger whole (also noted in Orwell’s *1984*).⁵⁰ Although working-class members of Hitler’s Germany did not self-identify with the Nazi image, they did identify strongly with their country. Hitler and the Nazi party virtually became Germany:⁵¹

It can be observed in many instances that persons who are not Nazis nevertheless defend Nazism against criticism of foreigners because they feel that an attack on Nazis is an attack on Germany. . . . This consideration results in an axiom which is important for the problems of political propaganda: any attack on Germany as such, any defamatory propaganda concerning “the Germans” . . . only increases the loyalty of those who are not wholly identified with the Nazi system.⁵²

Consistent with this mindset is the support that Saddam Hussein received from the Arab media and community at large,⁵³ as well as from many of the Iraqi people. They apparently did not see Operation Iraqi Freedom as an attempt to liberate Iraq and the Middle East of a cruel, inhuman dictator—they believed that America was launching an unprovoked attack against Iraq, the Iraqi people, and therefore, the “Arab nation.”⁵⁴ An attack against Saddam was an attack against the entire Arab community. Saddam (or Saddam’s regime) was therefore able to gain psychological support and regime-sustaining strength in a unifying effect resulting from the focus on a common enemy.⁵⁵

As combat troops raced through Iraq, most overt anti-leadership sentiment was noted only after a notably conspicuous absence, desertion, or demise of

regime leaders. Similarly, general dislike for Hitler and the Nazi regime became evident only after the war was lost and Hitler had committed suicide.⁵⁶ Although the reticence of the oppressed to display distaste for the oppressors is obviously influenced by fear of torture or death, it also can be explained as an attempt by those who have lost their concept of self to gain security by being part of a larger whole—an attempt at unity via nationalism or, in this case, Pan-Arabism and common enmity.⁵⁷

Fear of Freedom: Survival of the Fittest

Characteristic of the authoritarian sadomasochist, Hitler began his crusade on the heels of and surrounded by those he considered inferior,⁵⁸ as did Saddam Hussein.⁵⁹ The achievement of ultimate power was their driving force. This quest for world domination was, to Hitler, justified as the ultimate realization of Darwin's theory of survival of the strong over the weak:

The love for the powerful and the hatred for the powerless which is so typical for the sado-masochistic character explains a great deal of Hitler's and his followers' political actions. While the [Weimar] Republican government thought they could "appease" the Nazis by treating them leniently, they not only failed to appease them but aroused their hatred by the very lack of power and firmness they showed. Hitler hated the Weimar Republic *because* [italics added] it was weak, and he admired the industrial and military leaders because they had power. He never fought against established strong power but always against groups which he thought to be essentially powerless. Hitler's—and for that matter Mussolini's—"revolution" happened under protection of existing power, and their favorite objects were those who could not defend themselves.⁶⁰

In other words, fascist power (like the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing) has historically been aided and abetted (albeit unconsciously) by the weaker government it eventually replaced. One can see parallels in Saddam's rise to power. Many who supported him long before he assumed control of Iraq (when he ousted a man of "close family connections" and placed him under house arrest) were later executed.⁶¹

The manner in which both Mussolini and Hitler fell from power (in the minds of those who were ruled by them) was consistent with Fromm's depiction of a mutual sadomasochistic relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. In Fromm's descriptions of the authoritarian character, one could extrapolate a tendency of totalitarian societies to implode. The sadomasochistic personality sees "lack of power . . . [as] an unmistakable sign of guilt and inferiority, and if the authority . . . shows signs of weakness, his love and respect change into contempt and hatred."⁶² Thus, Fromm explained the basis of Mussolini's fate at the hands of his followers in 1945, Hitler's problems with his trusted elite toward the end of the war—and the toppling of statues as well as the plethora of shoes slapping the face of any accessible image of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The celebrations of 9 April 2003 and the displays of hatred toward Saddam and his henchmen noted in the days that followed were completely consistent with the sadomasochistic tendencies that were carefully cultured within the Iraqi social structure during Saddam's reign. As the ruling elite of Saddam's Iraq hid or ran, they showed themselves to be weak. Weakness in the authority figure, according to Fromm, elicits reactions of confusion, rebellion, and destruction.⁶³ Weakness is seen as submission—as an invitation to a more powerful authority to take control. The result of weakness displayed by the authority figure is either chaos (while others attempt to gain control) or a coup (with authority quickly transferred to another recognized power).

Fear of Freedom: Can Democracy Succeed in Iraq?

Fromm concluded his thesis by insisting that “authoritarian systems cannot do away with the basic conditions that make for the quest for freedom; neither can they exterminate the quest for freedom that springs from these conditions.”⁶⁴ Based on this conclusion, there may be hope for an Iraqi democracy. But Fromm also asserted that democracy faces the same basic problems as autocracy. The desire to escape freedom, the fear of alienation and powerlessness, the pressure and expectation of conformity, the suppression of individuality, and the loss of the unique self are all noted within the modern democratic society. Individuals join groups (political, social, economic, etc.), thereby individually satisfying the need to escape freedom. These institutions need to be carefully nurtured within the new post-Saddam Iraq.

Fromm argued that the fear of freedom leads to “new bondage.”⁶⁵ But he also postulated “a state of positive freedom in which the individual exists as an independent self and yet is not isolated but united with the world, with other men, and nature.”⁶⁶ He believed that positive freedom could be achieved if people are given the opportunity to express themselves as individuals. The ultimate objective is free, action-oriented critical thinking and free emotional reasoning.

“Positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality.”⁶⁷ In equating positive freedom to spontaneous activity, Fromm claimed that the only allowable spontaneous activity in modern society is that which is recognized as successful. Thus, as he described it, the artist who “does not succeed in selling the art . . . remains to his contemporaries a crank, a ‘neurotic.’ [Similarly] the successful revolutionary is a statesman, the unsuccessful one a criminal.”⁶⁸ But Fromm emphasized that success is not the point of life, and therefore not the point of positive freedom. Positive freedom must include the empowerment of individuals to contribute to the society in which they reside. The ability to propose and to make unique contributions without fear of suppression or oppression, without the fear of being isolated for reasons of non-conformity, gives an individual strength and confidence, and allows for intellectual and emotional growth.

“Fromm argued that the fear of freedom leads to ‘new bondage.’”

Fromm’s concept of the ideal society, in which positive freedom is the only kind of freedom, was tied to his hopes for democracy. He saw the greatest possibilities in democratic socialism, which extolled the virtues of “the individual as . . . altruistic and cooperative. The individual finds meaning in the community, not in the atomized conditions prevailing under capitalism.”⁶⁹ The aims of democratic socialism are the equality of each individual’s treatment by government in terms of respect and dignity, combined with a politico-economic system that allows substantial participation by every individual (as opposed to a substantial participation by an elite few and a superficial participation by the majority). Fromm’s concept of positive freedom finds voice in this type of “socialist society governed by democratic procedures.”⁷⁰

Unfortunately, Fromm’s ideal has yet to be achieved. Democracy (social, liberal, or otherwise) has lived a long and prosperous life, but the concept has not yet lived up to the hopes Fromm placed in it. It can be considered the best governmental system known to exist to this point in time, but there are points of contention as to how “free” and “empowered” individuals within the system really are. Much depends on circumstance and on decisions made by fallible individuals (which can have resulting unintended consequences). In general, the major democratic nations of the West appear to be suffering from problems similar to those that Fromm detailed as pre-revolutionary, and even pre-fascist scenarios. The sad fact is that in today’s “Western-style” democratic environment, qualities such as capability, honesty, humility, and foresight are no longer the primary factors that ultimately determine those who will run the country. Politics is now very much a game of popularity, charisma, money, and “spin.” Unfortunately, many of those who win such games concentrate on their own gain, as opposed to the welfare of the nation that elected them.

The freedoms that are shared by those living in a democratic society encourage the process of questioning the government and its leaders. Because questions involving popularity issues and political scandals often are highlighted for the world to see, the negative side of politics, the negative side of democracy, and thus, the negative side of freedom is exposed—especially to those who have been allowed to have knowledge only of that which their leaders deemed appropriate.⁷¹

These negative qualities are, perhaps, a large part of the propaganda problem that the United States faces in its efforts to change and befriend the Iraqi

people. Feelings of dislike, distrust, and fear among the Arab community in general may be based on their perception that democracy, USA-style, is either superficial and decadent nonsense (and therefore weak), or yet another form of rule by wolves clothed as fellow sheep. The questions they ponder might well be: Why should the Iraqi people submit to a weaker form of government? And, in accepting Western dominance, are the Iraqi people simply trading one form of conformity and submission to oppression for another?⁷²

The United States is an unknown factor. And as Fromm noted, fear of the unknown can be unbearable.

Regardless, an Iraqi democracy is essential, at this point. If the country is left to “sort itself out” the wolves will return and the Iraqi people will slide back into the oppressive, fascist structure they are used to. The people who publicly celebrated freedom will die, and they will die in vain.

Fromm wrote,

We fail to see the danger . . . [in] the readiness to accept any ideology and any leader, if only he promises excitement and offers a political structure and symbols which allegedly give meaning and order to an individual's life. The despair of the human automaton is fertile soil for the purposes of Fascism.⁷³

For democracy to take hold, an immense cultural change—a transformation—is needed, and submission and conformity to a framework of change are essential. The “invading superpower” must not show any weakness in resolve, for weakness will serve only to encourage the cultured sadomasochistic tendencies of the Iraqi people, and the new government will have little chance of succeeding.

The fact that democracy (as it exists) is not all that it should or could be may actually be a positive point in building a framework of change and a roadmap to transformation. A tight, strongly controlled democracy may provide critical linkage in the accomplishment of a “more free” society within Iraq. It could be argued that if Iraqis truly are looking for a “new bondage,” providing a social structure that can slowly evolve from one of tight control to one of less control (as in the manner that a child becomes slowly independent from his or her mother) may, in fact, be the only way to make the transformation from oppression to a state of democratic (albeit still limited) freedom.⁷⁴ Although there will be substantial resistance, as the unknown factors become known there will be less fear; as the unempowered slowly become empowered, there will be less resistance. It worked for postwar Europe—it can work again for Iraq.⁷⁵

Freedom in “e-Conformity”?

Fromm pointed out that peer pressure is a powerful force in gaining and retaining conformity, which will be a necessary and important tool in establishing a post-Saddam Iraqi democracy. But 21st-century peer pressure is somewhat different from that of the period with which Fromm was familiar. A more recent and powerful instrument in the crusade for conformity is a form of “techno-pressure.”

The pressure today to conform to information technology is enormous. Every human being in Western society is being immersed in techno-babble so pervasive that hundreds of words can be immediately transformed and understood by simply adding “e” to the beginning. Any individual without an understanding of URLs, e-mail, digital cameras, and webpages has felt the onslaught of alienation. There is an unspoken implication that those who are left behind in this toddler stage of the web-world will be left behind forever. It is hard to imagine a more intense burden of powerlessness.

In a September 2002 conference held in London, a group of Iraqi opposition leaders suggested that educational reform such as that imposed on Nazi Germany would benefit the impending process of “de-Baathification.”⁷⁶ The current reforms, according to the conference attendees, must include networked computers and encouraged use of the Internet.⁷⁷ They also called on nongovernment organizations and educational institutions from other (notably Western) nations that had previously assisted the Iraqi people to resume their work within Iraq. Could education and “e-conformity” help the Iraqi people to conquer their fears and make the necessary steps in their transition to freedom?

The oppressed and disenfranchised within the nation of Serbia found the Internet to be the voice of political freedom. On 2 April 1999, the building in which OpenNet.org (Belgrade Radio B92’s Internet center) resided, was seized by Milosevic’s special police.⁷⁸ Until that time, the Internet was the only constant propaganda-free method of obtaining untarnished news within Serbia. Even after the building was taken, supportive Internet sites were launched, proving that “the democratic nature of the Internet enables the army of anonymous users to sustain the fight for freedom of expression and democracy.”⁷⁹

Perhaps the Internet—by virtue of being “vast” and “powerful” as well as a source of multicultural information and news—could become the new authority figure, an essential tool of freedom, and initiator of a sense of belonging. Perhaps the approach that is needed with the Iraqi people is not that of imposing a Western-style democracy, but that of an offer of participation in the global society via educated connectedness:

The other side (of masochism) is the attempt to become a part of a bigger and more powerful whole outside of oneself, to submerge and participate in it. . . . By becoming part of a power which is felt as unshakably strong, eternal, and glamorous, one participates in its strength and glory. One surrenders one’s own self and renounces all strength and pride connected with it, one loses one’s integrity as an individual and surrenders freedom; but one gains a new security and a new pride in the participation in the power in which one submerges. . . . The meaning of . . . life and the identity of . . . self are determined by the greater whole into which the self has submerged.⁸⁰

Dr. Thomas Barnett of the US Naval War College suggests that network connectivity is a significant feature of “stable governments, rising standards of

living, and more deaths by suicide than murder.”⁸¹ Those who are in what he describes as “the Non-Integrating Gap” are not networked and are characterized by “politically repressive regimes, widespread poverty and disease, routine mass murder, and—most important—the chronic conflicts that incubate the next generation of global terrorists.” Barnett views those in “the Gap” as a strategic threat to global security.

Unfortunately, the Internet is not used solely for good or even benign purposes. Terrorist organizations, hate groups, and other criminals use the World Wide Web for recruiting, propaganda, and operational activities. Education provides no guarantee that a populace will reject malevolent or authoritarian ideas found in the “e-world”—but it may provide a basis on which to critique whatever ideas are discovered, with the Internet providing a forum to discuss them, as well as a feeling of freedom to do either without fear of political retribution. Providing educated connectivity to a formerly oppressed people may be a small step, but it will also be a strong one.

Freedom from Fear: Small Steps

Fromm did not despair in the futility of attempts to gain and retain freedom with individuality intact, although he knew only too well of the improbability of a society operating in pure, positive freedom. After World War II, he and his advocates turned to the future, and desperately hoped for a peaceful and unified coexistence. Fromm believed in the possibility of freedom in individual empowerment, obtainable under the auspices of a freedom-friendly, positive form of government. This is, perhaps, the best he could hope for.

In order to maintain a freedom-friendly government, conformity must not only exist, but it must be expected. Conformity is necessary for the maintenance of law and order, educational standards, public resources, and funding for continued governmental functions. Submission (for the same reasons) is considered imperative. However, the degree of freedom that exists within most democratic nations is significantly more than that which is allowed in totalitarian states.

The democratic ideal is that a populace in need of change can vote for a representative of that change. Therefore, feeling empowered enough to voice an opinion, the public should not have reason to feel disenfranchised or oppressed, or feel the need to resort to underground dissidence or violence.⁸² According to Fromm, there may be hope for those who have been oppressed, and therefore hope for the process of installing a productive form of government. Change may be very difficult for adults who have become ensconced in the authoritarian structure and the sadomasochistic environment⁸³—it is, therefore, the children who will hold the key to a democratic future for Iraq. The children must be raised in a manner that encourages individuation⁸⁴—breaking the ties of dependence while providing sufficient support to overcome and bear the fear of freedom. *This*

will take a long time. It will require resolve. If the post-Saddam coalition government can provide a sustained environment that will act as “mother” and not as a “Big Brother” in the Orwellian sense, the Iraqi people may eventually become assimilated into a new social structure that includes freedom.

Fromm wrote, “The more the drive toward life is realized, the less is the strength of destructiveness.”⁸⁵ Small but strong steps may be the key.

NOTES

1. Michael Dobbs and Mike Allen, “Images of Death, Ruin Inflict Setback in Propaganda War: U.S. Officials Hope for Eventual Success in Swaying Opinion in Iraq, Rest of Arab World,” *The Washington Post*, 30 March 2003, p. 26.

2. Vernon Loeb and Thomas E. Ricks, “Battling for Hearts and Minds,” *The Washington Post*, 4 April 2003, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-adv/archives/?nav=hpleft1>.

3. CNN, “CNN Special: Inside the Regime,” 20 April 2003.

4. Ibid.; Nicholas D. Kristof, “A World Upside Down,” *The New York Times*, 11 April 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/11/opinion/11KRIS.html>.

5. Michael Dobbs, “Hussein Scores in Propaganda War: Iraqi President Battling to Win Arab Hearts and Minds, Experts Say,” *The Washington Post*, 25 March 2003, p. 13; Marc Santora, “A Nation at War: Opposition Groups; Fear Said to Be Keeping Iraqi Dissidents from Rebellious,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 2003, p. B-3.

6. Dobbs, “Hussein Scores in Propaganda War,” p. 13; David Ignatius, “Hussein’s Enforcers at Work,” *The Washington Post*, 29 March 2003, p. 17; David Rohde, “On Pain of Death, Iraqi Soldier Kept at It,” *The New York Times*, 3 April 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/03/international/worldspecial/03SOLD.html>.

7. Peter Baker, “Arab Volunteers Draw U.S. Scrutiny,” *Washingtonpost.com*, 8 April 2003, <http://stacks.msnbc.com/news/897677.asp>; Associated Press, “Martyrdom Seekers Flock to Iraq, Setting Stage for Jihad,” *Fox News*, 30 March 2003, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,82588,00.html>; Associated Press, “Iraq War Sparks Jihad Debate in Saudi Arabia,” *Fox News*, 1 April 2003, http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,82785,00.html; “Arab Volunteers Seek to Join Fight for Iraq,” *The New York Times*, 2 April 2003.

8. Neil MacFarquhar, “A Nation at War: The Islamic World; For Arabs, New Jihad Is in Iraq,” *The New York Times*, 2 April 2003; Don Van Natta, Jr., and Desmond Butler, “Threats and Responses: Terror Network; Anger on Iraq Seen as New Qaeda Recruiting Tool,” *The New York Times*, 16 March 2003.

9. Reuters, “Arabs Watch Hussein’s Demise in Disbelief,” *The New York Times*, 9 April 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/international/international-iraq-arabs-saddam.html>; Todd Richissin, “On Arab TV, View of War Is Different than We See: Al-Jazeera Paints Hussein as Noble, Oil as U.S. Goal,” *The Sun* (Baltimore), 8 April 2003.

10. As Paul Berman notes, any suggestion that an “Arab country” could be compared to a European country raises tremendous controversy—especially among Arab nations. Paul Berman, “Learning Not to Love Saddam,” *The New York Times*, 31 March 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/31/opinion/31BERM.html>.

11. Ibid.; Conference of the Iraqi Opposition, *The Transition to Democracy in Iraq* (Washington: Conference of the Iraqi Opposition, November 2002), <http://www.iraqfoundation.org/studies/2002/dec/study.pdf>.

12. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (rpt.; New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969 [original published in 1941]).

13. Individuation was defined by Fromm as “the growing process of the emergence of the individual from his original ties.” Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 24.

14. Ibid., pp. 35-36.

15. Ibid., p. 28.

16. This could be a root cause of what is currently referred to as “risk aversion.”

17. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 29.

18. Ibid., pp. 15-16.

19. Ibid., p. 18. This sentiment is also expressed within several scenarios noted in Anthony Read and David Fisher, *The Fall of Berlin* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

20. Fromm described negative freedom as basically qualitative, seemingly contradictory elements involved in the acceptance and maintenance of freedom—social constraints that arise to alleviate the negative feelings (fear, isolation, powerlessness, etc.) associated with individuation. For instance, people in the United States are considered to be “free,” but they feel obligated to conform to commonly accepted regulations and laws; are often restrained in their freedom of speech by consideration for the psychological well-being of oth-

ers; and continue to seek security, unity, and strength by affiliating with groups of people who have common interests, issues, or backgrounds. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 104-08, 255-57.

21. In spite of some missing animals in this philosophy, his theory has an immediately obvious correlation to a subset of individuals who overtly look for the security of external control over their lives. This group might include people who are institutionalized for various reasons (mental, physical, emotional, etc.), some who choose restrictive religious orders, and ex-prisoners who commit acts guaranteed to put them back in prison because prison has become their comfort zone. On a larger scale, reports from the former Soviet Union of large segments of society who desperately want to return to a pre-Gorbachev form of government lend substantial credence to Fromm's theory.

22. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 112-13.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-51.

25. Additionally, with freedom, the individual must accept responsibility for his or her own actions. The sadomasochistic symbiotic relationship provides a convenient escape from any sense of responsibility.

26. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 162. German psychoanalyst Alice Miller, in *For Your Own Good*, expanded on Fromm's thesis in regard to pre-World War II Germany. Her belief, however, was that the strict and (according to her) largely abusive manner in which Germans had been taught to raise children for many centuries was the primary reason for the sadomasochistic authoritarian structure of German society. Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (Toronto, Canada: Collins Publishers, 1984).

27. Hitler used the Jewish people to satisfy the German populace's sadomasochistic desire to project power over a weaker opponent. Hussein used the Kurdish population in the same manner.

28. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 215.

29. Samir Al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

30. The difference between the two (Hitler's Germany and Saddam's Iraq) is that when confronted by an invading force, the Iraqi military did not provide anywhere near the same level of resistance that was common of the German military. There are, of course, many reasons for this (differences in training, organizational sophistication, deception, etc.), but the most devastating blow to the Iraqi regime was the early loss of leadership—the elite (apparently) ran away. The resulting lack of authority or "freedom" (to which lower levels were completely unaccustomed) resulted in chaos.

31. Again, Alice Miller (*For Your Own Good*) describes destructiveness as an almost inevitable consequence of unresolved issues of child abuse. The victim ultimately gains strength and authority over others who are weaker, and victimizes them as an unconscious symbolic response to the original aggressor.

32. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

34. Headquarters, US Army Air Forces, Office of the Assistant Chief of Air Staff, *Defeat* (Washington: US Army Air Forces, January 1946.)

35. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 41.

36. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 1997: Iraq*, <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aireport/ar97/MDE14.htm>.

37. Samir Al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear*.

38. *Ibid.*; John F. Burns, "When the Enemy Is a Liberator," *The New York Times*, 16 February 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/weekinreview/16BURN.html>; CNN, "CNN Special: Inside the Regime"; Miller, *For Your Own Good*.

39. John H. Cushman, "A Nation at War: 'Decisive Points' in a Race to Baghdad," *The New York Times*, 6 April 2003, p. B-16.

40. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 178.

41. This also could explain the looting and lawlessness that followed the liberation of Baghdad.

42. "Positive freedom" (Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 108) is what we, as individuals, all strive for. Fromm described this as "a new kind of freedom, one which enables us to realize our own individual self, to have faith in this self and in life" (p. 106); and as "the growth of an active, critical, responsible self" (p. 108). He stated that the only productive way to avoid collective feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and unworthiness—and the conflict situations that inevitably arise from those feelings—is to encourage connection of each individual to the world without eliminating individuality (p. 29). This will be the task of those who take on the responsibility of rebuilding a "free" Iraq.

43. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 179.

44. Conference of the Iraqi Opposition, *The Transition to Democracy in Iraq*.

45. The idea of self-suppression was later depicted in George Orwell's *1984*. Fromm discussed the suppression of self in an "Afterword" written for the Plume and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich edition of *1984*. Fromm, "Afterword," in George Orwell, *1984* (London: Plume, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955 [1983 Edition]), pp. 257-67; Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 202.

46. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 207.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., p. 208.
50. Orwell, *1984*.
51. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 208-09. This sentiment is also noted in Anthony Read and David Fisher, *The Fall of Berlin* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), p. 159.
52. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 208-09.
53. Reuters, "Arabs Watch Hussein's Demise in Disbelief," *The New York Times*, 9 April 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/international/international-iraq-arabs-saddam.html>; Richissin, "On Arab TV."
54. Reuters, "Arabs Watch Hussein's Demise in Disbelief," *The New York Times*; Richissin, "On Arab TV"; Susan Sachs, "A Nation at War: Cairo: Egyptian Intellectual Speaks of the Arab World's Despair," *The New York Times*, 8 April 2003.
55. David P. Barash, *Beloved Enemies: Our Need for Opponents* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994); Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*. Although the "Arab community" did not unite (militarily speaking) at the national level to actively resist the US and coalition forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the threat of terrorism and subsequent acts of terrorism have proven the effect of "unity through common enemy."
56. Interviews with several German prisoners-of-war indicated that popular support for Hitler continued until the people discovered that they had been "deceived" and "misled"—after atrocities had been exposed. Headquarters, US Army Air Forces, Office of the Assistant Chief of Air Staff, *Defeat*.
57. Ibid.
58. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 229.
59. Samir Al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear*.
60. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 230-31.
61. Samir Al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear*.
62. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 170.
63. Ibid., p. 213.
64. Ibid., p. 248.
65. Ibid., p. 256.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., p. 257.
68. Ibid., p. 258.
69. Charles F. Andrain and David E. Apter, *Political Protest and Social Change: Analyzing Politics* (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York Univ. Press, 1995), p. 40.
70. Ibid.
71. Hollywood's portrayal of US society and politics has not helped in this regard.
72. Indeed, this is what they will be told by authoritarian factions attempting to take control.
73. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 255.
74. The Iraqi people are still looking to someone of authority to provide for them. Whatever it is they need, they expect the incoming authority to give them. When the incoming authority does not provide, it is seen as weak, and the masses turn on the authority. As a group, the Iraqi people have yet to see what they can do to help themselves. If the authority figure provides, while simultaneously nurturing individual development, systemic change could become reality.
75. Berman, "Learning Not to Love Saddam." It could be argued that Germany did not have the outside religious pressure to overthrow the victor and to install a theocracy. Because of this factor in regard to Iraq, more time and effort will be needed to ensure the existence of a stable democratic government before the interim governing system begins to pull up stakes.
76. Berman, "Learning Not to Love Saddam."
77. Ibid.; Conference of the Iraqi Opposition, *The Transition to Democracy in Iraq*.
78. Drazen Pantic, "B92 of Belgrade: Free Voices on the Airwaves and the Internet," *Media Studies Journal*, 13 (No. 3, 1999), 176-81.
79. Ibid., p. 181.
80. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 154-55.
81. Thomas P. M. Barnett, "The Pentagon's New Map," *Esquire*, March 2003, <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/newrulesets/ThePentagonsNewMap.htm>.
82. Forrest Chisman and Alan Pifer, *Government for the People; The Federal Social Role: What It Is – What It Should Be* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).
83. Miller, *For Your Own Good*.
84. Ibid.; Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pp. 35-36.
85. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 182.