

Totalitarianism vs. Authoritarianism

One of the Reagan Administration's major foreign policy departures has been to redefine our government's conception of human rights and to reorder its priorities.

The liberals are up in arms over the new direction, because it seemingly represents a willingness to indict repression by left-wing regimes while looking the other way when it comes to right-wing dictatorships. Actually, the government's new human rights policy is based on another distinction, namely that between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Argentina, El Salvador and Uruguay are examples of the former. Cuba and the Soviet Union represent the latter.

While many authoritarian governments are classified as rightist and many totalitarian ones are viewed as leftist, this correlation is neither perfect nor inherent. (Nazi Germany is classified as both right-wing and totalitarian). The only thing the Reagan Administration has suggested, rather timidly at that, is that totalitarian regimes are more repressive than authoritarian ones.

Prof. Ernest Lefever was one of the people who recently drew the distinction. This did not sit well with liberals. They saw it as one more sign of Lefever's rightist leanings, and they therefore made it impossible for him to become Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights.

However, the Administration need not be timid about the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian governments, and liberals must not be permitted to treat it as some sort of phony verbal gimmick. The distinction is basic and well established in political science and in the literature on political violence. It is valid and meaningful.

The repressive powers of totalitarian governments are infinitely greater than those of authoritarian ones. Proof of this lies in the fact that countries such as Nazi Germany, Cuba and the Soviet Union have never had a terrorist problem, whereas countries like Argentina, Uruguay and El Salvador of course do. The menace provided to human rights by totalitarian systems is far greater and more irreversible than that coming from authoritarian dictatorships. Totalitarian regimes are far more efficient in their ruthlessness and commit violence on a much greater scale.

Consider the case of Argentina. Jacobo Timerman is an exiled publisher from that country. He has just published his memoir in which he describes the gruesome torture and imprisonment he received at the hands of Argentina's ruling junta. Timerman has been eagerly coopted by America's liberal establishment. His experience and his book are used as ammunition to attack Reagan's new human rights emphasis. Timerman is proof, so the reasoning goes, that there should be no compromises with regimes like Argentina's.

The liberals are wrong. Some of them may truly believe in the morality of their beliefs, and some are simply twisting their arguments because they are wedded to the vested interests of the American liberal establishment. Whatever the case may be, they are wrong.

Nobody is saying that the rulers of Argentina are nice guys. Timerman no doubt suffered great injustice (although it is not clear that this was because he is Jewish). What liberals refuse to face is the fact that Argentina's present condition is the inevitable outcome of the unbearable level of violence and terrorism which prevailed in the mid-'70s, and the vast majority of Argentinians prefer their current situation to what was happening then.

The facts speak for themselves. Between 1970 and 1977, terrorism in Argentina became a massive problem. At the height of their activities, the ERP (*Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo*) and the Montoneros numbered over 30,000. Along with many other smaller groups, they were responsible for hundreds of Kidnapings, bombings and indiscriminate killings of foreigners, natives and innocent civilians. Their annual budget, derived from ransom, was over \$100 million. One single ransom netted \$60 million. As terrorism expert Walter Lacqueur notes, Argentina became one of the very first cases in history of terrorism turning into urban guerrilla warfare.

It is an axiom in the study of terrorism that when the level of violence finally threatens the very foundation of society, the state will, with its infinitely vaster resources, introduce whatever repressive measures are necessary as a last resort to guarantee a return to order and collective survival. The price, of course, is a loss of democratic values.

This is clearly what happened in Argentina. After 1977, terrorism subsided. It is now entirely under control. The pattern occurred in Uruguay a few years earlier. There, terrorism began in 1961 and gradually grew to massive proportions until it was defeated in 1972. Like Argentina, Uruguay became an authoritarian dictatorship.

The liberals attribute terrorism to unbearable economic deprivation, but no such correlation -exists. While the Tupamaros of Uruguay and the Montoneros of Argentina rose during economic depressions, Brazil's great upsurge of terrorism (1968-1971) happened precisely during an economic boom. There is simply no cause-and-effect relationship between terrorism on the one hand and poverty and oppression on the other: witness the German Red Army faction, the Italian Red Brigades and other similar groups.

The Carter Administration's human rights policy was quixotic and counter-productive. The new Administration's approach is correct. It makes sense to distinguish between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. While governments such as Uruguay and Argentina's are repressive, they are less rigorously so than the USSR government, and they are the unfortunate but inevitable response of societies that were recently floundering on the verge of anarchy. The real world does not consist of two sides - good and evil - but of many gradations of both. It is fortunate that the Reagan Administration recognizes this fact.