

A Democracy in Crisis: Who is Really in Control?

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Years back, an old and astute professor at the University of Washington ended a fascinating lecture to a small group of freshmen with the following contention: "Our country might find itself in a position that could force it to deprive its citizens from certain freedoms to preserve basic rights."

The political atmosphere in the United States then was hardly tense; moreover, the professor was not essentially alluding to a political topic; his argument was meant to assert an environmental concern: the government must interfere, mustering its entire legal prowess to contain human activities that have for long harmed our increasingly fragile environment; even if such intervention can theoretically be qualified as one that curbs certain freedoms, as long as by doing so, we preserve basic but fundamental rights, the right to a good life, health and collective preservation. Utilitarianism at its best; partly, I agreed.

But a question, nonetheless, lurked within and I simply couldn't wait until the following lecture to raise it. I followed him to his office. He sat in front of me, gasping for air and desperately probing the top drawer of his ailing desk for a cigarette; I hesitantly overlooked the irony and retorted: Your point made a lot of sense, but it was too generalised; what if the freedoms being denied are those of political dissent, civil rights and the like? Would any fundamental right be a worthy prize to compel such compromises?

His answer was simple: our democratic system simply wouldn't allow it.

The logic of that point was hardly new, of course; what was interesting about it, however, was its swiftness and decidedness. It contends that the country's founding fathers were farsighted and indeed remarkably sensitive to the kinds of political dilemmas that might create a situation that could provide the ruling elite the opportunity to abuse their powers. The rest of the argument is scarcely out of the ordinary: the checks and balances within the political establishment itself, the watchful eye of the media, the Bill of Rights, an educated citizenry and so forth, are more than enough to draw a well defined line that would keep America from falling into the abyss of tyranny, authoritarianism and theocracy.

A young student, trying to leave a positive impression on a progressively more irritated professor, I fabricated satisfaction and withdrew.

The February 26 issue of Newsweek however, brought that conversation back to mind. "A Man of Mystery: Richard Hohlt is the heavy hitter you've never heard of," by Michael Isikoff was not a lengthy investigation by any accounts, though it deserved to be so. It introduced a most disturbing twist to the Valerie Plame story: the CIA officer who had her identity revealed by top White House staff to punish her husband, a leading Iraq war critique Joseph

Wilson for discounting reports that the Iraqi government was endeavouring to acquire raw materials for nuclear weapons from an African source. The story was later found to be sheer concoction, but Wilson, according to the Bush administration's standards had to pay for his integrity.

The 'scoop' was made public when conservative US columnist Robert Novak revealed it in one of his columns, on July 14, 2003; more recently, according to Novak's court testimony, it was further revealed that the information was passed on to him through two top Bush administration officials: Vice-President Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby and public policy genius — until the recent Republican legislative election's defeat, of course — Karl Rove.

Leaking a name of a CIA agent to the Press is a federal crime; both Libby and Rove knew such a fact well, although the former — now being prosecuted — is still acting as if he cannot recall the exact conversation he had with the columnist during the early stages of the Iraq war. Like faithful soldiers, Libby and his associates shall do their utmost to halt the persecutors' incessant quest of finding out the original source of the leak, suspected of being Cheney himself, or even worse.

As disconcerting as this may be, a new element was adding to the unfolding drama, as delineated by Isikoff's article: "Asked by one of Libby's lawyers if he had talked about Plame with anybody else before outing her in his column, Novak said he'd discussed her with a lobbyist named Richard Hohlt. Who, the lawyer pressed, is Hohlt?"

It turned out that Hohlt is "a very good source" of Novak as both talk "everyday"; A lobbyist and a "powerbroker", Hohlt reportedly seeks little media attention, although represents such influential clients as Bristol Myers, Chevron, JPMorgan Chase and the Nuclear Energy Association (not to mention his status as a 'Super Ranger' for his remarkable fund raising talents for the Republican Party.)

According to some affiliates of the obscure lobbyist, speaking to Newsweek, Hohlt is "known as the person you can go to to try to get stuff in Novak's column." Though Novak denied the suggestion as "ridiculous," nothing else can explain the columnist's daily hunts for scoops from Hohlt. The latter is so influential in fact, that before publishing his column revealing Plame's identity, Novak "did something most journalists rarely do: he gave the lobbyist an advance copy of his column." In turn, Hohlt, passed on the copy to Rove, according to his statement made to Newsweek. The White House clique thus had advanced knowledge of the "bombshell" that was yet to come, three days later. The tripartite scandal: one that revealed, or rather further confirmed, the troubling matrimony between the state, the media and the lobbyists, is hardly an individual account of rogue elements that behaved on its own behest.

"But Hohlt's more significant role may be his leadership of a secretive social group of GOP heavy hitters and, occasionally, White House officials (including Rove and White House chief of staff Josh Bolton), who convene to smoke cigars and mull over politics," wrote Isikoff. The group's name is the Off The Record Club. Hohlt is designated as "keeper of the flame." This travesty has apparently been going on for over 15 years.

As such dirty politics is being actively pursued behind close doors — involving self-serving officials and politicians, their media beneficiaries, larger corporations, religious zealots and

the rest — one has to wonder how relevant the American people are to the democratic process in their own country, and more to how they are governed and by whom?

If I could only present these questions to my dear professor of many years ago; if he is still alive, I wonder what his answer would be. Would he contend that our system of checks and balances and the foresightedness of the founding fathers would eventually prevail over the corruption of the ruling elites and big businesses? Or would he finally admit that a nation that compromises on its freedom under false pretexts is a nation that is destined to lose its own democracy, once the greatest on earth?

Ramzy Baroud's latest book: The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronology of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is now available at Amazon.com.

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