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# Natan Sharansky Makes the Case for Democracy

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President George W. Bush is recommending a book these days, and the President's new literary interest has caught the attention of the world press. President Bush is recommending Natan Sharansky's new book, *The Case for Democracy*, and he has made frequent references to Sharansky and his book, telling audiences that Sharansky's argument represents "how I feel" and how he thinks.

This is a remarkable turn of events for both Sharansky and Bush. Natan Sharansky first gained international attention in the 1970s as he served alongside Soviet scientist Andrei Sakharov in a struggle against the repressive Communist regime. Sharansky would eventually become one of the most famous dissidents in the Soviet Union, and would spend years in the Communist gulags. Now, Sharansky serves as a minister in the Israeli government, holding a post in the cabinet of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Sharansky's transformation from Soviet prisoner to Israeli government minister frames part of the background for his new book. But Sharansky is not only looking backward at his own remarkable story, but forward to a world marked by growing democracy and expanding freedom.

Sharansky, aided by journalist Ron Dermer, has written one of the most thoughtful and interesting treatises for our times. His own liberation from the Soviet gulag came after President Ronald Reagan challenged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, warning him that "as long as you keep him and other political prisoners locked up, we will not be able to establish a relationship of trust."

Within months, Gorbachev's aspirations for a thaw in world opinion would lead him to release Sharansky, but only after attempting to package his release as part of a "spy exchange" between the East and West. The Americans would not play this game, and Sharansky was eventually set free 30 minutes before the official exchange of spies. Within hours of his release, Sharansky was in Jerusalem, warmly greeted by thousands of Israelis at the Western Wall. "In a few hours, I had ascended from hell to paradise," Sharansky recalled, "from the grim reality of evil to the fantasy world of my imagination."

Sharansky's new book arrives as at least two generations of Americans have come to maturity with little knowledge of the Cold War and the terrors it represented. Sharansky will have nothing to do with the moral relativism of the political left. Like President Bush, he describes the war between freedom and tyranny as a struggle between good and evil. When it came to the Soviet Union, Sharansky knew the evil he faced. "The evil was a totalitarian regime that had killed tens of millions of its own subjects, and ruled an empire of fear by repressing all dissent for over half a century."

From within the bowels of the tortuous Soviet prison system, Sharansky was frustrated by American liberals who served as apologists for the Soviet regime. Furthermore, he and his fellow dissidents were also frustrated by American foreign policy experts of the "realist" school, who advised successive American administrations that the Communist world must be tolerated and cajoled, rather than confronted and destroyed. The foreign policy of "containment" marked presidential administrations from Harry S. Truman to Jimmy Carter, including both Republican and Democratic presidents. Only the arrival of President Ronald Reagan changed the equation—and Reagan's refusal to accept Communism as a permanent reality changed the situation utterly.

Sharansky is not reluctant to name names. Though he offers a gesture of respect to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Sharansky criticizes Kissinger as “the foremost champion of detente” and “a devoted pupil of the realist school of foreign policy” who “immediately went to work doing what realists do: de-emphasizing the ideological and moral dimension of foreign policy.”

Sharansky and his fellow dissidents wanted merely to taste freedom, and to claim freedom on behalf of their fellow citizens. “We all wanted to live in a free society. And despite our sometimes contradictory visions of the future, the dissident experience enabled all of us to agree on what freedom meant: A society is free if people have a right to express their views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm.”

Even from within the belly of the Soviet beast, Sharansky and his fellow prisoners knew that the Soviet Union was destined to self-destruct or collapse. “A regime based on fear must maintain increasingly tight control over its population to remain in power,” Sharansky explains, “and such control inevitably triggers a process of decay. Outward signs of this decay may take some time to emerge. In fact, if a fear society is blessed with abundant natural resources, the society may prosper even when the process of internal dissolution is well underway. This is what occurred during the middle decades of the twentieth century in the Soviet Union.”

In the prisons, the inmates would communicate with each other by tapping on the walls in Morse code, or talking through toilets after the bowls had been drained of water. Reports of a collapse in the Soviet economy offered threads of hope to the beleaguered prisoners. Above all, news of the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States offered the prisoners hope. When Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the “evil empire,” the word spread rapidly through the walls and plumbing of the Soviet prisons. “The dissidents were ecstatic,” Sharansky remembers. “Finally, the leader of the free world had spoken the truth—a truth that burned inside the heart of each and every one of us.”

Armed with his experience in the Soviet gulags and his more recent years as an Israeli official, Sharansky calls the world to moral clarity and admonishes nations that they must follow a foreign policy of principle and morality, not merely of “realism” in policy.

Sharansky poses the reality like this: “The great debate of my youth has returned. Once again the world is divided between those who are prepared to confront evil and those who are willing to appease it. And once again, the question that ultimately separates members of the two camps remains this: Do you believe in the power of freedom to change the world?”

Sharansky divides the world’s nations into two categories—the free societies and the fear societies. A free society allows dissent and genuine liberty, passing what Sharansky calls the crucial “town square test.” According to this test, a society is free if its citizens can speak their minds freely in the town square without fear of arrest, harassment, or worse.

The fear societies are those nations that operate by fear and protect their own interests by intimidation, torture, or even the threat of death. “The power of a fear society is never based solely on an army and a secret police,” Sharansky argues. “As important is a regime’s ability to control what is read, said, heard, and above all, thought. This is how a regime based on fear attempts to maintain a constant pool of true believers.”

Tracing a tragic pattern of Western naivete and complicity with dictatorial regimes, Sharansky warns that a “failure to appreciate the inherent belligerency of all nondemocratic regimes results in the dangerous illusion that they can serve as reliable allies in preserving international peace and stability.” With his warning, Sharansky argues that fear societies, whether of the right or the left, cannot be trusted as allies, regardless of the admonitions of the foreign policy realists.

“Freedom’s skeptics must understand that the democracy that hates you is less dangerous than the dictator who loves you,” Sharansky asserts. “Indeed, it is the absence of democracy that represents the real threat to peace. The concept of the friendly dictator is a figment of our imagination because the internal dynamics of nondemocratic rule will always require external enemies. Today, the dictator’s enemy may be your enemy. But tomorrow, his enemy may be you.”

There can be no mistaking Sharansky’s intended point—in the context of the War on Terror, he is advising America and other Western nations that autocratic Arab regimes like the government of Saudi Arabia cannot be trusted as reliable allies. Much like the Communists in the Soviet Union, the royal house of Saudi Arabia is propped up by a regime of fear, he claims, and as such it will inevitably fall of its own weight.

During his prison years, Sharansky believed that the West must have lacked the strength to confront the Soviet reality. After his release, Sharansky found out that the problem “was not that the West lacked the power to spread freedom around the world, but that it lacked the will.”

Accordingly, Sharansky’s appreciation for President Ronald Reagan is directly attributable to Reagan’s determined refusal to accept the Soviet reality. Sharansky’s appreciation for Reagan is understandable and eloquent. “Today, it is fashionable to believe that the Soviet Union would have collapsed regardless of who sat in the White House or which policies were adopted in Washington,” Sharansky acknowledges. “In this view, Reagan was simply lucky, a man in the right place at the right time who benefited from an inexorable historical process. Nothing could be further from the truth. Had Reagan chosen to cooperate with the Soviet regime rather than compete with it, accommodate it rather than confront it, the hundreds of millions of people he helped free would still be living under tyranny.”

Similarly, Sharansky sees President George W. Bush as a man of moral clarity who is willing to risk his own political future for the cause of freedom. Shortly after the November 2, 2004 elections, Sharansky visited Condoleezza Rice’s office in the West Wing. Rice, then President Bush’s National Security Adviser, told Sharansky that she was reading his book “because the president is reading it, and it’s my job to know what the president is thinking.”

Later that afternoon, Sharansky found himself in the Oval Office, talking about his book with the president. Sharansky later recalled what he said to President Bush: “I told the president, ‘There is a great difference between politicians and dissidents. Politicians are focused on polls and the press. They are constantly making compromises. But dissidents focus on ideas. They have a message burning inside of them. They would stand up for their convictions no matter what the consequences.’ I told the president, ‘In spite of all the polls warning you that talking about spreading democracy in the Middle East might be a losing issue—despite all the critics and the resistance you faced—you kept talking about the importance of free societies and free elections. You kept explaining that democracy is for everybody. You kept saying that only democracy will truly pave the way to peace and security. You, Mr. President, are a dissident among the leaders of the free world.’”

A division of all the world’s nations into fear societies and free societies is inescapably reductionistic, but it is also a helpful exercise in moral clarity. Sharansky’s “town square test” is a common sense standard virtually all persons can understand. Free societies demonstrate and prove their commitment to freedom by allowing dissent, protecting the rights of citizens, and accepting limitations on state power. The Case for Democracy is an important book for these times, and Sharansky’s treatise on liberty and foreign policy should remind the United States and all Western nations that we cannot do business with dictators without compromising our own integrity and national security.

The saddest aspect of Sharansky’s book is his recitation of Western failures to confront Communism and defend liberty. Sadder still would be our refusal to learn the lessons of the past as America confronts the challenges of the present. Read The Case for Democracy in order to understand how the Bush administration intends to confront tyranny as it fights the War on Terror. Sharansky’s argument is honored where it matters most.

