

Wolfowitz and Jefferson on democracy

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Within the Bush administration, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz is an intellectual power to be reckoned with. The former dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington has a vision for building democracy in the Arab world that has come to shape the administration's policy regarding the Middle East. It has resulted in the demise of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Wolfowitz strongly advocates "the power of the democratic idea" as the organizing force for Iraq and other Arab countries with autocratic regimes that await their turn for democratization, some of which have been long-time friends of the United States.

We in Puerto Rico, where the power of the democratic idea has not come to full fruition more than 100 years after a war was proclaimed to bring us the blessings of liberty, would do well to reflect on the intellectual underpinnings of current U.S. foreign policy as we continue to seek these blessings in order to arrive at our political maturity.

The transformation of the Arab countries in the Middle East into stable democracies where human rights are respected and peace prevails is a lofty goal that calls for radical, audacious and optimistic thinking such as Wolfowitz's. It also calls for a steadfast resolve to be sustained for a long time.

Although post-war democratization of countries with previous authoritarian regimes has succeeded in the past--Japan and Germany being prime examples--it has usually followed as a logical step after winning a war into which the U.S. was drawn to defend itself, not to democratize others.

Making wars to establish democracies is another matter. The difficulties attendant on establishing order in Iraq, not to say those involved in bringing all the ethnic factions together, promoting, bargaining, compromise consensus, and institution building among them, and at the same time steering the process in a direction pleasing Washington, are a totally different matter. The events unfolding in Iraq towards the reconstruction of its government point towards a directed democracy.

Thomas Jefferson would oppose these policies as contrary to the principle of consent of the governed. Isn't consent the basic principle upon which government of the people, by the people, and for the people is founded? That the Iraqis by and large wanted liberation from the tyrant is not to be debated. But once the tyrant has fallen, it does not follow that all the important policies of a democratic government in Iraq will be agreeable to Washington. Yet their being agreeable to Washington is the objective towards which they are directed. That's where the U.S. runs into trouble with the "e" word, i.e., empire.

This philosophical quandary is not new in American politics. It dates to the beginning of the nation and involves the thinking of men like Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, who wrote in it the sacred principle that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. Jefferson loathed wars of conquest. He understood that an empire was repugnant to the principles upon which the new nation would stand: liberty, democracy, and justice for all.

So when he penned the Northwest Ordinance for the government of the territory ceded by Virginia to the Confederation--the first land acquired by the U.S.--he structured a government based on these principles. This Ordinance was written while the Philadelphia convention, in which Jefferson sat, was drafting the Constitution of the United States. It was adopted by the first Congress convened under the constitution.

“Sec. 13. And for extending the fundamental principles of civil and religious liberty, which form the basis whereon these republics, their laws and constitutions, are erected; to fix and establish those principles as the basis of all laws, constitutions, and governments which forever hereafter shall be formed in the said Territory; to provide, also, for the establishment of States and permanent government therein, and for their admission to a share in the federal councils on an equal footing with the original States, at as early periods as may be consistent with the general interest.

Sec. 14. It is hereby ordained and declared, by the authority aforesaid, that the following articles shall be considered as articles of compact between the original States and the people and the States of the said Territory, and forever remain unalterable unless by common consent”.

These principles guided governments in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin until they joined the union as states, whereupon they gained equal footing under the federal constitution.

Years later, the same principles guided the Commonwealth compact established in Puerto Rico under Law 600: “Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that, fully recognizing the principle of government by consent, this Act is now adopted in the nature of a compact so that the people of Puerto Rico may organize a government pursuant to a constitution of their own adoption.”

Under Jeffersonian principles, the power derived from the consent of the American people is not to be used for governing, directly or indirectly, the Iraqi people or any other people.

At the time of the Spanish American war, the fate of the Spanish colonies--Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam--stirred strong national debate around the “e” word. McKinley, who espoused Jeffersonian principles, was driven by the plutocrats of the day into a quest for empire. The debate that ensued was strong in the country and in Congress. The country and the Senate were divided between imperialists and anti-imperialists.

Mr. Platt, one of the imperialists, spoke thus in the Senate: “The Declaration of Independence was made to suit a particular existing condition of things. The Declaration meant simply that the Colonies had become tired of the British domination, deeming it oppressive, and intended to set up a government of their own by the right of revolution. They were not laying down a principle for anybody except themselves, and they had not the conception of the ‘consent of the governed’, as it is proclaimed by the generally hypocritical gang who are sympathizing with him in the hope of cheating us out of our rightful conquests.”

Rev. P.S. Henson, of the First Baptist Church, Chicago, went to the extreme of imperialistic frenzy in delivering these words at a public meeting in May 1899: “And so today there are those that wave the Declaration of Independence in our faces, and tell us that the thing to do is to deliver over those islands of the archipelago in the East to the people who are their rightful masters; for ‘all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.’ So wrote Thomas Jefferson. Do you remember that the Lord said to Joshua, ‘My servant is dead?’ And so is Thomas Jefferson. I do not believe that Thomas Jefferson was infallible. I believe that a live President in the year of grace 1899 is just as much of an authority as a President that lived and died a hundred years ago. I am no worshiper of a saint just because he is dead. Let the dead bury the dead. As to that hallowed document that declares that all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, if that is to be literally construed, there never was a greater falsehood palmed off by the devil upon a credulous world. It is not true of the government of God.”

If there is one principle that the government of God respects, it is the principle of human liberty. He never saw fit to love us so much as to force us to obey his commandments. He wanted the love of free men and women. Liberty is the root of the consent of the governed. Jefferson saw this clearly when he wrote: “The laws, however, which must effect this must flow from their own habits, their own feelings, and the resources of their own minds. No stranger to these could possibly propose regulations adapted to them. Every people have their own particular habits, ways of thinking, manners, etc., which have grown up with them from their infancy, have become a part of their nature, and to which the regulations which are to make them happy must be accommodated. No member of a foreign country can have a sufficient sympathy with these. The institutions of Lycurgus, for example, would not have suited Athens, nor those of Solon, Lacedaemon. The organizations of Locke were impracticable for Carolina, and those of Rousseau for Poland.”

Democracy will blossom in the Middle East if liberty blossoms, and liberty must be complete so that the strongest bonds can be tied through diplomacy, cooperation, and consultation with the U.S. One hundred years after our U.S. war of liberation in Puerto Rico, we are still waiting for the complete blossoming of democracy under Jeffersonian principles.