

## [Strange Bedfellows on Egypt](#)

**Leon Hadar** February 4th, 2011

If the debate in Washington over the Iraq War had made for strange political bedfellows, during the current discourse over the Egypt crisis the bedfellows are looking really weird.

In the run up to the U.S. “liberation” of Mesopotamia the romance between the neocons (American Enterprise Institute/*Weekly Standard*) and the liberal imperialists the Brookings Institution/*New Republic*) — consummating their relationship while doing nation building on the banks of the Euphrates — was all the rage. You may recall that the bed (aka the Freedom Agenda) that our odd couple was sharing crashed to the floor of Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and the rest of the Middle East.

In fact, some neocons and imperialiberals were beginning to have second thoughts about their great Mideast misadventure. Those Arabs failed to appreciate all generosity and goodwill – not to mention the death and destruction — that America was willing to bestow on them. And when given a chance to vote, they disappointed us by electing all the wrong people.

A huge neoconservative crackup followed while the empire-seeking liberals seemed to be losing their momentum in the second term of the Bush presidency. And it was not surprising that the idea of making the Middle East safe for democracy was not making the creative juices of foreign policy junkies flow anymore. A Realist Moment seemed to be reigning in Washington.

Well, at least until Egypt started to unravel and now once again, the notion that America has the obligation and the right to drive change in the Middle East is bringing together neoconservatives and estranged neoconservatives, pro-Iraq-invasion liberals who had apologized for their sins, and even anti-neocon liberals who seem to be joining the ranks of those who insist that Washington can and should “do something” to help build democracy in Egypt.

Hence, Francis Fukuyama, whose own breakup with the neoconservative movement over Iraq was compared to Arthur Koestler’s historic split with the Communist Party – and who only recently praised China’s command system for its fast response to problems and argued that it was wrong to say democracy is the only path forward – [is now lauding](#) the Egyptian demonstrators for their desire for freedom and for wanting “to join the rest of the world and not cut themselves off from it.”

And after reading what Elliot Abrams, a former deputy national security adviser to President George W. Bush, has to say on the topic, you could almost imagine this self-professed pro-Israeli professional being glued 24/7 to *Al Jazeera*’s live reports from Tahrir Square.

In a way, it was Abrams who seemed to be setting the tone for the renewed alliance between the democracy promoters on the political right and the left, by suggesting that his boss' view that democracy could and should be brought to the Arab World was correct. [Writing in \*The Washington Post\*](#), Abrams stated that Bush believed the region was long overdue for a democratic awakening similar to that which had swept Eastern Europe in the 1990s.

“The massive and violent demonstrations underway in Egypt, the smaller ones in Jordan and Yemen, and the recent revolt in Tunisia... are exploding, once and for all, the myth of Arab exceptionalism,” Abrams wrote. “Arab nations, too, yearn to throw off the secret police, to read a newspaper that the Ministry of Information has not censored and to vote in free elections,” he stressed. The revolt in Tunisia, the gigantic wave of demonstrations in Egypt and the more recent marches in Yemen “all make clear that Bush had it right – and that the Obama administration’s with the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal* echoing this criticism a few days But the revolt in Tunisia, the gigantic wave of demonstrations in Egypt and the more recent marches in Yemen “all make clear that Bush had it right – and that the Obama administration’s abandonment of this mind-set is nothing short of a tragedy,” he concluded. And the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal* concurred, declaring that the crisis in Egypt marked the collapse of Realism as an approach to managing U.S. foreign policy. “Are we all neocons now?” asked Max Boot on the *Commentary* blog, arguing once again that President Bush was right in pushing his “Freedom Agenda” for the Middle East.

Abrams’ narrative seemed to have placed the many liberals, including ex-opponents of the Iraq War who have been extolling the Egypt uprising as a replay of the 1989 liberal democratic revolution in Eastern Europe, on the defensive. Is it possible that their resistance to the inclusion of Bush’s crusade for democracy in Iraq and the Broader Middle East was a reflection of nothing more than their hatred towards the former president and their Republicans?

Trying to resolve this cognitive dissonance, liberal critics of the Bush era’s Freedom Agenda explain, as columnist [Maureen Dowd has done recently in \*The New York Times\*](#) that Bush “meant well when he tried to start a domino effect of democracy in the Middle East and end the awful hypocrisy of America coddling autocratic rulers.” But that “the way he went about it was naïve and wrong.” The idea was great. The strategy to implement it was wrong. She even relies on Robert Kagan for suggesting that the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East should be re-energized.

“There’s no way for us to go through the long evolution of history without allowing Islamists to participate in democratic society,” according to Kagan, who not long ago and by using the same kind of mix of the bombastic and the banal was assuring Americans that the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the U.S. invasion of Iraq was going to remake the Middle East along the lines of American values and in accordance with U.S. interests. “What are we going to do — support dictators for the rest of eternity because we don’t want Islamists taking their share of some political system in the Middle East?” so says Kagan. “We’ve got to put our money where our mouth is.”

Kagan is wrong and Bush was wrong. The former president's Freedom Agenda proved to be nothing more than wishful thinking and when he tried to implement it, the fantasy turned to be a nightmare. Bush not only failed to promote American liberal democratic values in the Middle East. His policies ended up strengthening the hands of those forces in the Middle East who reject these values and whose policies also run contrary to U.S. national interests. (And let us not forget that the invasion of Iraq was carried in the name of protecting U.S. interests – getting rid of Saddam's WMD's. There was never any public or Congressional support for using American resources to 'democratize' the Middle East).

Indeed, when the leaders of Shiism International will be celebrating their great success in remaking the Middle East twenty years from now, my guess is that W's picture will be hanging next to that of Khomeini: The secular Arab-Sunni minority that had ruled Iraq was replaced with a government elected in open election by the Arab-Shiite majority that is Islamist and has close ties to Iran – and includes the anti-American followers of Muqtada al-Sadr.

In other parts of the Middle East, the Freedom Agenda forced the Syrians, led by the secular Ba'ath to withdraw its troops from Lebanon – and through open election created the conditions for the electoral wins of the Hizbollah movement whose leaders have just gotten rid of a pro-American PM and replaced him with their own candidate. And then there was another case of open election in Palestine which brought to power Hamas — strategic partner of Iran and the ideological ally of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Can someone explain to me how a policy that helped shift the balance of power in the Persian Gulf and the Levant helped advance U.S. interests? Or how the strengthening of the power of political movements who discriminate against women, Christians, Jews, and gays helped promote democracy and liberalism in the Middle East? (And I'm not even bringing in the issue of the human and financial costs of these policies).

And here is another question: Does anyone really believe that the Bush and Obama Administrations could have done anything by way of "democracy promotion" in the last ten years that could have transformed the social and political realities in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East into a version of Poland and Eastern Europe in 1989? If anything, the position that the U.S. is not occupying in the Middle East is akin to that of the former Soviet Union in pre-1989 Eastern Europe. Gorbachev had decided to respond to the uprising in Poland and elsewhere by withdrawing Soviet troops from the region. He was trying to manage a cost-effective retreat of the Soviets from there, a process that failed to ignite any pro-Russian sentiments there.

Are Kagan and Company willing to contemplate a similar scenario in Egypt and the Middle East – launching a process of U.S. disengagement from the region and of bringing to an end the Pax Americana we have been trying to impose there since 1991 – and allowing the elites and the peoples there to decide their own future – which, if one considers the way freedom evolved in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine – will probably not

bode well for American influence and (note to liberals) to liberal-democratic values? I didn't think so.