

## REVIEW ESSAY

*The Case for Democracy:  
The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*

by Natan Sharansky with Ron Dermer  
PublicAffairs Books (2004). 303 pp. \$26.95

REVIEWED BY M. D. J. MORGAN

During the Cold War, scholars of international politics spent reams of paper trying to explain when and why states went to war. The results of these investigations were typically quantitative studies that attempted to isolate the conditions—military spending or population size, for example—that caused one country to attack another. Unsatisfied with these questions, some writers turned these studies on their heads, asking not what factors produced war, but rather which produced peace. This approach led to what is known as democratic peace theory, which says, in its simplest form, that democracies do not fight one another. Given the popular preference for peace over war, democratic leaders know that their electorates will remove them from office if they drag their countries into unjustified conflicts. The fundamental desire of such leaders to hold onto power means that they will never go to war except in self-defense. By this logic, the more democracies there are, the more peaceful the world will be.

Natan Sharansky, a Soviet dissident turned Israeli cabinet minister, is an evident fan of this argument, which lies at the heart of his book, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*. His aim is to assemble a bulletproof case not just for supporting democracy but also for actively attempting to spread it around the world. The book endeavors to toughen up democratic peace theory, make it palatable beyond liberal campuses, and change it from a descriptive model into a prescriptive one. Sharansky's central claim is that every democratic state ought to make the spread of democracy its top foreign policy priority on both pragmatic and idealistic grounds. President Bush and his team of speechwriters seized this idea and put it at the very heart of his second inaugural address,

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M.D.J. MORGAN

offering Sharansky membership in that small and lucky club of political writers whose ideas are actually taken seriously by policymakers. This fact alone makes the book impossible to ignore.

In his first few chapters, Sharansky rehashes familiar arguments about why democracies inherently prefer peace to war and why the principles of democracy have undeniable appeal to all of humanity, regardless of culture or history. His unacknowledged kinship with such writers as Francis Fukuyama and Fareed Zakaria on this point is obvious, though his argument lacks Fukuyama's grasp of philosophy and Zakaria's attention to history. But Sharansky is uninterested in subtle theoretical debates and sticky issues. He plunges forward, shouting his convictions as loudly and starkly as possible. In this vein, he lays out his much-discussed "town square test," asserting that only two kinds of polity are possible—one based on freedom and one based on fear. In the first, one can proclaim one's political beliefs without repercussion. In the second, the state forbids and punishes any ideas that do not cleave to the official ideology.

This self-described black-and-white view of the world is, for Sharansky, the chief prerequisite for a just view of the world. Unless one can draw the proper distinction between the states that fall into the free camp and those that fall into the fear camp, one lacks "moral clarity," a term which Sharansky uses repeatedly and with relish. To him, moral clarity suggests willpower, conviction, and justice. To have moral clarity is to refuse to engage in difficult debates about shades of gray. According to this definition, a lack of moral clarity leads only to paralysis. The best political leaders, possessed of moral clarity, understand intuitively when tough measures are necessary. They do not hesitate to act.

Sharansky's implicit goal is to blend the idealism of those who champion democracy and human rights with the pragmatism of those who claim national security must be the chief objective of any government. If spreading democracy makes the world safer and if moral clarity is required to spread democracy, he argues, then idealistic and pragmatic goals become one and the same. This is a seductive line of thinking, since it offers realists the means to respond to long-standing charges of amorality and makes it possible for idealists to claim that they are hardheaded and practical after all. This is the creed of the passionate moderate—tough yet thoughtful, aggressive yet sensitive. Within the American political tradition, the conviction blends

Wilsonian and Jacksonian elements in a synthesis perhaps best personified in the two Roosevelts: Theodore, the radical conservative (or conservative radical); and Franklin, the renegade Wilsonian.

Sharansky speedily applies these philosophical arguments to the contemporary situation, making this book a polemic as much as it is a work of political theory. The unspoken agenda here is to turn the spotlight away from a war against Islamism and toward a war for democracy. Given his claims that democracy is an automatic harbinger of peace and that all acts of terror are the products of repressive political systems rather than of ideology, it makes sense to conclude that focusing on problems within the Islamic world is to grab the wrong end of the stick. It is not Islamism that causes a lack of democracy, but rather a lack of democracy that causes Islamism and, therefore, Islamic terrorism. This makes for particularly useful and universalist policy prescriptions. Don't worry about the intricacies of Arab culture, Sharansky writes, since in the end, they don't matter. If one is genuinely interested in putting an end to terrorism and threats to international peace, focus instead on building democracy across the Middle East—and indeed around the world—rather than on problems specific to a particular country or region.

The problems with this argument are obvious, but not necessarily fatal. At a fundamental level, Sharansky fails to address the criticisms that have been leveled at democratic peace theory since its inception. It is true, for example, that no democracy has yet attacked another, but in the grand scheme of world history, our democratic age is only just emerging. Too little time has passed to say definitively whether the concept is as good in reality as it is on paper. What's more, Sharansky reduces the causes of war and peace to the nature of the regime involved. His framework denies the possibility that culture and ideology might play some part in giving rise to international violence. How can this theory explain the origins of the Basque separatist group ETA or, for that matter, the Irish Republican Army, both of which emerged within decidedly democratic countries? What about *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's claim that "poverty of dignity" at an individual level, rather than a lack of freedom at a societal level, is the real root cause of terrorism? Sharansky seems so determined to produce a straightforward, succinct argument about the causes of terrorism and the solutions to it that, in his scramble for moral clarity, he forgets that blanket theories are usually too small to cover the messier corners of reality.

M.D.J. MORGAN

This is not to say his theory is useless. The urgency of his tone and the connections he draws between a lack of freedom and international violence make his argument particularly compelling. The theory is not comprehensive, but, unless one judges it by the strictest standards of social science, there is no reason it has to be. One cannot help but admire Sharansky's determination to fire up Western democrats and defenders of human rights who have forgotten that the liberties they champion never materialize on their own. These freedoms need to be won and they need to be defended.

It is when Sharansky tries to translate his theory into concrete policy recommendations that more serious questions arise. His analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian situation is questionable, and his prescription for dealing with it is ludicrous. He claims that Yasser Arafat turned the Palestinian territories into a classic fear society, riddled with corruption and poisoned with anti-Semitism, and that these factors in turn spawned the second Intifada. Given the illness of Palestinian society, he argues, it is naïve to accept Palestinian promises to move toward democracy and peace, since the regime has an interest in maintaining its tight grip. According to Sharansky, the only solution is to sack the entire Palestinian governing class and replace it with a new administration, "appointed by outsiders," that would slowly build the institutions of free society and even allow free elections. Only this kind of root-and-branch change can guarantee lasting peace with Israel, Sharansky says. Of course, he does not even broach the question of who would appoint this new administration, or how the Palestinian people could accept an externally imposed government as legitimate. On this question, his allegedly practical policy recommendations are mired in fantasy.

His reading of late Cold War history points toward a strategy for defending and spreading democracy that is more compelling than his calls for regime change. This strategy emerges from Sharansky's stories of his years as a Soviet dissident in the 1970s, his 1977 arrest and imprisonment, and his release nine years later. This was the era of the Helsinki Final Act, in which the Soviet Union pledged to respect the basic human rights of its citizens. Employing a strategy of linkage, the United States exploited the growing Soviet reliance on friendship with the West—especially in trade and technology—to pressure Moscow to live up to the promises made at Helsinki. By the mid-1980s, use of this leverage was yielding grudging reforms, which in turn contributed to the essentially peaceful collapse of communism across Eastern Europe.

From this account, it is possible to elaborate on what might be called the “Helsinki strategy” for the peaceful overthrow of dictators, which has three components. First, there needs to be a critical mass of dissidents willing to stick their necks out to fight for freedom. Second, there must be a critical mass of decision makers in the West willing to pursue policies to help the dissident cause. And third, these decision makers must make friendly relations with the target regime contingent upon the degree of freedom it allows its citizens. Once the West finds enough dissidents with which to ally, builds up the political will to act, and finds the right lever, it simply needs to ratchet up the pressure, gradually demanding greater reforms in exchange for ongoing cooperation. The tyrant is thus stuck on the horns of a dilemma: he can either refuse to reform, in which case the West can withdraw the cooperation he needs to stay in power, or he can meet Western demands, move slowly toward democracy, and ultimately cause the collapse of his own regime.

A strategy along these lines would not be foolproof, nor would it work in every instance. But it played an important—if not a dominant—role in ending the Cold War and remains a promising alternative to the head-on confrontation the Bush administration has pursued since the attacks of September 11, 2001, not least because the United States cannot afford another Iraq. Today, the United States does not have sufficient leverage over every dictatorship for a Helsinki strategy to work everywhere, but there is no question that the ideals of democracy and human rights played a major role in the transformations witnessed in Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Ukraine, and even Kyrgyzstan, and that they have the power to produce similar earthquakes elsewhere. The West now has a huge opportunity to capitalize on this momentum and apply Helsinki’s principles even more widely.

In the big picture, then, there is much to admire in this book. At a more detailed level, however, it is full of annoyances and oversights. The dust jacket acknowledges that Sharansky wrote the book in collaboration with Ron Dermer, which presumably means that the former was responsible for the ideas and the latter for the words. The result—as is so often the case with ghostwritten books—is banal, occasionally sloppy prose completely bereft of authorial voice. For example, a sharper editor would not have allowed the authors to use “ascribe” where “subscribe” is required, would have changed the fatuous title, and would have caught the numerous repetitive passages and anecdotes that suggest that, by chapter seven, Dermer had for-

M.D.J. MORGAN

gotten what he had written in chapter one.

Most irritating of all is the book's lack of overall coherence. It is actually three books in one: an essay on political theory, a memoir of the Soviet Union during the era of *détente*, and an analysis of the current state of Israeli-Palestinian relations. The authors make no attempt to draw substantial connections from one to the next. The reader is jerked from chapter to chapter without any sense of the book's overall trajectory. As often happens with books built on a single idea, such as Robert Kagan's *Of Paradise and Power* or Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, one cannot help but think that *The Case for Democracy* would have been better off as an extended essay in *The Atlantic* or *Foreign Affairs*.

The upshot is that Sharansky has produced an interesting and provocative book, if not a great or lasting one. His beefed-up theory of democratic peace and the rudiments of what might be expanded into a Helsinki strategy certainly deserve attention, and attention they have received, most notably from President Bush himself. These core ideas could prove very powerful tools in the coming years, not least in making the case to liberals that idealism must not be equated with pacifism, that democracy must sometimes be fought for, and that the fight is just. ■