

U.S., Cuba and Democracy

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During the Clinton administration, the sentiment has been proclaimed on many occasions by the president and other political leaders, and dutifully reiterated by the media, that the thesis “Cuba is the only non-democracy in the Western Hemisphere” is now nothing short of received wisdom in the United States. Let us examine this thesis carefully for it has a highly interesting implication.

During the period of the Cuban revolution, 1959 to the present, Latin America has witnessed a terrible parade of human rights violations — systematic, routine torture; legions of “disappeared” people; government-supported death squads picking off selected individuals; massacres en masse of peasants, students and other groups, shot down in cold blood. The worst perpetrators of these acts during all or part of this period have been the governments and associated paramilitary squads of El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay, Haiti and Honduras.

Not even Cuba’s worst enemies have charged the Castro government with any of these violations, and if one further considers education and health care — both of which are guaranteed by the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and the “European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” — areas in which Cuba has consistently ranked at or near the top in Latin America, then it would appear that during the near-40 years of its revolution, Cuba has enjoyed one of the very best human-rights records in all of Latin America.

If, despite this record, the United States can insist that Cuba is the only “non-democracy” in the Western Hemisphere, we are left with the inescapable conclusion that this thing called “democracy”, as seen from the White House, may have little or nothing to do with many of our most cherished human rights. Indeed, numerous pronouncements emanating from Washington officialdom over the years make plain that “democracy”, at best, or at most, is equated solely with elections and civil liberties. Not even jobs, food and shelter are part of the equation.

Thus, a nation with hordes of hungry, homeless, untended sick, barely literate, unemployed, and/or tortured people, whose loved ones are being disappeared and/or murdered with state connivance, can be said to be living in a “democracy” — its literal Greek meaning of “rule of the people” implying that this is the kind of life the people actually want — provided that every two years or four years they have the right to go to a designated place and put an X next to the name of one or another individual who promises to relieve their miserable condition, but who will, typically, do virtually nothing of the kind; and provided further that in this society there is at least a certain minimum of freedom — how much being in large measure a function of one’s wealth — for one to express ones views about the powers-that-

be and the workings of the society, without undue fear of punishment, regardless of whether expressing these views has any influence whatsoever over the way things are.

It is not by chance that the United States has defined democracy in this narrow manner. Throughout the cold war, the absence of “free and fair” multiparty elections and adequate civil liberties were what marked the Soviet foe and its satellites. These nations, however, provided their citizens with a relatively decent standard of living insofar as employment, food, health care, education, etc., without omnipresent Brazilian torture or Guatemalan death squads. At the same time, many of America’s Third World allies in the cold war — members of what Washington still likes to refer to as “The Free World” — were human-rights disaster areas, who could boast of little other than the 30-second democracy of the polling booth and a tolerance for dissenting opinion so long as it didn’t cut too close to the bone or threaten to turn into a movement.

Naturally, the only way to win cold-war propaganda points with team lineups like these, was to extol your team’s brand of virtue and damn the enemy’s lack of it, designating the former “democracy” and the latter “totalitarianism”.

Needless to say, civil liberties and elections are not trifling accomplishments of mankind. Countless individuals have suffered torture and death in their pursuit. And despite the cold-war blinkers, which even today limits the United States’ vision of this thing called democracy, there would still be ample credit due Washington if, in fact, in the post-World War II period, the US had been using its pre-eminent position in the world, its overwhelming “superpower” status, to spread these accomplishments — to act as the unfailing global champion of free and fair elections, multiple parties, a free press, a free labor movement, habeas corpus, and other civil liberty icons. The historical record, however, points in the opposite direction.

The two cold-war powers presented fraudulent faces to the world. The Soviet Union’s party line regularly extolled “wars of liberation”, “anti-imperialism” and “anti-colonialism”, while Moscow did extremely little to actually further these causes, American propaganda notwithstanding. The Soviets relished their image as champions of the Third World, but they stood by doing little more than going “tsk, tsk” as progressive movements and governments, even Communist Parties, in Greece, Guatemala, British Guiana, Chile, Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere went to the wall with American complicity.

At the same time, the words “freedom” and “democracy” rolled easily and routinely off the lips of American leaders, while American policies habitually supported dictatorships. Indeed, it would be difficult to name a brutal right-wing dictatorship of the second half of the twentieth century that was not supported by the United States — not merely supported, but often put into power and kept in power against the wishes of the populace.

As numerous interventions have demonstrated, the engine of American foreign policy has been fueled, not by a devotion to democracy, but rather by the desire to: 1) make the world safe for American transnational corporations; 2) enhance the financial statements of defense contractors at home; 3) prevent the rise of any society that might serve as a successful example of an alternative to the capitalist model; 4) extend political and economic hegemony over as wide an area as possible, as befits a “great power”; and 5) fight a moral crusade against what cold warriors convinced themselves, and the American people, was the existence of an evil International Communist Conspiracy.

Over the past fifty years, in striving to establish a world populated with governments compatible with these aims, the United States has — apart from monumental lip service — accorded scant priority to this thing called democracy.

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