

Humor Can Bring Down a State
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One characteristic of nasty governments?theocracies, dictatorships, and authoritarian monarchies is that they have no sense of humor. The one thing that can put a frightening government on the defensive is to know that their subjects are laughing at them.

In Jacques Barzun's final book, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present* (Harper Collins, 2000), he tracks the fall of the French monarchy and the French Revolution to the point where the French elites had no fear of making jokes about the monarchy. Republics such as ours have little to fear that making fun of the government or mocking our leaders will bring down the walls---yet. We are in full mockery mode right now, made easier by the actions of our current leaders, Presidential and Administrative.

Humor endangers dictatorships, however. When Rumania's nasty dictator Nicolae Ceausescu made a speech to his abused population on Christmas Eve of 1989, he was startled to hear laughter and hoots?and the armed soldiers in the square, contrary to his expectations, did not shoot into the crowd; they arrested Ceausescu instead, and he was dead by morning.

I have long thought that we miss the boat in dealing with the "hearts and minds" of the benighted populations of the world. We should use comedy and soap operas to get our points across. Laughter, mockery, and serialized stories can be very destabilizing?and effective. Examples are plentiful.

A few years ago, a Persian comedy group in Beverly Hills put on a hilarious weekly TV program for their Persian-American audience. By a fluke, the broadcast was picked up by satellite and beamed to Iran. The Iranian public was much entertained and the government started to confiscate satellite dishes (a losing battle). In the broadcast was a segment called "Ask the Mullah," in which a ridiculous little turbaned fellow gave answers to call-in questions that brought down the house?and were too realistic for comfort of the clerics. Our own 60 Minutes picked this up and suggested that our government sponsor this regularly. We haven't done so yet! The tradition of mocking clerics is old and honored in Iran?and we should build on it.

It is interesting to note that many Iranians a few years ago privately referred to then President Ahmadinejad as "maymunac" "little monkey"?and for them, this was not a term of endearment. Jokes about lecherous mullahs are legion, as are jokes about the legendary greed of clerical families. This fuels the joke mills, and not just for Iranians but for Arabs too.

The Israelis, who have plenty of Arabic and Persian speakers, could be producing some really juicy soap operas and comedy shows. I would bet that viewers throughout the Muslim world would pick these up on satellite. And who knows what the effect this would have on the European Muslim population tethered to their satellite dishes?

Who would have thought that a program as silly as American Idol could be picked up in Iraq and that an Iraqi-American girl singer could be such a sensation? Nobody knows whether she is Sunni or Shi'a (in America, who cares?) but she has been embraced as an all-Iraqi girl. That is a good thing indeed. We should build on it.

Soap operas could deal with family issues, abused women, forced marriages, and all sorts of other things that would be positively subversive in those closed societies. Soap operas have also been used by certain African countries in their battle against AIDS. Sexual matters are not discussed in those societies, but when a soap opera deals with such things, everybody listens. Men get just as hooked by these programs as women, we are told.

So much of our propaganda is obvious, boring, and too earnest to be taken seriously.

A good joke or appropriate insult, however, gets through?and makes people think about the ridiculousness of the tyrants who dominate their lives. President Trump's recent designation of the latest British terror bomber as a "loser" is pretty apt.

Blowing oneself up as a suicide bomber deserves a "Darwin Award," a prize to a fool who will not live to father more fools.

678 words

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