

The Values That Didn't Fail

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism serves as a reminder that liberalism makes the right kind of "regime change" possible.

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umans tend to over-commemorate. Almost no historical event is adjudged so minor that some group can't gather for a parade and speeches. I read recently, for example, of massive festivities marking the 213th anniversary of the Cherasco armistice, which apparently settled certain affairs between Napoleon and the Kingdom of Sardinia. I'll pass on that one, but this summer and fall bring the 20th anniversary of a series of events very much worth celebrating—because embedded in those events are lessons about an idea liberals still grapple with, in new forms, today.

The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989. The wall's collapse, in turn, culminated a series of vertiginous events in that astounding year that dawned, I think it's fair to say, with no one anticipating it would end the way it did. Let's start with Poland. Wojciech Jaruzelski was still in control of the Polish state. A series of strikes by Solidarity in 1988 had forced the government into negotia-

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tions, but it was hardly clear, as the year began, that in June 1989 free elections would be held in which Solidarity and other non-Communist candidates would win virtually every genuinely contested seat, in both legislative houses.

Also that June, two weeks after the Polish voting, something remarkable happened in Hungary, the kind of event that carries us back to that era of the vanishing commissar but stands its twisted logic on its head. The remains of Imre Nagy, the leader of the 1956 Hungarian uprising who had been tried, convicted, and hanged (all in secrecy) by Soviet authorities in 1958, were disinterred by pro-democracy forces. Nagy had been made a non-person by the Communist regime. But a series of reformist victories over the previous year created an environment in which anti-Soviet groups were able to defy authorities and give Nagy a respectful re-burial on the 31st anniversary of his death.

The air, that Hungarian summer, was rife with auguries. On June 27, 11 days after Nagy's rehabilitation, Foreign Minister Gyula Horn met his Austrian counterpart, Alois Mock, at the border. Each official held large clipping shears and made ceremonial cuts in the barbed-wire border fence. Soon thereafter, an annual ritual, by which East and West German families divided by the Iron Curtain reunited for a short vacation in Hungary, started again. But this year, for some reason, Hungarian border guards began letting some East Germans slip through to the West. By summer's end, there was a full-fledged refugee crisis at the border. It's a shame that the date September 11 now carries the solemn historical weight attached to it, because it was on that date in 1989—after a brave decision by Horn to abrogate a treaty with East Germany forbidding Hungary from permitting East Germans to cross into the West—that East Germans started streaming by the thousands through Hungary into Austria.

The tumult spread quickly to Leipzig and eventually Berlin. George H.W. Bush and James Baker chose, correctly, to do and say little. Mikhail Gorbachev, more importantly and impressively, chose not to roll tanks into Budapest or Berlin. On November 9, with pressure mounting, East German official Gunter Schabowski announced—hastily and incorrectly, in fact, but, since the announcement was aired live across much of the world, irrevocably—that all rules for travel abroad would be lifted “immediately.” East Germans rushed to the Wall and overwhelmed the guards. They danced atop it and chipped away souvenirs. The next day, Bulgarian ruler Todor Zhivkov was ousted. On November 28, the Czech Communist Party announced it would relinquish power; Vaclav Havel and Alexander Dubcek were running things by year's end. And in Romania, there were the Christmas Day executions—broadcast live on state television—of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena (not exactly a democratic seizure of power, but given the nature of the Ceausescus' rule, a perhaps understandable one).

By 1990, the Iron Curtain draped around only Albania, the Baltic states, and the Soviet republics, and their moment was coming. Twenty years later, the world has still never seen so total and rapid a demolition of something so seemingly permanent. It makes 2009 a good occasion to ponder whether anything like it can take place again—and whether liberalism can act as a lubricant to make it happen.

The setting for this drama has moved eastward. This June, there will have been, by the time you read this, an important election in Lebanon pitting forces seeking to redeem the assassination of Rafiq Hariri against groups allied with Lebanon's longtime occupier, Syria. There are many problems with the so-called "March 14" reform forces (the date, since we're talking anniversaries, of the massive Cedar Revolution demonstrations held in Beirut in 2005, leading to Syria's withdrawal). But there is also no question that if the results have favored the other side (they call themselves March 8), Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah will be strengthened, and Lebanon's push toward a more secular pluralism will have been dealt a difficult blow.

June also brings elections in Iran. As of this writing, few observers expect Mir Hossein Mousavi, the chief reformist challenger to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to prevail. But Mousavi has spoken openly about wanting to pursue better relations with the United States, praised Obama in speeches, and had the backing of some prominent figures. If he puts up even a decent showing, it will be a hopeful sign that a significant chunk of Iranians reject their president's lunatic rantings. Finally, Afghans head to the polls in August. More than 40 candidates filed for president, but the lackluster Hamid Karzai appeared to be the favorite to win reelection.

Obviously, 2009 will not be in the Middle East what 1989 was in Eastern Europe. Even if the March 14 coalition wins in Lebanon, it will probably not have the will to dismantle the country's baroque "confessional" electoral system, and it will scarcely have the power to roust Hezbollah from its strongholds. And even if through some miracle Mousavi beats Ahmadinejad, we all know that the Supreme Mullah, Ali Khamenei, really pulls the strings. In Afghanistan, the central government controls only about a third of the territory—the Taliban control a chunk of the rest, and now, some areas in Pakistan, itself on the brink of collapse. Israel's new conservative government announced even before assuming office that it is in no hurry to talk statehood with the Palestinians and may even "reconsider" the Oslo accords. Hamas has likewise signaled no interest in moderation and continues to preen and propagandize and disserve its luckless constituents. Finally, in Iraq, the fledgling democracy continues to assert itself, but comity depends on the continued good faith of factions that still have some distance to travel toward real nationhood.

In America, we've moved from the Bush era into the Obama era. We had a chance to see, for eight years, how well the neoconservative approach to the Middle East worked, and the answer is: pretty miserably. Unsurprisingly, governments answered American bellicosity with bellicosity of their own.

Obama has already begun to pursue a new approach. Will American good faith be answered in kind? The answer will probably be: sometimes, when it's also in a nation's self-interest to do so. That's not the result of our dreams, but neither is it hopeless. It's not inconceivable, with the right combination of diplomatic carrots and sticks and under the right circumstances, that Syria could one day agree to a less hostile posture toward Israel. Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad sends mixed signals, but at least they're mixed.

The importance of the next four or eight years as a crucible for American liberal belief and practice in these matters can hardly be overstated. Liberals support a respectful internationalism not because we're a bunch of milquetoasts but because we believe in the long run it yields better results than belligerence. American diplomatic history has rarely if ever presented liberalism with the opportunity to contrast itself so clearly with a failed conservative approach. If Obama's strategy has helped make the Arab world more open and democratic by the time he leaves office, it may well stand as *the* great achievement of his tenure—greater even than health care reform and a new energy policy and all the rest here at home. It would change for a generation or more the domestic debate about foreign policy, burying those rasping Vietnam-era ghosts about liberal lassitude once and for all, and its impact on the world would be profound.

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In the meantime, though, let's consider one more way in which liberal ideals make themselves felt around the world, a way that has little relationship to what the United States does or doesn't do.

American conservatives love to claim, as we know, that Ronald Reagan won the cold war. By this they mean that a belligerent posture toward the Soviet Union made it succumb, that Gorbachev refused to send tanks into Budapest or Berlin not because he was a nice guy but because he knew the USSR couldn't afford to subsidize its satellites anymore, and it couldn't do that because Reagan had spent him into the ground. The revisionist argument about Reagan, on the other hand, is that he achieved great success with Gorbachev, but only

after he abandoned his initial belligerence and adopted a more liberal posture (the historical record shows that by 1986, many neoconservatives felt betrayed by Reagan on the question of East-West relations).

There is a degree of merit to the conservative argument, and considerable merit to the revisionist one. But what both ignore is the role played by the Eastern Europeans themselves—the astonishingly brave actions of intellectuals, writers, scientists, students, some officials, and regular people over the decades. From Czech samizdat literature to the amazing “singing revolution” in Estonia (look this up, if you’ve never heard of it; there is a documentary film, “The Singing Revolution,” which captures the scarcely believable events), Eastern Europeans relied on values that can only be called liberal—their questioning of authority; their insistence on individual dignity and the rights of minorities; their faith in young people; their dependence on collective action; their belief in the vital roles of art and culture in the kind of pluralistic society they aspired to create. Those are the values that sustained them and that eventually won the day.

And they are *our* values. The Polish dissident leader Adam Michnik once said: “For my generation, the road to freedom began in 1968.” He wasn’t referring to the election of Richard Nixon. And Gyula Horn, when he abrogated that treaty with East Germany, understood that his decision would lead to “a landslide-like series of events” but insisted: “There was no other way. We had to look for the humanist solution.”

“Humanist” is a word conservatives detest, denying as it does any divine agency for our actions and destinies. But it’s a concept liberals—even believing ones, because liberals endorse the separation of church and state—recognize and support. Today’s Horns are out there—feminists in Egypt, progressive secularists in Lebanon and Iran, anti-authority artists and writers and journalists everywhere—looking for the humanist solution. In this sense, progressive values are being put into practice every day.

I’ll watch this year’s commemorations in Eastern Europe thinking of the people across the Middle East who are working toward their own 1989. It might sound farfetched. But we should hope, and expect, that four or eight years of liberal-internationalist engagement will bring that day’s arrival closer. We should all take heart in knowing that our values are being planted in soil all over the world—someday, as unexpectedly as once happened in Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague, trees will begin to sprout. ▀