

Abetting Democratic Revolution in the Third World

ALEXANDER P. SHINE

The contention of this article is that US policy toward the Third World in general, and counterinsurgency in particular, is fundamentally and fatally flawed because we lack a coherent vision for positive change; that development of such a vision and a concept for realizing it is possible; and that to do so would be one of the most useful things our nation could do for itself and the world.

Consider the hypothetical case of Manuel: He is 26, one of eight children, the illegitimate son of a tough, moderately wealthy planter in the western province of the country of Montegura. Energetic, intelligent, and physically active, Manuel always excelled in academics, athletics, and school politics in spite of his frequent brushes with disciplinary authorities. From his father, from his observation of the gross inequalities between the small elite and the masses of peasants in his province, and perhaps from his own persecution for being a bastard son of non-aristocratic blood, Manuel developed a strong tendency to sympathize with the underdog.

In the university he was introduced to Marxism. He was impressed by its analysis of the structural causes of oppression and injustice. He was excited by its vision of a classless society, where cooperation rather than competition reigned, service motivated instead of greed, and the people shared in the fruits of their productivity. He was encouraged and challenged by the revolutionary plan of action presented to him by the dynamic leaders of the underground Frente Democratico Popular (FDP); he was inspired by the examples of Lenin, Mao, Castro, Ché, Ho, Ortega, and in his own country the late Santiago—martyred, but not forgotten by those who were carrying on his struggle.

He attended mass at the local church only enough to abate his mother's constant nagging, but he was a regular at the Tuesday evening meetings of the Catholic Justice Society headed by the church's leading exponent of liberation theology, Father Columbo; the vision of social justice he saw at these Tuesday meetings was clearly the vision of the Church, and of its great revolutionary founder, Jesus Christ.

After graduation from the university, Manuel accepted the good offices of an FDP friend who arranged for the young idealist to study at a special school in Cuba. Manuel was quietly spirited out of Montegura and spent a year in Cuba followed by another at the Moscow Institute. His Marxist vision and enthusiasm grew. However, while in Moscow, he began to have a few nagging doubts. What he was *taught* reinforced all he was learning, but what he *observed* was not consistent with the teachings. As the oldest Marxist state in the world, the Soviet Union should have been well along in establishing the workers' paradise, but it was not. There were long lines at the food stores, the KGB was everywhere, the party bureaucrats seemed not much better than the corrupt hacks who managed the government in his own country, and many of the Soviet citizens were profoundly cynical. In fact, even the Soviet leader, while professing continued allegiance to communism, was in effect admitting that as a system it was bankrupt. Perhaps the fault lay in poor leadership, capitalist infiltration, or some weakness in the Russian people. Perhaps this was an aberration; the Marxist concept was good, but the execution was flawed—flaws which the FDP in Montegura had detected and would correct.

But perhaps, just perhaps, there was a better way.

With this possibility in mind, Manuel managed to slip into the United States. He took a few courses at George Washington University, where his quick intelligence, diligence, and intensity soon overcame his language limitations. In the course of his study, he developed a friendship with Major John Doe, US Army, who was working on a master's degree in international relations.

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The time is now. The setting is one of the innumerable little cafes in Georgetown.

Manuel: "John, I've got a couple of serious questions to ask you."

John: "Sure, buddy. Shoot. You know me, I've got an opinion on everything. Occasionally, I'm even right."

Manuel: "John, you know the situation in my country. We are a nation of extremes. The overwhelming majority of the people are poor campesinos;

Colonel Alexander P. Shine, Infantry, is Director of Global Military Strategy in the Department of Corresponding Studies at the US Army War College. He is a graduate of the US Military Academy and holds an M.A. in history from Harvard University. He served two tours in Vietnam, as senior advisor to the ARVN 52d Ranger Battalion in 1967, and as a company commander with the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division in 1969. Among his other assignments, he has served in Korea, taught history at West Point, held staff assignments with the 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell, taught military science at Wheaton College, and commanded the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry Training Brigade, at Fort Benning. His article "Theater Airlift 2010" appeared in the Winter 1988 issue of *Airpower Journal*.

malnutrition and disease are rampant; the barrios are ruled by violence, mitigated only slightly by the influence of the churches. There is virtually no middle class; economic and political power is concentrated in the hands of a few families, comprising at the most ten percent of the population. Elections are a sham, the courts are tools of the elite, and both the government and the army are shot through with corruption. For the poor there is no way out, except the drug gangs for the men or the swank brothels of San Angelino for the women. It has been this way for as long as anyone can remember. But there are rumblings of change.

“As you know, I have studied Marxism at home and abroad. The Marxists sympathize with the condition of my people and say it can and should change. They present to me a vision of a very different society, and they have a well-developed plan to bring this vision about. Yet I am troubled by what I have seen in Cuba and Russia, and what I have read since coming here. It seems that the Marxists never deliver all they promise. They do a lot for the people when they create a revolution in a country like mine, but they also seem to end up with their own form of poverty, oligarchy, and injustice. It seems that there must be a better way.

“I have three specific questions for you John:

“First, as an American giving me advice, what would be your vision for my country 10 or 20 years from now?

“Second, could you suggest a general concept of how to bring that vision about.

“And third, if you cannot answer the first two questions, is there someone I could go to in your government who could give me the answers?—Surely there is?”

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How would Major Doe answer? How would you? If he is like most of us, his answer to the question about a vision for Montegura 20 years hence would probably be an ill-defined description of a society vaguely like those of Minnesota, New Jersey, Texas, or California. His answer as to how to bring the vision about would be even more vague, the real essence of it being, “Honestly, Manuel, I haven’t got a clue.” There might be partial answers to the third question in various US and international agencies. But it is not clear that there is any place in our government where Manuel could find answers to his questions anywhere near as thorough or carefully conceived as he found in Havana or Moscow. Nor is it clear that there is sufficient recognition in Washington of the importance of developing those answers.

Consider the case of El Salvador. Certainly, if there is any country with features like Manuel’s where we should have a well-defined policy, it would be there. After all, since 1981 we have been committed to helping the government and people of El Salvador to restructure their society. This

restructuring is recognized as both a desirable end in itself, and as a means to the end of defeating a fairly mature Marxist insurgency. Yet, a marvelously frank report written by four Army Fellows and published in 1988 by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis suggests that we have few answers for the Manuels of that embattled nation. The report is primarily a reflection of information gained by extensive interviews of American military personnel who participated in US efforts in El Salvador. Note the following excerpts:

The United States provided resources not on the basis of some overall vision of success, but in response to successive and increasingly acute crises.¹

The officers we interviewed agree that the United States has yet to define clear policy objectives in El Salvador.²

Asked to describe US national objectives in El Salvador, for example, one general officer replied that the White House was hoping for "a bright shiny democracy to spring into being overnight."³

One former psyops adviser commented, "*although 'the world's premier example of democracy,' the United States 'was of little help in providing substantive, ideological advice with which to counter insurgent propaganda.'*"⁴ [italics added]

The United States has yet to grasp fully what it will take to win such a contest [for popular support] and how to go about doing it. Failure to solve that riddle will condemn Americans to recurring frustration in future small wars.⁵

The theme is repetitive and clear: although the United States is acting primarily in the role of rendering advice and assistance to the Salvadorans, we do not have a coherent idea of what we think the Salvadorans should do, nor how we think they should go about doing it. We are teachers who do not know what we are trying to teach.

The irony is of course that America really *does* have a great deal to offer philosophically, ideologically, and pragmatically to nations and peoples caught in the cycle of poverty, injustice, political corruption, and gross inequality that is often endemic in the Third World. Furthermore, what we have to offer in the long run is a far better alternative than that offered in Moscow, Havana, Beijing, or Managua. We have a superior product to sell, but we haven't taken the time and effort really to decide what the fundamental components of that product are, or how to package and market them. Meanwhile, competitors with a product that both philosophically and historically is demonstrably inferior to ours continue to peddle it around the world with carefully thought-out preparation, slick marketing, and cadres of highly trained and dedicated pitchmen.

True, there are several Third World leaders, such as Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, who recognize the advantages of our product and are trying hard

to implant it under very difficult circumstances. The jury is still out on whether they will succeed. But it seems axiomatic that their difficult task would be easier if the world's leading democracy had been able to provide them a well-considered democratic vision, a conceptual strategy to help bring that vision into being, and truly useful assistance—aside from mere dollars—in carrying out the strategy.

What, then, might be the main components of an American vision for the future of a developing nation? A carefully conceived, well-supported answer to this question should be the result of considerable research and debate. Nonetheless, the major outlines of the vision are open to at least preliminary suggestion. Given time to ponder Manuel's question, Major Doe might suggest two broad principles to guide Montegura toward the year 2010. First, the government would be firmly based on a social contract, the proposition that the people owe their fealty and support to the legally constituted government, and that in return the government will serve the people and be ultimately accountable to them. Second, the country's political, economic, and social systems would be based on a realistic view of human nature. That is, they would recognize that human beings are capable of rational thinking, and—given decent education and reasonably supportive societal structures—they can live together in relative peace and harmony; however, they are neither intellectually, psychologically, nor morally perfectible. Individually and as groups they will always be limited in their wisdom and prone toward self-centeredness in their actions. Disagreements, conflict, and competition will always be prevalent in human society, necessitating patience, tolerance, self-restraint, and compromise. Hence, any philosophy of government that offers a utopian end must be rejected as unworkable and therefore dangerous. Pluralism in politics, in the classroom, and on the streets must always be the expected and protected norm.

The foregoing principles suggest in turn a number of practical features which should be imbedded in the nation's governmental structure.

- It should be a "government of laws, not of men." Within this constitutional framework (and external to it) should be some form of checks and balances so that power is diffused. No individual or group of individuals should be able to ascend to unchallenged power.⁶ There will be no "maximum leader," nor will any group, even a majority, be unconstrained.

- It should have an objective legal system, and to protect its objectivity the judiciary should have a degree of independence from other power centers within the nation's polity.

- There should be some form of representative democracy, based upon periodic elections and peaceful transfers of power, with all adult citizens free to participate in the electoral process.

- The political, economic, educational, and social structures of the society should be designed to provide a high degree of mobility and equal opportunity. Self-perpetuating power monopolies of any kind should be resisted

so that all citizens have the opportunity to advance as far as their character, efforts, talents, and the legitimate rights of others allow.

- A considerable degree of freedom of expression should be protected as the only way to insure the free flow and flowering of ideas, and as a first line of defense against abuse of power.

- The fundamental human rights, including the basic freedom of the individual to life and personal choice, should be protected by the state.

- The state must have a coercive arm. The Marxist goal of a state with no more need for police than to manage traffic must be rejected as silly utopianism, inconsistent with human nature. However, the police and military elements of the state must be subordinate to the law and to democratically elected civilian authority.

- Some mixture of capitalism and socialism should govern the economics of the nation. "Pure" capitalism, unfettered and unmoderated, should be rejected because of its tendency to lead to concentration and exploitation; conversely, "pure" socialism should be rejected because it concentrates political and economic power together, and because of its demonstrated unresponsiveness and inefficiency (a predictable problem given the nature of man).

This listing of what might be termed the "key components of democracy" is suggestive only. The objective, however, is clear: to define those features of government that provide for a decent, civilized life for its citizens, but which are also consistent with a realistic view of human nature and history. On the surface, this may seem to Americans a simple task—"Take our Constitution, substitute Montegura for United States, and use it." But we know better; we know that not everything in our country is as it should and can be. We also know that any concept must be culturally apposite; that it must be built upon the history of the society that adopts it, and be responsive to the particular needs, habits, and enduring values of the people of that society. There are undoubtedly many different ways that government can be organized to provide for the flourishing of humane values. But this is not to deny that there *really is* a core of humane values which must be provided for by government, and that our own government poses a remarkably successful model. Thus, as citizens of this old and successful democracy, we *really do* have a vision.

Manuel's second question is tougher: "O.K., gringo, I understand what your vision for Montegura is, and I like it. It suggests the possibility of a relatively just, humane, and free society without the repression, militarism, and economic stagnation that seem to have been the lot of every Marxist state in history. Obviously, though, if we are to bring this vision to fruition, we must have a strategy for change. To use your expression, 'How do we get there from here?'"

A fundamental problem we have in answering this question is the dilemma of means versus ends. Marxism has faced this problem head-on and

decided unequivocally that the ends justify the means. We cannot come to the same conclusion, both because it is morally repugnant to us and because we recognize that means have a tendency to create, or at least mutate, their ends. But we are faced with a very difficult problem. Montegura is basically a criminal society. Like any criminal, it will seldom be reformed by kind and gentle words alone. Those who enjoy the luxuries of power in Montegura will probably not relinquish them easily, and there are habits of mind and action in all segments of society which reinforce the status quo.

It is almost inconceivable that a corrupt oligarchical society, especially one founded on disproportionate concentrations of wealth and property, could be transformed into a liberal democracy without a period of something in between.⁷ It is likely that the "in between" government would be fairly centralized, and that some of the rights which are intended in the final vision would have to be infringed on the way to attaining it.

It is also highly probable that it would be necessary, at least partially, to centralize and socialize the economy for a period of time, before it gradually could be restructured as a more balanced and efficient system. Some forced redistribution of assets would probably be necessary; years of unrestrained economic concentration, coupled with government corruption, have led to gross poverty, paralleled by great concentrations of wealth and the means to protect it. Land reform and perhaps other forms of expropriation and redistribution would be necessary to break the monopoly of resources and to establish a meaningful degree of equality of opportunity. It is not at all inconceivable that blood might be shed in the process of change.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that Montegura would fully align itself with the United States in the international arena either during or after its period of transition. In fact, if Montegura is in Latin America, it is almost certain that some gringo-busting would be included in its rhetoric and actions. Some of this would be justified, some of it would not. Nonetheless, the challenge for the United States would be to avoid overreaction, realizing that a healthy, maturing, independent but fundamentally compatible neighbor is better than a sycophantic little brother or an avowed enemy seething with resentment.

Let's face it—there is no easy solution to the problem of transforming a corrupt oligarchy into a just, liberal democracy. The best way is certainly the way the United States arrived—through a long period of evolutionary change. But in the world today, the time and patience for such evolution will seldom be available; we are much too interconnected and ideas move too rapidly. Moreover, there are many nations and individuals who make a profession of starting undemocratic revolutions whether we want them to or not.

Admittedly, the brief suggestions above fall far short of providing Manuel a detailed roadmap of how Montegura can get from here to there. They do little more than sketch in some of the issues to be considered. To do more

would be beyond both the scope of this article and the expertise of its author. Two generalizations can safely be made, however. First, any useful answer to Manuel's second question is dependent on a good answer to his first. An effective strategy starts with well-defined ends; ways and means follow. The comments from US officers in El Salvador mentioned earlier, and the experience of many veterans of the advisory efforts in Vietnam and elsewhere, strongly suggest that when advising non-democratic Third World nations, the United States is woefully lacking in a clear understanding of the ends of its advice. Second, the difficulty of developing a conceptual strategy for democratic revolution should not be grounds for giving up on the effort. It may never be possible to produce utopian formulas dressed in the trappings of economic determinism and embraced with all the dogmatic certainty and messianic fervor that the Marxists have mustered. A strategy for democratic revolution must be both more restricted in means, and more realistic about its ends, than that used by Marxists. The challenge for Americans is to decide how we can help others bring about revolutionary change where it is really needed, but to do so in ways that avoid the repression, sterility, poverty, and international trouble-making which the Marxist approach inevitably brings.

Turning now to Manuel's third question, is there anyone working on this challenge? Happily, the answer is Yes, but it is still a very diffuse, incomplete, and underfunded Yes. In recent years, a flurry of scholarly research has been directed at answering exactly the types of questions posed by the Manuels of the Third World.⁸ More encouraging, people are reading what is being written. (As Zbigniew Brzezinski said recently, "It is no longer fashionable to be a Marxist in the salons of Paris."⁹) Several US governmental agencies such as the United States Information Agency, the Agency for International Development, and the National Endowment for Democracy are aware of, and in some cases involved in, such investigations, and it is entirely fitting that they should be. To use the language of the strategists, deliberate government-supported efforts to develop and disseminate answers to Manuel's questions are applying the socio-psychological element of national power to support our national interests. However, the agencies involved in this sort of activity are seldom supported up to their potential,¹⁰ and if the experience of US military personnel in El Salvador discussed earlier is representative, then we have given insufficient attention to developing a real strategy for encouraging revolutionary democratic change.

Yet there is one final question. Why address this issue in a military journal? Isn't democratic revolution the business of statesmen, not soldiers? Perhaps that's true in theory, but it is certainly not so in practice. In many countries today the military is both the center of power and the only instrument of stability. The future leaders of these countries will often come out of the military. And if the military does not have a vision for democracy,

or is unwilling to support it, there is more than a fair probability that it will never come about. Furthermore, within even the most corrupt Third World militaries, there are some members who remain true patriots; from among these could come their George Washingtons, their Simón Bolívars. In our many military-to-military contacts, American service men and women with a thorough understanding of democracy will be key links in the formative education of people like Manuel.

It is a truism that the American military has a prominent role in what has come to be known as low-intensity conflict, and that such conflict involves a complex mixture of political, social, ideological, economic, and military factors. If we are to be effective in helping Third World countries to bring about positive change (and thereby preempt negative change), American soldiers are going to have to understand the principles of democratic revolution almost as well as American statesmen.

In Vietnam we focused much attention on "winning the hearts and minds of the people." We had the right idea, but to a degree we put the cart before the horse. We should focus more on winning the hearts and minds of idealistic and dedicated future leaders; if we can win them, *they* will win their people. Our best hope of winning these leaders must start with the development of a realistic vision of a good society, and concepts for making that vision a reality. The vision exists today, as it did in 1776—we simply need to clarify and codify it, and then adapt it to the unique situations prevailing elsewhere. Developing concepts for change is a more difficult challenge; but with hard work and a lot of assistance from the very people we would like to help, it may be that it can be done.

The United States has always been a beacon of hope to the oppressed of the world, not just as a refuge for immigrants, but as an exporter of ideas. In a revolutionary world, it is time to get serious again about exporting the ideas of democracy and freedom. It is time to help the Manuels of the world create democratic revolutions.

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Postscript: This article was begun when the dramatic events in Eastern Europe were only beginning to unfold. These events are extremely encouraging. They should not, however, lead us to conclude that the needs stressed in the article do not remain. Rather, current events should spur us even more urgently to seek to define for the Manuels of the world what the heart of democracy really is and how it might be quickened. As Marxism collapses in Europe, the appeal of Castro and Ortega is certainly shaken. But considering the problems of Latin America and other Third World regions, the status quo is not a very attractive alternative either. (Even as the Berlin Wall crumbled, the FMLN was in the streets of San Salvador. Noriega is gone, but

the work of establishing a stable democracy in Panama is just beginning.) The “window of opportunity” is wide open. Now is the time for the US political, economic, social, and military leaders to work hard to help Third World patriots to clearly define a better way.

NOTES

1. A. J. Bacevich et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988) p. 13.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

6. Research on democracy has increasingly noted the importance of extragovernmental organizations to the development and protection of democracy. Civil organizations such as labor unions, youth groups, private schools, churches, clubs, etc. both protect democracy by diffusing power and serve as schools for democracy by accustoming their members to compromise and the free flow of ideas.

7. During the course of this paper, I have assumed that in those areas of the world where revolutionary ferment is in process, the choice lies generally between the Marxist and democratic solutions. Obviously, however, there is at least in theory a third choice—to squelch the revolutionary ferment and retain the status quo, meaning in most cases that repressive rightist regimes would remain in power. As we view the long succession of rightist dictators who have fallen—Bastista, Trujillo, Somoza, Marcos, etc.—it becomes increasingly clear that the rightist solution is no solution, despite Lyndon Johnson's cynical admonition, “He may be a dictator, but at least he's *our* dictator.” The moral price that our nation as the world's preeminent exemplar of liberal democracy would pay by freely continuing to tolerate and consort with such allies is simply too great. Furthermore, change is coming to these nations, and our support for repressive governments will in the long run usually turn against us. As retired General Fred Woerner, former USCINCSOUTH, said, “American liaison with right-wing dictatorships is sometimes convenient, but that convenience is very transitory” (interview at the US Army Military History Institute, December 1989). For an excellent discussion of this subject, see Richard N. Haass, “Dealing with Friendly Tyrants,” *The National Interest* (Spring 1989), 40-48.

8. Examples include Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries*, 4 vols. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989); Gregory A. Fossedal, *The Democratic Imperative: Exporting the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1987); and Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

9. Zbigniew Brzezinski, statement at a meeting of the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C., April 1989.

10. The very limited funding for security assistance within the defense budget is well known to those involved with national security strategy. The history of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) offers another example. After a long legislative battle, a 1984 Act of Congress established the NED as a non-profit corporation, independent from the US government but funded primarily by annual grants from Congress. Its mission, simply stated, is to advance the development and maintenance of democracy around the world primarily through the spread of ideas. By making carefully considered grants to national and international groups seeking to understand and apply democratic concepts, and by bringing together those doing so for social and intellectual interchange, the NED comes closer than any other government-supported agency to dealing directly with Manuel's questions. The NED is well-managed, respected, and apparently quite effective at a time when the sudden rediscovery of democratic values around the world offers a marvelous opportunity to use ideas to foster change. However, with an appropriation in the Fiscal Year 1989 budget of only \$15.8 million, the NED is fiscally constrained far out of proportion to its potential. For additional information, see Fossedal, pp. 71-74; US General Accounting Office, *Report to Senator Malcolm Wallop: Events Leading to the Establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy* (Washington: GAO, 1984); and National Endowment for Democracy, Annual Report 1988.