

# Cato's Letter

A QUARTERLY MESSAGE ON LIBERTY

## Bringing Liberal Democracy to Iraq

**Fareed Zakaria**

**Editor, *Newsweek International***

I'd like to talk about the themes of my book, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, and try to apply them to the case of our 51st state. You may not realize that we have a 51st state, but we do. It is called Iraq. We acquired it on the lofty principle of international relations that Thomas Friedman calls the Pottery Barn principle: "You break it, you buy it." And so now that we possess it, we have to figure out just how much it costs and how to fix it. This involves getting to know a part of the world that we are not as familiar with as we should be. Ambrose Bierce, in his wonderful book *The Devil's Dictionary*, defines war as God's way of teaching Americans geography. We now have taken on a very ambitious agenda for Iraq. Bringing democracy to



**This is an excerpt from remarks made by Fareed Zakaria at a Cato City Seminar in New York City on June 5, 2003. Zakaria is the editor of *Newsweek International*, a regular columnist for that magazine's domestic edition, and author of *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*.**

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Iraq will be difficult. And I think it will be difficult because of something that is really the central theme of my book—we want to bring to Iraq not just democracy but *liberal* democracy. In the past three or four decades there has been a great movement toward democracy in much of the world, but many of the governments formed in that process don't look, feel, or smell like democracies.

You have a government like Hugo Chavez's in Venezuela that is essentially an elected dictatorship. You have a government in Russia run by Vladimir Putin. Putin, who was elected freely and fairly, has fired half of the governors and appointed super governors in their stead; ousted a third of the Duma, the Russian Parliament; intimidated the Russian media, which

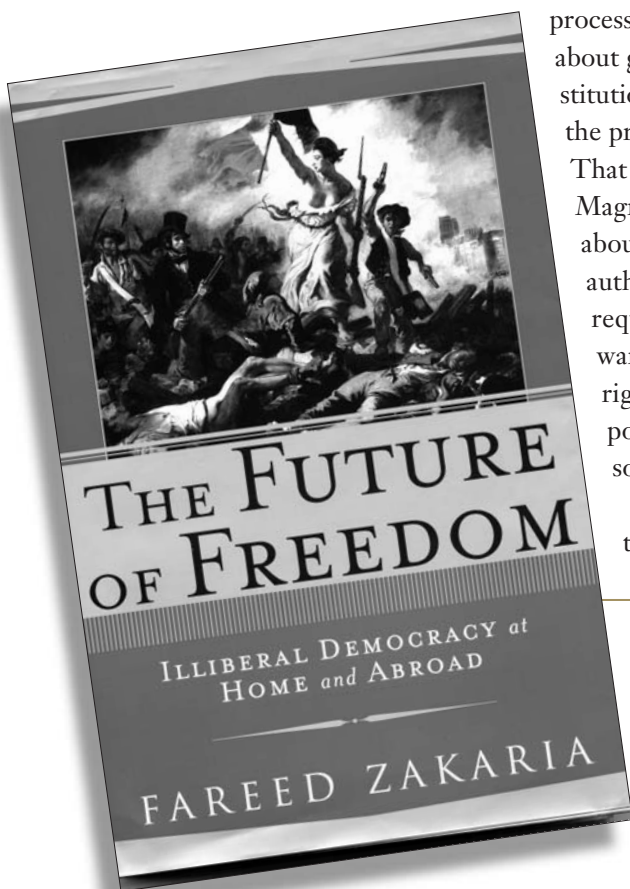
was once free and vibrant, into nearly total silence; and is prosecuting a war in Chechnya in which the Russian Army has killed about 100,000 Chechens, mostly civilians. Is that really a democracy?

## LIBERALISM VS. DEMOCRACY

The Western model of government that we cherish comprises two somewhat different traditions that I describe in my book—the constitutional liberal tradition and the democratic tradition. The democratic tradition is about public participation in government—essentially about elections. Democracy is best defined as a form of government in which the regime is chosen by free and fair elections.

Constitutional liberalism, on the other hand, is really not about the process for selecting governments but about government's goals. In the constitutional liberal tradition, the goal is the preservation of individual liberty. That tradition, which began with Magna Carta or even earlier, is about restraints on governmental authority. Historically it has required the development of bulwarks that protect individual rights and liberties from arbitrary power—from state, church, or society.

We tend to think of those two traditions as somewhat one and



the same because in the Western world they have merged together. But they're really quite different and have diverged at various points in history.

### THE RISE OF WESTERN LIBERTY

I begin the book in 324 A.D., because that's when, in my opinion, there were the beginnings of Western liberty. That is when Constantine decided to move his capital from Rome to Byzantium. It was a very important decision because he took with him his entire court but left behind one person—the Bishop of Rome. In doing so, he began the process of the separation of church and state. And the church, ironically, turned out to be the first great check on state authority in the Western world. It was really the first time in human history that an institution independent of governmental authority was able to check the power of government.

Then there was a whole succession of such institutions and traditions in the Western world and the rise of feudal aristocracies that checked the power of government. Often these checks were not intended to protect individual liberty. Magna Carta was intended to be a charter of baronial privilege. It was a document that said to the king, "You cannot trespass on the rights of these barons." But, in doing so, it checked royal absolutism. There was also the rise of capitalism, which was probably the single most profound check on state power because it produced an entire class of people, the bourgeoisie, who derived their strength from society, not the state. This produced an independent civil society, a term which in its ori-

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gins referred to private businessmen. In reality, the symbol of Western government has always been, not the mass plebiscite, but the impartial judge.

All of that took hundreds of years to develop, and then we got democracy. It is very important to remember that when Britain was considered the most liberal, constitutional free society in the world, in 1800—after Montesquieu had sung its praises—only 2 percent of Britons voted. Lest we think we are that different, only 5 percent of Americans voted in the election of 1824. But America had the rule of law, property rights, and other rights firmly enumerated and protected. That tradition of law led to democracy and then fused with democracy to produce liberal democracy.

### ELECTED DESPOTISM IN EUROPE

Those two traditions have diverged even in Western history. People some-

times think that Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in a kind of covert coup, but that is not entirely true. He came to power on the heels of the famous and flawed election in November 1933, but there were three elections before that in which the Nazi Party won a plurality of the vote. The

fore the war one would read statement after statement of government officials extolling the virtues of oil—explaining how oil is going to mean the development of the Iraqi economy, the payback of reconstruction efforts, and how it will put the country on a glide path to modernity.



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Nazis, fascism, and populist nationalism rose throughout Europe on the back of fairly popular movements and often through elections.

We are not just trying to bring popular participation—the process of selecting a government—to Iraq, but the whole long tradition of Western constitutionalism and liberalism. Anyone can hold an election, but it will be far more difficult to create the rule of law; the institution of property rights; and responsive, transparent, and clean governmental authority. It will be difficult because Iraq faces two or three obstacles along the way.

### **THE CURSE OF OIL**

First is the problem of oil. I call it a problem, yet many in the U.S. government seem to see it as a solution. Be-

There is only one problem with this theory. Of all the oil-rich countries in the world, only Norway is a functioning capitalist economy with a liberal democratic polity. And Norway got its democracy long before it discovered its oil. In my book I call states with easy access to oil revenue “trust fund states.” Such states never go through the hard work of modernizing their societies, modernizing their laws, and building a market economy. Minus oil, the merchandise exports of the entire Arab world—290 million people—equal those of Finland, with 11 million people. The reason is that the region has too easy access to unearned income.

### **A NATION DIVIDED**

This is not just an economic problem, it’s also a political problem,

because when a government doesn't need to tax its people, it doesn't need to give them back anything in return. We've learned that the hard way. The American Revolution occurred because Americans felt they were being taxed but not represented in the British parliament. The Saudi royal family makes a different bargain with its people. It says, "we won't tax you and we won't represent you." It is in a sense the inverse of the slogan of the American Revolution, "no taxation, no representation." And that political dysfunction affects every oil-rich society.

Another great problem is that Iraq is riven with differences. Its people are Shia, Sunni, Kurd, and Turkmen, among others. To see what this can produce, go back in Europe's history and look at how easy it was for demagogues to rally people on the basis of very raw appeals to nationalism. Just 10 years ago, we had a similar situation in the former Yugoslavia, a country also governed for decades by totalitarian rulers. The old order crumbled, and in the void everyone pushed for a

quick transition to democracy. But Serb and Croation politicians had to campaign to get votes, and the most popular and effective appeals were not education reform or tax policy but raw appeals to race, religion, and ethnicity. The cycle of Serb nationalism and Croatian nationalism got out of control. The result was ethnic cleansing and, eventually, attempted genocide.

It doesn't have to happen exactly that way in Iraq, but Iraq does have a raw, young political culture in which no politics or political parties have been allowed. And people are mobilizing on the basis of Shia radicalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and Kurdish nationalism. Secular liberals might find it more difficult to rally crowds and appeal to voters.

## A HISTORY OF OPPRESSION

The final problem is that Iraq is a Middle Eastern country. By which I mean, like every Middle Eastern country, it has followed a particular pattern over the last three or four decades. It was a secular, Westernizing regime that morphed into a tyranny. The Saddam Husseins, the Nassers, the Assads of the Middle East are all suit-wearing, Western-styled modernizers. And when their people look at them they see tyranny and repression.

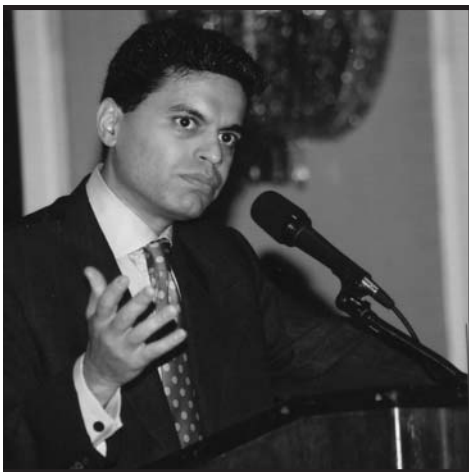
These rulers put into jail anyone who hinted at political opposition or tried to found a political party—or even a Rotary Club. An Egyptian friend of mine recently said to me, "If four people are sitting down in a coffeeshouse in Egypt talking about poli-

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tics, they will be put into jail.” The one place in the Middle East which you cannot ban is the mosque. So all the discontent and extremism got channeled into the mosque, and religion became the language of political opposition in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein did not allow liberal or conservative parties; Democratic or Republican parties. But like every

lowed a pattern, which was a variation of the Western pattern—the rule of law and capitalism first, and elections and democracy afterwards. Sequencing matters; ideally you get the institutions of liberty in place before you create democracy. If you hold elections and cross your fingers that constitutionalism will emerge, it often doesn’t turn out right.



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other Middle Eastern leader, he didn’t dare shut down the mosques, nor did he take on tribal chieftains. So when the regime crumbled, only the mosques and the tribes were left standing.

In Africa, 42 of the 48 countries have held elections, producing governments that are often thoroughly illiberal. But in countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand, where they have built the rule of law, a commercial class, an independent middle class, and *then* democracy, you have achieved something quite significant. Democracy is hard work. It is very much worth trying to spread but it takes a much broader process of modernization and liberalization than people realize.

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## LIBERTY BEFORE DEMOCRACY

If you look at the successful cases of non-Western countries that have made transitions to genuine liberal democracy, they are almost all clustered in East Asia or former colonies of the British Empire. They all fol-

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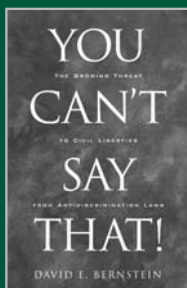
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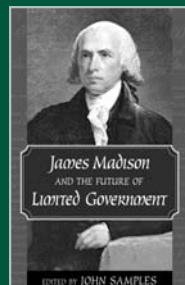
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