

FREE KNOWLEDGE OR FETTERED MINDS

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In June 1982 President Reagan spoke before the British Parliament. In that speech he predicted that

the march of freedom and democracy . . . will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.

In making this prediction, President Reagan challenged the totalitarian powers to engage with the free world in a "competition of ideas and values."

It is that freedom of ideas, intellectual freedom, that I have chosen as the topic of my presentation here today. It will be my contention that any efforts by totalitarian states to suppress ideas will be self-defeating anyway, because for three reasons it cannot work. The first reason is that it cannot be made to last long enough to effect permanent change. The second is that it stunts the growth of the state, making it less able to compete with the free world. And third is that it allows government without wisdom, which is also less able to compete on the world scene. I will discuss these three contentions in order.

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1. Suppression of the Intellect Cannot Last

My first contention then is that no effort to suppress the intellect of a people will last long enough to accomplish change. Three times during my life time, small ruling elites have resorted to heavy repression in their efforts to recast history into accord with their preferences. Anxious to preserve and enhance their power, yet lacking faith in the persuasive capability of their own arguments alone to win out in a free "competition of ideas and values," they have resorted to repression to silence the voices of dissent. In each of these three cases, they have attempted to do this by purging the literature of viewpoints contrary to their own, thinking that by hiding opinion, they are changing it, and believing that by denying access to the entire human record, they are somehow altering that human record itself.

The first of these three efforts during my lifetime to stifle opposition voice was in the early period of Nazi domination in Germany.¹ In March of 1933, Adolf Hitler announced a program calling for a "thorough moral purification" of German literature. Long lists of books in classical and contemporary world literature, philosophy, history, and science were forbidden as immoral, or undesirable, or pacifist, or degenerate, or by "traitorous" authors, or liberal, or tinged of Marxism, or in some other way inimical to Hitler's vision of a new world order based upon an Aryan master race.

Less than two months later at the University of Berlin, 40,000 persons gathered one night at midnight to watch as hordes of students brought 20,000 proscribed books and burned them on a vast funeral pyre. In Kiel 2,000 books were burned, and in Breslau and Frankfurt many thousands more. Among authors whose works were thus consigned to the flames were Sigmund Freud, H. G. Wells, Lion Feuchtwanger, Thomas Mann, Emile Zola, Friedrich Engels, Upton Sinclair, Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, Marcel Proust, and Jack London.

This effort to expunge from human experience thoughts

that were distasteful to the leaders of the Nazi party continued for more than a decade, and for a time it appeared to succeed, but only in Germany and only for a time. Although suppressed in Germany, these books remained available in the free world. Indeed within a year a "German Library of Banned Books" had opened in Paris for all of the rest of mankind to see. The mischief of the great lie of German superiority, of course, totally wracked world social order, but the free marketplace of ideas eventually won out, and in 1945 the tyranny of Nazi fascism was dumped unceremoniously upon President Reagan's "ash heap of history."

Given this recent and ignominious example of the fruitlessness of such an exercise in literature control, one would expect not to see it attempted again soon. Yet within only five years after World War II, the same sorry spectacle was being repeated, this time in the Soviet Union.² Again the people were perceived by party leaders as needing protection from contaminating contact with new and counterposing ideas. Reading by citizens, it was felt, needed more than to be counselled and guided; it needed to be controlled and directed into channels supportive of the party in power.

In accord with this doctrine, the importation of much foreign literature was embargoed, and the productions of the Soviet press languished under total state scrutiny and severe censorship. When such literature came into the possession of Soviet libraries, it was kept in closed special collections, unlisted in the libraries' public catalogues, and accessible only with difficulty and at the reader's peril, if indeed accessible at all. Writers seen by the party as "enemies of the people" were persecuted, exiled and, we are told, sometimes tortured and killed.

When these throttling circumstances were relaxed following the death of Josef Stalin, however, the embarrassing admissions that were forthcoming demonstrated clearly the uselessness of attempting to tamper with the historical record in support of a political position.³ It was revealed, for example, that documents and photographs had been forged to "prove" the claim that a

Russian had constructed the first airplane in 1882, and that footnote references to non-existent sources had frequently been invented as evidence of Soviet primacy in a field. Subscribers to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, itself an official document of the USSR, were sent replacement pages to be substituted for offending texts in volumes already distributed. The page concerning Lavrenti Beria, the disgraced Soviet chief of police, was to be discarded entirely in favor of an article of equal length discussing the Bering Strait, which came adjacent to it in the Cyrillic as well as the Roman alphabet. Similar treatment was accorded to others who fell from favor, including Molotov himself and even the Chinese Communist Kao Kang, following his alleged suicide after being accused of conspiracy.

The most recent and ruthless attempt to expurgate the historical record, of course, was perpetrated on the China Mainland as part of the Cultural Revolution.⁴ This intellectual holocaust began slowly in 1963 when Chiang Ch'ing came increasingly to dominate cultural affairs, but it gained frenzied proportions in 1966 when it set out, in accord with the directive of the Central Committee, to gain "the destruction of the entire old civilization," its old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Libraries especially, with their impartial ability to serve as agents both for change and for stability, experienced the wrath of the Gang of Four and the terrorizing of the Red Guards.

Almost the entire classical book heritage of both China and the West was slated for extinction. Private and public libraries alike were ransacked and decimated, and virtually millions of books representing so-called "old culture" were relegated to the flames and garbage dumps, while others were pulped and recycled as copies of Mao's *Red Book*. Many libraries were closed entirely; others had their book purchases and periodical subscriptions suspended; still others had their staffs depleted by jailings, transfers to work farms, and persecutions of other kinds.

This was not the first time that Chinese literature had experienced such a fate. Fully 2,200 years ago, the emperor Shih

Huang-Ti likewise ordered all books to be burned,⁵ except for the imperial records and treatises in a few scientific fields. His purpose was the same as that of the Gang of Four—to rid society of the conservative influence of long memories (as recorded in books) and thereby hasten the advent of a new social order. But Shih Huang-Ti's intent was frustrated by his early death, after which a great effort was made to recover the lost books. Some that had escaped destruction were found, while others had to be reconstructed wholly or in part from memory. It simply was not possible for him so effectively to alter the human record as to substitute falsehood for truth.

In exactly the same way, and for exactly the same reason, the recent great book conflagration of the Cultural Revolution also eventually failed. Following the downfall of the Gang of Four, more than two million confiscated books were returned to their rightful owners, most libraries were reopened, and bibliographical operations were restored, although now severely handicapped by a decade of maltreatment. In short, this attempt at thought suppression through book-burning had come to its logical, foregone conclusion.

Efforts to alter the human record simply cannot work, because books outlive people. Human beings are mortal, but their thoughts, once recorded, become immortal. They outlive any regime or political system, good or bad, and for this reason any system built upon false premises is certain eventually to succumb to the unrelenting buffeting of indomitable truth. The efforts of Hitler, of Stalin, of Chiang Ch'ing and her cohorts, and of Shih Huang-Ti to recast history by rewriting the books simply cannot work because the past remains always as it was. New perceptions, new views, new interpretations are always welcome because they can help to elucidate the past, clarify it, and illuminate it, but they cannot change it. True history is absolute and unalterable.

2. Suppression of Ideas Stunts the Growth of Nations

The fulfillment of nations and of cultures, in the same way as the fulfillment of an individual, will depend to a degree upon the extent of the record of human experience that is made available to them. Indeed a biological analogy deserves to be brought into play here, because it appears that the cross-fertilization of ideas, values, and knowledge produces stronger hybrid varieties of thought than those that result from sustained self-pollination. It is not accidental that the flowering of Hellenic-Roman civilization followed the conquest of new worlds by Alexander the Great and the bringing back to the Mediterranean of alien traditions, beliefs, customs, understanding, and perceptions.

Likewise the period of great intellectual ferment in Arab scholarship came only after zealous Islamic *jihads* had sought out all corners of the world and absorbed, synthesized, and recombined the traditional knowledge of their new-found domains. It is an irony that the great European Renaissance began with the exposure of the Crusaders to this new Arab learning.

The West flourished then, of course, for five hundred years as the beneficiary of the knowledge and ideas brought back by its traders, its armies, its explorers, and its missionaries. A far greater treasure than its shiploads of gold from the Incas, and its cargoes of spices from the Moluccas, and its caravans of silks from Cathay, was the vast fund of new knowledge and comparative custom which became available to invigorate the minds of European men and women. Work in art, music, philosophy, literature, law, government, and technology were all spurred to attain greater heights through this assimilation of new and different ways of thinking and doing and perceiving.

Any state that shuts off access by its people to such a free flow of knowledge and attempts instead to feed off of itself, as it were, will suffer from intellectual inbreeding which is at least as deleterious as inbreeding in the plant and animal worlds. Its

products will prove less and less able to survive in competition with free and therefore fitter societies.

3. Thought Suppression Obstructs Wise Government

There is an old English saying that "two heads are better than one," and there is probably no place where this is truer than in governance. The entire concept of democracy is built upon the premise that the wisest government will be the government that benefits from the judgments of the widest segment of its citizens. But to be of greatest value to the state, those individual judgments must be shaped in accord with fullest understanding of the issues involved.

An informed electorate is essential to the success of any government that claims to work for the good of the people. Indeed Lenin himself understood this and insisted upon an elaborate network of libraries for the education of the Soviet people. Unfortunately, however, these libraries have thus far been used too often to indoctrinate rather to inform Soviet citizens, thus foreshortening their value in eliciting wise governments by making only part of knowledge available to them.

Governments can never be wiser than their people. James Madison, fourth President of the United States, expressed it this way: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge brings."⁶ A strong government, sustained over a long period of time, will require the participation of as many citizens as possible, as widely informed as possible. This is the meaning of the second of the Three Principles of the People—the Principle of Democracy—as conceived by that great and revered leader, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen.

CONCLUSION

Unless therefore the totalitarian states of this world do accept President Reagan's challenge to combat in the free arena of ideas, where they are sure to lose, I would contend that they will surely lose anyway, because (1) partial or un-truth cannot last as long as truth; (2) partial or un-truth stunts the development of nations; and (3) partial or un-truth permits governments to act unwisely. Thus, whether or not President Reagan's gauntlet is picked up, the tyrannies on this earth seem certainly destined for "the ash heap of history."

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