The Spirit of Despotism: Understanding the Tyrant Within

by

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The Spirit of Despotism:
Understanding the Tyrant Within

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to better understand the developmental history of despotic regimes and the existence of leadership by terror. To gain greater insight into this phenomenon, the unusual relationship between leaders and followers in despotic regimes is explored, and the self-destructive cycle that characterizes such regimes is examined. The price paid in the form of human suffering and the breakdown of the moral fabric of a society is highlighted. In this article, particular attention is paid to highly intrusive totalitarian regimes. The levers used by such regimes to consolidate their power base are discussed in detail. The role of ideology, the enforcement of mind-control, the impact of the media, the inception of the illusion of solidarity, and the search for scapegoats are part of the review. Finally, suggestions are made on how to prevent despotic leaders from gaining a hold on power. Observations are made about the newly founded International Criminal Court, a permanent international judicial body that has been specially set up to try despotic rulers for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

KEY WORDS: Despotism; tyrant; leadership; totalitarianism; autocracy; tyranny; dictatorship; societal regression; democracy; paranoia; narcissism; scapegoat; ideology; mind-control; aggression; violence; sadism; terror; genocide; war; crimes against humanity; war criminal; International Criminal Court.
The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness...This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears he is a protector.
—Plato, *The Republic*

The possession of unlimited power will make a despot of almost any man. There is a possible Nero in the gentlest human creature that walks.
—Thomas Bailey, *Leaves from a Notebook*

**Introduction**

Whether we talk about autocrats, tyrants, despots, totalitarian regimes, or violent rule, the subject of terror is a contemporary problem, although this generation did not invent it. Indeed, throughout the ages, autocratic governments have been more the rule than the exception; in fact, democratic forms of government have been relatively rare. In the recent past, despots such as Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Nicolae Ceausescu, Joseph Désiré Mobutu, Kim Il-Sung, and Slobodan Milošević, replaced Caligula, Nero, Tamerlane, Vlad the Impaler, Shaka Zulu, and Ivan the Terrible; and these leaders have, themselves, been followed by the likes of Saddam Hussein, Fidel Castro, Kim Jong Il, Muammar Qaddafí, and Robert Mugabe. Although some of these leaders have been lionized as nation-builders, despite the atrocities they have committed, they stand out as examples of the kinds of horror humans can inflict on other humans, many having murdered millions. They stand as dramatic examples of how to inflict human misery and suffering. Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot in the previous century were grandmasters of bloodshed, leaving tens of millions of dead in their wake.

What makes the existence of such violent leaders particularly disturbing is that it seems so inevitable: the history of absolute, totalitarian regimes is a long one, with no apparent
beginning and no end in sight. We like to think that the world is growing more civilized, and yet the crop of potential new despotic leaders is burgeoning. The explanation is disturbing: studies of human behavior indicate that the disposition to violence exists in all of us; everyone may have a despot in his or her basement. Lord Acton’s dictum, “All power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” is truer now than ever. Humankind appears to be the only member of the animal kingdom that has the potential for mass murder, and we realize that potential with disturbing frequency. Given the psychological makeup of the human animal, we must assume that there are untold numbers of tyrants in the making among us, who will be revealed if and when the opportunity for power arises. The human tendency to lionize leaders and excuse their excesses encourages an endless line-up of new candidates for fame and glory.

The objective of this article is to better understand the developmental history of despotic regimes. Because prevention requires knowledge, and change requires insight, an understanding of the mechanics of terror can be seen as a modest step toward preventing despotic leaders and totalitarian regimes from coming to the fore. Such an understanding will help us find our way through what remains a largely unexplored domain. It will, for example, give us an insight into the unusual relationship between leaders and followers in totalitarian regimes, help us deal more effectively with potential and existing tyrants, and give us tools of prevention.

Leadership by terror can be seen as a form of leadership that achieves its ends and gains compliance through the deliberate use of violence and fear. It is the use of arbitrary power beyond the scope permitted by law, custom, and tradition. The lust for power pushes true despots beyond the boundaries of their mandate to rule, causing them to abandon respect for human rights and individual freedom, and to behave in ways that prevent others from living their lives with dignity and self-respect. In a nutshell, tyrannical leadership is the arbitrary rule by a single person who, by inducing a psychological state of extreme fear in a population, monopolizes power to his or her own advantage (unchecked by law or other restraining influences), exercising that power without restraint and, in most cases, contrary to the general good. Despots hamper justice,
the right to fair process, excellence, and the development of the human potential of a population.

**Clarifying Confusing Terminology**

In contrast to many other writers dealing with the subject, in this article the terms *dictatorship, despotism, tyranny, authoritarianism,* and *totalitarianism* will be used somewhat interchangeably. The polemics of the various nuances of these terms is not the objective of this article; classification is a topic unto itself. I will simply mention briefly that some writers have made an effort to classify non-democratic forms of government, putting at one extreme traditional, relatively benevolent authoritarian regimes, and at the other extreme, totalitarian governments of the Nazi and Soviet variety (Walter 1969; Arendt 1973; Reich 1990; Chirot 1994; Herschman and Lieb 1994; Glass 1995; Boesche 1996; Robins and Post 1997).

*Totalitarianism.* At the most dangerous extreme of the control spectrum, the term *totalitarianism* is used by these writers to refer to regimes under which a population is completely subjugated to a political system that aspires to total domination of the collective over the individual. Totalitarian regimes strive to invade and control their citizenry’s social, economic, political, and personal life. Such forms of government are typically permeated by a secular or theocratic ideology that professes a set of supreme, absolute values that are propagated by the leadership. Repression of individual rights and loyalty to that ideology are their salient characteristics. The overriding importance of ideology means that every aspect of every individual’s life is subordinate to the state. Because totalitarian governments want to transform human nature, they exercise thought-control and control moral education. In other words, repression is carried out not only against people’s *actions* but also against their *thoughts.*

Such regimes retain control only so long as the terror of totalitarianism does not ease up. Thus any objection to governmental control is viewed as a danger to the regime, a threat to its delicate equilibrium. As a result, such regimes are more likely than others to “eat their own”—that is, to do away with (by exile, imprisonment, or death) government
supporters tainted by the merest suspicion of rebellion. These regimes need the sacrifice of an endless stream of new enemies to retain their focus (Friedrich 1954; Friedrich and Brezzeinsky 1965; Arendt 1969; Arendt 1973; Boesche 1996).

**Authoritarianism.** Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, are perceived by those who make this distinction, as being less invasive. Although repression of the populace takes place, there is no intrusive ideology. Such regimes do not profess the benefits of a future utopian state; they do not seek to transform human nature. The goal of authoritarian leadership is much more mundane: retaining power. Authoritarian rulers strive to keep the riches and privileges that come with holding on to power, and they exert whatever level of repression that it takes (Boesche 1996).

Although both types of regime can be extremely brutal to political opponents, in an authoritarian state, the government’s efforts are directed primarily at those who are considered political opponents. The government lacks the desire (and often the means) to control every aspect of each individual’s life, and thus intervention in the day-to-day life of the citizenry is limited. Grounded in greed rather than ideology, authoritarian leadership does not claim to represent a specific historical destiny or possess the absolute truth; it is not in the business of creating a new type of social life or a new kind of human being. Under the guise of promising social reform, authoritarian leaders seize power only to enrich themselves and their friends, ruling with brutal terror and arbitrary force for enrichment only. The amassing of wealth, the betrayal of social reforms, the development of a military power base, and rampant paranoia are characteristics associated with authoritarianism.

In a way, totalitarianism and authoritarianism can be viewed as specific positions on a spectrum, according to the degree of mind-control enforced. Although many of the observations made in this article will refer to both positions, special attention will be given to the extreme, most intrusive position: totalitarianism.
Riding the Waves with Despots

Whenever people gather in groups, there is the potential for the abuse of power. Would-be despots are everywhere, although they thrive best in the fertile ground of tribal or nation formation. The turbulence of the formative period makes people anxious, and anxiety prompts them to look for some forms of “containment” and search for strong leadership (Bion 1959; Kets de Vries 2001). The prevalence of human anxiety explains why totalitarianism and authoritarianism have been with us since the dawn of time. The early civilizations that grew up along great rivers such as the Nile, the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Yangtze, the Yellow, and the Ganges clamored for leaders to give their public waterworks a modicum of centralized direction. A brief look at history tells us, however, that centralized leadership can easily become perverted. We see, for instance, how ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India, and the pre-Columbian Central and South American cultures positioned an absolute, often despotic ruler at the center of the ruling bureaucracy. We also observe the rise and inevitable fall of such regimes.

Much has been said and written about absolute rulers. Philosophers, in particular, have tackled this subject. Plato, for example, was one of the earliest recorded observers of tyranny. Tyranny evoked, for him, associations of disharmony and disease, and he viewed tyrants as individuals governed by out-of-control desires. According to Plato, “drunkenness, lust, and madness” differentiate the tyrant from other people. A tyrant “becomes, in reality, what he was once only occasionally in his dreams, and there’s nothing, no taboo, no murder, however terrible, from which he will shirk. His passion tyrannizes over him, a despot will be without restraint or law…” (Plato 1955, p. 348). In other words, tyrants act out in the light of day what most of us only dare to dream about at night. Plato concluded that to act on such dreams—to satisfy one’s darkest desires—leads the tyrant into an unending, spiraling cycle of desire, gratification, and more desire.

Most students of despotic regimes acknowledge the application of violence of such entities. As Niccolò Machiavelli (1966) advised, cynically, half a millennium ago, “Men must either be caressed or else annihilated.” Machiavelli, who was one of the first
statesmen to build a political science based on the study of humankind, saw no alternative
to love and violence as motivators. But tyranny goes beyond the “simple” violence of,
say, execution; it evokes images of madness and sadistic desires run amok.

The terror and violence that characterize despotic regimes take two forms: outwardly
directed and inwardly directed. Both forms often lead to mass murder and genocide.
Outwardly directed terror is used to intimidate or even exterminate enemies outside one’s
borders. Typically, enemies are viewed by despots as forces of darkness that need to be
destroyed by a force of light. They are described in derogatory terms and depicted by
tyrrannical leadership as less than human. This dehumanization makes the administration
of violence more palatable to members of the enforcement arm of the government. After
all, it is only the enemy—no more than a subspecies—upon whom violence is inflicted
(Volcan 1988).

Leadership by terror is particularly devastating when it is directed—as it often is—not
only outwardly but also inwardly. Inwardly directed terror heightens considerably the
fear and anxiety of living under despotic regimes. Using violent acts directed against the
despot’s own population, inwardly directed terror results in subjugation of the citizenry,
classification as a subspecies of one part (or multiple parts) of the population, loss of
various freedoms, and ultimately the suffocation of the mind. A reign of terror is
superimposed on the conventional systems of power and authority.

The ability to enact terror—whether against an external enemy or against one’s own
people—is viewed by many tyrannical leaders as a sign of privilege. It is seen as a special
prerogative. To despots, boundaries of acceptable behavior apply only to others. Living
in a narcissistic “soup”, having little concern for the needs of others, despots perceive few
restraints on their actions. They believe that “divine providence” (however they construe
divinity) has given them power over life and death. In other words, they believe that they
have the right to act as they do. This sense of entitlement is especially frightening when it
spreads: the specific psychology or psychopathology of a leader can become
institutionalized (as with Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Bin Laden), so that the common
people come to support the distorted and dangerous ideology articulated by the leadership (Kets de Vries 1989).

Leadership by terror succeeds only in the hands of a despot skilled at the fine art of boundary management. If, on the one hand, terror is taken to its extreme and executed too forcefully, there is soon nothing left to terrorize; the “objects” of terror are destroyed. If, on the other hand, terror is applied too lightly, it does not result in the desired compliance. Maintaining the devilish bond between the terrorized and the tyrant requires a delicate balancing act: traditional mechanisms in society need to be modified but cannot be destroyed.

Sorcerers’ Apprentices
Why is it that some societies can pass through an initial despotic phase into freedom while others become mired in despotism? What creates fertile ground for the cultivation of despotism? How does the process of despotic rule evolve?

In general, despots are leaders who take personal advantage of a chaotic situation. They tend to flourish in societies in transition. If we review historical processes, we see that the greatest despots have emerged in situations of war or class war. Consider Germany after World War I, dealing with a sense of national humiliation and a class struggle verging on civil war. Consider China, still haunted by the affront of Western powers intruding in their sovereignty, a process that started in the nineteenth century. The lingering presence of the memory of such indignities is typical of the world’s breeding grounds for tyranny. Societies in which democratic traditions and institutions are still lacking or are poorly developed, societies with weak political systems and/or an ineffective judiciary, and societies in severe economic distress, seem to be particularly vulnerable. These social conditions, especially occurring together, facilitate a power grab by a power-hungry despot. They allow such a leader, generally with the help of a gangster-like regime, to exploit the lack of organization, alienation, and bewilderment of the citizenry.
Notwithstanding the twentieth century’s much-vaunted progress in the scientific and economic realms, that period witnessed the rise of some of the most brutal and oppressive regimes in the history of humankind. Nations just emerging from colonial or communist rule seemed to be particularly vulnerable. Such nations have had institutions imposed on them—institutions not rooted in their original culture—making them susceptible to despotism. Many such examples can be seen in the history of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The proliferation of recent, new dictatorships in countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union also illustrates this vulnerability.

When formerly colonial or communist countries become independent, people generally have sky-high expectations about the future. These expectations are followed by deep disappointment once the gap is seen between hope and harsh reality. Deep contrasts between wealth and haunting poverty, both within nations and between nations, and the prevalence of corruption that is made more visible through the media, add to this state of discontent.

All the above social conditions create alienation within a society, and that alienation paves the way for tyranny. When social institutions disintegrate, and when there is little to hold on to, people are more willing to subject themselves to despotic regimes. They are more inclined to search for messiahs who promise economic and political salvation from the hardships the population is experiencing. Those individuals who are insecure and lonely are looking for a safe harbor, searching for the “containment” that they hope a strong leader offers; they are looking for a “holding environment” that will contain their existential anxiety and deal with their sense of alienation, dislocation, and aloneness (Winnicott 1975). They can find all these things in one mass movement or another. Mass movements, whatever their ideology, typically offer solidarity, an end to loneliness and anxiety, and hope for a better future.

**In Praise of Tyranny**

Niccolò Machiavelli viewed the adoption of the despot’s role as a natural phase in nation-building—one that would, of necessity, last until the nation-builder had achieved his or
her primary goals (Machiavelli 1966). Many leaders take on the role of tyrant without hesitation, but fail to temper their violence or modify their rule after they have consolidated their power base. Because of that intemperance, such countries never become societies based on the rule of law, and the populace will never have a say in how that rule of law should be applied. Unable to make the transition that Machiavelli believed possible, many of these rulers unleashed powers that they could not ultimately control.

Many political scientists share Machiavelli’s outlook that dictatorship is a transitional phase that many countries have to go through on their way to democracy. Those who support this view argue that non-democratic political configurations do not deserve the harsh condemnation they receive from democratic idealists. Like it or not, they remonstrate, simplistic Western political formulas do not suit certain societies at an early stage of development. Given the mindset of the people in these developing societies, democratic structures would turn out to be highly ineffective—worse, in the end, than a transitional tyranny. The people in these societies are simply not ready to deal with the freedom that democracy not only offers, but also demands. While acknowledging the darker side of dictatorship, these proponents are quick to point out the advantages of being ruled by an autocratic government. Although despots repress their citizens, they may also protect the population from outside dangers, reknit a society torn apart by violent upheaval, put an end to internal strife, introduce law and order, and eradicate certain forms of corruption. Some despots even create a new prosperity (or at least the illusion of prosperity) by embarking on great public works and by providing such services as schools, housing, hospitals, and roads.

What these Machiavellian proponents fail to acknowledge is the likelihood—the all-but-certainty—that autocratic leadership will turn into all-out tyranny. Positive contributions notwithstanding, the shadow side of power-based leadership almost inevitably comes to the fore. As time passes, most leaders with despotic tendencies increasingly feel entitled to do whatever they want, however inappropriate their behavior may be. As excessive narcissism raises its ugly head, feelings of entitlement sway behavior (Kets de Vries
2001). Gradually, the perks and privileges, appropriated by the ruling elite, become increasingly glaring. The leader and his henchmen engage in regressive activities, the arbitrary use of power, the grabbing of scarce resources, the repression of free will, and the violation of human rights, all of which mean misery for the populace and decline for the economy.

While dictatorships are one-way streets, democracies are two-way streets: in the latter, the people have a voice. That does not mean that democracy is perfect. Life in freedom is not always easy. After all, having choices implies having responsibilities. Moreover, democratic decision-making can be cumbersome and slow. Democratic leaders are often unwilling to bite the bullet and make unpopular but necessary decisions, because they are concerned more about being reelected than about the good of the country. Furthermore, compromise and coalition politics do not always lead to the best outcome. The latter, for example, sometimes results in a paradox of voting whereby the least attractive candidate wins the election.

And yet the alternative to democracy is not really an option. While benevolent autocracy is a theoretical possibility, rule by a solitary leader typically ends in servile obedience to authority and abuse of human rights. In contrast, democracy (though flawed) safeguards human dignity, protects individual freedoms, assures free choice, and gives people a voice in decisions that affect their destiny, allowing them to work for a better future for their children. Humankind’s desire for justice and fair play makes democracy possible. Humankind’s capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary. Given the shadow side of human behavior, we need democracy, with its many checks and balances on power, such as the judiciary, varied political parties, independent administrative bodies, a free press, and a comprehensive legal system. These elements help prevent leadership and followers alike from falling into a regressive abyss; they serve as boundaries against humankind’s excesses.

But a political system that grants fairness to all should never been taken for granted. Given the ever-present potential for individual and societal regression, democratic
practices must be continuously defended. All human beings have a darker side, a violent streak ready to erupt as circumstances dictate. Every leader, every individual, has this potential. Modern tyrants hang on to ideologies whose dogma they interpret according to their own needs, not the needs of their people. They will resort to repressive measures. By engaging in demagoguery, they will oppress their people, depriving them of freedom and hope. They will prevent them from developing their capabilities to their fullest potential. They will taint their rule with fear, misery, degradation, and poverty, and create an outwardly passive, subjugated populace, dead to critical inquiry. And, not to mention, they will eventually eat their own.

**The Despot’s Tool Box**

Beyond the obvious tool of violence, what do tyrants use to remain in power? What levers of action do they pull? What kind of “instrumentation” do they possess to stay in power? How are they able to subject a population? The answer varies, depending on the society and its circumstances, but the strongest weapon of the more despotic regime is ideology. As suggested, the resort to an intrusive ideology is what differentiates authoritarianism from its more extreme manifestation: totalitarianism.

**The Enchantment of Ideology**

To Hannah Arendt, a major aspect of the totalitarian despot’s tool box is the introduction of an ideology with supreme values—a political religion that replaces traditional religion (Arendt 1969). That ideology claims to have the answer to all-important social and historical dilemmas. To use the words of the sociologist, Robert Jay Lifton:

Behind ideological totalism lies the ever-present human quest for the omnipotent guide—for the supernatural force, political party, philosophical ideas, great leader, or precise science—that will bring ultimate solidarity to all men and eliminate the terror of death and nothingness (Lifton 1961) p. 436).
We observe how, particularly in totalitarian states, virtue and evil—the forces of light and of darkness—become bound in the state ideology, which presents the pursuit of virtue as a universally accepted ideal. Frequently, the promise is a laudable, utopian-like solution to the human condition, but the ideological goals of totalitarian systems vary. While the Soviet Union under Stalin and the People’s Republic of China under Mao Zedong sought the universal fulfillment of humankind through the establishment of a classless society, Germany under Hitler’s National Socialism attempted to establish a Thousand Year Reich based on the superiority of the so-called Aryan race. Ironically, in the process of universalizing that pursuit, despotism destroys the moral fabric of a society. Frequently, the leaders of such totalitarian entities create huge bureaucratic machines to institutionalize their allegedly virtue-based worldview. The existence of such institutions goes a long way toward creating a submissive, obedient populace that reiterates the party’s propaganda.

As has been noted, the urge to surrender to some form of idealistic belief system is most prominent in fragmented, divided societies plagued by stress and uncertainty. Although what the outside world sees of despotism is the merciless leader, the belief system that supports him is often in place before he steps up to take the reins. Alienated and frustrated intellectuals and/or theocrats in such a society are often the ones who first develop and speak of a particular vision of utopian society. They typically establish a pseudo-scientific or extremist religious base for their theories, thereby undergirding their “formula” for the perfect society. Through their convoluted ideology, they offer a form of “salvation” to a select group of true believers—those who are chosen to attain the “promised land”.

Thus, ideology is everything in totalitarian states. It serves the leader’s narcissistic fantasies, and it creates a “fusion” of leader and led. By facilitating conscious and unconscious dreams of togetherness, of shared purpose, it creates a false sense of group solidarity. Maintaining this delicate mental equilibrium implies the abdication of autonomous functioning. Thus, any attempt at individuation, at independent thinking, is seen as high treason, an attack on the state. Because individuation starts early, the family
is important as a training ground, a forum for building patterns of obedience to authority. Someone who knew no freedom in childhood is less likely to protest a lack of freedom later on.

And given the importance of early indoctrination, many totalitarian governments use preschool and later schooling to eliminate undesirable attitudes that the parents may have passed on. Some totalitarian regimes have even taken children away from their parents and raised them in communal houses. The Soviet Union, for example, experimented with communal houses in the 1920s and the 1950s. Likewise, during the war with Afghanistan during the 1980s, the Soviet government forcibly took tens of thousands of young Afghan children to the USSR to be raised away from their families. The Hitlerjugend, the Pioneers, the Komsomols, the Red Guards, and the Khmer Rouge can all be seen as tools to brainwash young people, gain their support for the prevailing ideology, and even make them spy and inform on their parents.

These ideologists paint a stark world of good and evil, truth and falsehood, and stake an absolute claim on the former. As a test that will determine their entry into the “promised land”, followers are challenged to overcome a number of obstacles posed by “nonbelievers”. These opponents are depicted, at best, as evildoers, at worst, as “sub-humans” (Erikson 1963; Des Pres 1976). The ideologists encourage their followers to fight these “evil” adversaries with whatever force is necessary. As time evolves and the group of followers grows, a political party (either established or new) embraces the ideology, with believers unquestioningly parroting its tenets. And out of that party emerges the leader, the “high priest”, who will turn vision into tyranny.

Leaders of ideology-based totalitarian states will do anything to win new converts. They want to spread their creed—but only to people “worthy” of conversion, of course. They are convinced that sharing their ideology, whether secular or theocratic, will bring enlightenment to the masses. There is a sect-like intensity to this need to convert others: the fragility of the ideology demands constant validation from others, to bolster faith in the worldview, create solidarity, and reinforce the righteousness of the cause. In contrast,
people who resist conversion threaten the ideology and make the converted uncomfortable. They remind true believers of the shakiness of their belief system, often triggering anger and violence.

Whichever party adopts the totalitarian ideology generally attempts to give the appearance of propriety. For example, it typically makes participation in politics, especially voting, compulsory. As we all know, though, in totalitarianism, the right to vote does not mean the right to choose. The only real choice is the party and the party’s leader. The lack of choice is enforced through political repression. The ruling party and its leader restrict the rights of citizens to criticize the government, the rights of opposition parties to campaign against the government, and the rights of certain groups, associations, and political parties to convene (or even exist). They try to shape the thoughts of their subjects through control of educational institutions and the media. In fact, they seek to dominate all economic and political matters, including the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the population, thereby erasing the distinction between state and society. The citizen’s duty to the state is thus the primary concern of the community, and the goal of the state is the replacement of the existing society with the utopian society depicted by the favored ideology.

Because divine authority is a particular threat, totalitarian regimes typically combine spiritual and secular guidance, gaining a monopoly on correct interpretation of both secular and religious thought. The totalitarian state’s ideology then becomes the nation’s religion, as it did in Nazi Germany, Stalin’s Russia, and Mao Zedong’s China, often claiming to represent the “general good” or the liberation of some oppressed group. Totalitarian regimes also deprive individuals of the sense of community that lateral relationships bring, severing those ties in favor of stronger ties to the state. The resulting loss of personal identity is compensated for by shared identification with the powerful leader, who has all the answers as proclaimed through his ideology.
In totalitarian-like societies, nobody has any individual rights. Every aspect of human activity is dominated by the prevailing ideology; all spheres of life are under the control of the state and its leadership. To make such total control truly effective, all legally recognized buffers between the leader and his subjects need to be eliminated. No reliable, independent, authoritative body can stand between the leader and the masses. This means that tyrants need to subvert existing institutions, particularly the judiciary, to make their control absolute. Traditional groups such as labor unions, political parties, an independent press, and other associations of any kind, need to be destroyed. Meaningful participation in a vibrant political community cannot be tolerated, though participation (or better, imprisonment!) in ideologically “correct” institutions and in front organizations is allowed, encouraged, or even mandated.

**Enforcing Mind-Control**

Under such despotic systems, ordinary people are nothing more than cogs in a merciless political machine. The leader uses the police, the military, and other specially designated henchmen to spread fear in the general population and to impose the extreme sanctions of imprisonment, internment in hospitals and camps, torture, and execution on those who oppose the government. Such is the imprimatur of a dictatorship. In the case of truly despotic regimes, the secret police often become like a state within a state, suppressing freedom in the name of law and order but holding its own actions above the law, free from accountability. As despots use a segment of the population to keep the other people under their oppression, terror gradually becomes not only a means to an end but an end in itself. In this vicious circle, those who carry out purges one day may be purged the next. The consequence is a totally cowed, subdued population.

Despotism’s total control over the armed forces and the police help ensure survival of the regime’s ideology. Typically, a terrorist-type police force and omnipresent informers monitor and enforce the despotic leader’s monopolistic control over the economy and the media. These military institutions are used to terrify the populace, ensuring that the people toe the party line—whatever prevailing theological or ideological belief system defines itself as the embodiment of goodness and light. We have all heard how the
Gestapo and the SS in Hitler’s Germany, the NKVD in Stalin’s Soviet Russia, and the Khmer Rouge in Pol Pot’s Cambodia used terror to paralyze the populace. People who protested against the limits to freedom imposed by these regimes were threatened, tortured, interned in concentration camps, and/or executed. The Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the Ministry of Interior, and the Revolutionary Guards in Iran have used similar tactics to shore up an unpopular theocratic regime; and during Saddam Hussein regime—his Special Republican Guards—maintained an iron grip on the population.

**The Role of the Media**

Distorted mass communication is a hallmark of any despotic, totalitarian regime, propagating the prevailing utopian goals and official ideologies through thought-control. Ideological propaganda and morality-education permeate such regimes. While in ancient societies the indoctrination by despots was rather crude, contemporary totalitarian leaders use modern propaganda techniques to brainwash their subjects into the “right” way of thinking, forcing a mendacious ideology down their subjects’ throats. In today’s totalitarian states, information flowing from the party is severely censored, with distorted discourse and “news-speak” sanitizing corruption and abhorrent acts. Absolutely no honest, open debate is permitted; any moral or spiritual authority, independent of the leader or contrary to party doctrine, is prohibited. Rote memorization of the party line is encouraged, and people who engage in critical inquiry or speak out against the party line are arrested, or worse. Ideological jargon and magical celebrations replace open discussion as the party and its leader engage in verbal acrobatics to hide the reality of the situation.

**The Illusion of Solidarity**

Another important element that fosters the continuation of tyranny is the isolation that despots enforce. The very idea of totalitarianism implies the breaking of lateral relationships between individuals—the original sense of community—in favor of strong ties to the state. This dissolution of the original ties between people creates helplessness, dependency, and loneliness. There are those familiar words again—the very traits that encourage people to look for a savior and to hope for salvation. It is a vicious circle:
helplessness breeds a need for strong leadership, and excessive leadership breeds helplessness.

Despots understand the psychological vulnerability of humans. They are aware that people are more easily manipulated when they feel isolated and powerless. Lacking reference points, lacking other people to exchange opinions with, isolated individuals gradually lose their common sense and their ability to think independently. Regressing to a state of passivity, they become increasingly helpless. And in that helpless state, they are open to a salvific ideology and a leader apparently endowed with superhuman, omniscient, omnipotent qualities—qualities touted by the state propaganda department. In the person of the leader, the power of the state, the people, and the ideological movement become unified.

Thus, tyrants look for ways of keeping their subjects isolated. They go to great lengths to break up traditional relationship patterns. Further, they prohibit all associations between citizenry that could lead to free debate, knowing that the loss of “voice,” the inability to speak one’s mind and talk with others who cherish similar “apostate” ideas, enhances feelings of isolation. To ensure that the populace cannot coordinate any form of political opposition, tyrants suppress or destroy all organizations and individuals that espouse views diverging from the main secular or theocratic ideology. To that end, they rely on an elaborate network of spies and informers (many of whom are happy to turn in friends and associates in the hope of saving themselves), and they use police terror to prevent lateral communication.

Having destroyed existing relationship patterns, tyrants can then transform their fragmented society so that it better achieves their purpose. They do so by replacing connectedness with magical thinking, human intimacy with the pursuit of an illusion—that same illusion that lies at the heart of the regime’s ideology. Propped up by their propaganda machine, these leaders encourage their subjects in the fantasy that they are wise, noble, kind, and understanding. They offer evidence that they are doing whatever they can to create a perfect society—one in which, according to the propaganda machine,
there will be justice for all, everyone’s needs will be met, there will be meaningful work for everyone, and hunger and poverty will be eradicated. The result, they promise persuasively, will be a just, humane society, a society in which children can grow up safely.

**The Search for Scapegoats**

Rarely do things work out that way, however. In the process of striving for their utopia, despots create injustice and misery. And whose fault is that? Well, not the tyrants’, certainly. They can always find someone else to blame. The typical tyrant might, when “learning” of an incident of cruelty or injustice, announce that he did not know of the problem; if he had, of course, he would have handled things differently. It was some key person or group that was actually responsible for people’s privations. This is a nice fairy tale, but it lacks even the smallest kernel of truth. Of course the despot is responsible. He knew exactly what was going on (or if he did not, it was because he chose not to know).

The very definition of a totalitarian state is that nothing can be done without the leader’s knowledge and say-so. If the inner circle or the military behaves cruelly, it is because he tells them to. He selects his henchmen; he dispenses orders and permission; he rewards obedient behavior. And the henchmen oblige. They follow his wishes, sometimes even exceeding his demands to show their loyalty (especially if they “identify with the aggressor”).

Because the leader sets the tone for the whole society, his unwillingness to take responsibility creates an entire culture of blame. Each henchman passes on blame to his or her underlings, who, in turn, do the same to theirs. But somewhere in that cascading blame, the responsibility has to finally come to rest. Thus, scapegoating comes into play in every tyranny, the inevitable result of dichotomous thinking. The “nonbelievers” described earlier—forces of evil (so designated by those in power)—are seen as posing a great threat to the purity of society and the well-being of “believers”, and are thus deserving of “elimination”. The Jews in Nazi Germany, the kulaks and capitalists under the Soviet regime, the educated elite in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, the non-Arab Christians and
animists in southern Sudan, and the Muslims in Kosovo were all victims of scapegoating. They were the source of all the problems their countries were experiencing.

Enemies—real or imagined—are essential to tyrannical regimes (Volcan 1988). With the help of propaganda, despots inspire intense hatred for their chosen scapegoats, creating a primitive level of commitment to the cause. In the process, they create a sense of belonging in their followers, give them a sense of purpose, and distract them from the real issues of the day. Indoctrinated by a constant stream of virulent propaganda, people become willing to inform on neighbors, friends, and family members. But there is an even uglier side to scapegoating: it has a genuine attraction to people. Violence repels most people, yes; but it also intrigues and draws them. In addition, as with participating in violent spectator sports, engaging in scapegoating is a way of overcoming one’s own fears. Violent participation is, for many, a way of dealing with their own anxiety and feelings of doubt about the regime. It is a form of insurance as well: people hope that by showing commitment to the regime and its policies of violence, they can save themselves. Even those who only stand at the sidelines are affected. Those who watch this macabre “spectator sport” are bound together by shared guilt over not putting an end to the violence.

The Ultimate Cost of Terror Within

While that may be a cultural bias, history shows irrefutably that enduring great societies are built on freedom of spirit and freedom of expression. Such freedoms cannot flourish in the absence of basic standards of morality, civic virtue, and justice for all, fairly administered. Far-reaching restrictions on freedom inevitably result in economic decline. Freedom in the economic sphere makes for individual initiative and entrepreneurship, creates employment, and helps eradicate poverty. In this way, it supports all the other freedoms. Someone with a job and three square meals a day feels freer to express his/her opinion than someone dependent on others for survival.
Totalitarian-like governments, on the other hand, with their gigantic bureaucracies, are not conducive to the spirit of entrepreneurship. Bureaucracy, corruption, and uncertainty, combined with the lack of individual freedom and human rights, sap the energy and rend the moral fabric of a country. Creating special rights for some people, as despotic regimes do, undermines individual freedom and civil rights, and thus undermines civilization itself. A government that does not hold itself accountable cannot create a foundation for economic growth. As totalitarian states mature, their practices are greater and greater obstacles to economic development. Unemployment, poverty, and hunger typically result, as in the regimes of Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, Joseph Désiré Mobutu of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. Despots, then, although they may enjoy a temporary honeymoon period, bring on economic decline.

They also destroy a country’s cultural institutions and sense of national pride. The discontent that grows in a populace around inequities and lack of freedom eventually turns even an environment of creativity and free thought into a breeding ground for the disenfranchised. In their anger and desperation, seeing enemies and conspiracies everywhere, citizens begin to commit desperate terrorist acts. Unable to touch the leader, they strike out wherever they can, destroying their own society in the process.

Once people embrace a theological or secular belief system that has no room for compassion, goodness, and hope, it is only a matter of time before violence sets in. And once violence takes hold, civilization itself is condemned. Dictatorships and totalitarian governments kill civil society. Thus, people have to combat despots before totalitarian states are established. They need to be able to dream, to envisage a better society for their children and for future generations, and to incorporate their dreams into positive goals, both individual and collective. Without meaningful work, close ties to family and friends, and reasonable hope of a positive future, people quickly become alienated. That alienation becomes universal when totalitarianism deprives people of these essential rewards, and an entire population loses its sense of humanity and compassion.
Homo Homini Lupus

All leaders are susceptible to the darker side of power. No single individual should ever be in control of an organization, community, or society. That human susceptibility to cruelty and violence turns people in high positions into villains with alarming frequency. The statement *Homo homini lupus* (“Every man is a wolf to every other man”) is all too painfully true. However admirable leaders may be when they first take the scepter, however enlightened they may be, however much they may resemble Plato’s philosopher-king, they are not exempt from the pull of psychological regression.

Perhaps the best test of a person’s character is to put him or her in a position of power. That’s the *hardest* test, certainly. Unfortunately, most leaders fail the test miserably. Even the most “normal” human being can become cruel and callous when given too much power. Power is so intoxicating, so addictive, that only the hardiest individuals can survive it without psychopathology. Even those on the receiving end of power feel its psychopathological effects: they often become dangerously overdependent.

Power and reason cannot coexist peacefully, and reason is always the loser. Excessive power blurs the senses, triggers delusional paranoia, and corrupts reality testing. And paranoiacs do not take their delusions lightly. Many a reign has been steeped in the blood of enemies more *perceived* than *real*; many a ruler, from Roman emperors to modern despots, has been more *executioner* than *diplomat*. And in every case, those who are carried away by power eventually self-destruct—but not before sacrificing countless victims on the altar of their ambitions.

The history of many despotic regimes are a string of cautionary tales, reminding us that every culture needs to build and maintain strong checks and balances against the abuse of power. Without these safeguards, any regime, no matter how benign, can give way to despotic rule. Thus power retained should always be a check to power conferred.
The Need for Countervailing Powers

Democracy requires well-entrenched social systems of checks and balances that protect against the destructive potential that lies dormant in humankind. Only political diversity, a well-established legal code, and freedom of expression and economy can ensure democratic rule. But these things alone are not sufficient. In addition, individuals must have a civilized personal code of conduct and endorse a civic mindset that supports democratic social structures. In other words, the populace has to internalize a civic culture that protects against the abuse of power. That internalization comes from learning the fundamentals of democratic government at home and in school, seeing democratic government at work in daily life, witnessing open and honest elections, and hearing respected adults support human rights (and question authority when it restricts those rights). Only through the combination of supportive social structures and an internalized civic culture can the relinquishing of power follow the assumption of power.

It is bad enough when a regular guy becomes intoxicated by power (as victims of child abuse can attest). But when that intoxication strikes a national leader—someone reading his or her lines on a world stage—the consequences can be devastating. The paranoia that such intoxication spawns makes despots trigger-happy: fearing that others are seeking to overthrow them, they resort to what psychologists call “protective reaction”—that is, they take the aggressive initiative, attacking before they can be attacked. If their protective reaction gains a base in reality (if, for example, dissidents from their own regime form an alliance with external forces), it is as if oil has been thrown on their paranoid fire. Even when paranoia does not argue for war, despots are motivated into combat by the sense of purpose and solidarity it gives the people, and the distraction it offers from the despot’s own misdeeds.

What makes despots so dangerous for the world community is not so much their tendency toward violence as the ease with which that tendency can be indulged. Starting a war—engaging in any form of violence, for that matter—is so much easier for despots than for democratic leaders. Despots do not need to ask permission from various executive and legislative bodies. Despots do not have to convince the populace. The most they have to
do—if that—is to get an official-sounding agency to rubber-stamp their war effort. They have the power to do pretty much as they wish.

It goes without saying that wars come at an incredible price in human suffering for the citizens involved. But the visible costs of war—death of soldiers and civilians, homelessness, privation, economic disaster—are only the tip of the iceberg. There are hidden effects of war that can take generations to rebuild—for example, the loss of self-respect and national pride, and the obliteration of culture and creativity. These desolating consequences are a persuasive argument for humankind to rid the world of dictatorships—even if, paradoxically, it takes war to do so. If the cause is just, it is much better to have a short, preventive war than years of stretched-out agony. Certain regimes are so corrupt and destructive that they have to be restrained, no matter what.

Rare is the despot who dies peacefully in bed of old age. Just as despots are the instigators of war, so are they often its victims. After a career of villany and deception, many despots are brought down, regime in tow, by victors in battle. Others survive a losing war only to be brought down by segments of their own population who, seeing the devastation that accompanied defeat, decide that enough is enough and mount a successful insurrection.

Sometimes, what brings a despot to ruin is rot within the regime. The idealism that flourished when the regime was first put in place gradually becomes cynicism as the ideals lose their meaning. Those true believers who once fought for an ideal now fight only for the perks that loyalty brings. The lure of those perks is strong: in a society built on favoritism, corruption is inevitable. And with the onset of corruption, the regime loses two of its most powerful sources of control: moral authority and political legitimacy. Furthermore, corruption breeds dissension among the exploited masses, who nurture thoughts of revolution as the only answer to their disenfranchisement.

A good illustration of a regime brought down by inner rot is the decades-long reign of despot, Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania. His secret police, known as the Securitate,
maintained rigid controls over free speech and the media, tolerating no internal opposition. He encouraged an extensive personality cult and appointed his wife, Elena, and some members of his family to high posts in the government. His regime, despite the glowing promises of the early years, was marked by disastrous economic schemes that led to great suffering for the populace. Over time, his regime became increasingly repressive and corrupt. After years of agony, that regime finally collapsed. The catalyst was his order, given to his security forces, to fire on antigovernment demonstrators. A December 1989 uprising of the people, in which the army participated, led to his arrest, his trial and sentencing (by a hastily assembled military tribunal), and his execution. His wife and other key figures were also put to death.

Deterring Terror
The execution of Nicolae Ceausescu is a rare exception; few despots are ever held accountable for their evil acts. The tragic paradox of history is that those individuals who murder one person are more likely to be brought to justice than those who plot the genocide of millions. Despots who commit crimes against humanity far too often go into quiet retirement rather than being brought to justice. A small sampling of the many examples available:

- More than nine thousand people disappeared during the “Dirty War” in Argentina that started at the end of the 1970s, to end at the beginning of the 1980s. The perpetrators are living happily ever after.
- Syria’s late dictator, Hafez al-Assad, also had a happy ending to his life, although he ordered the death of at least ten thousand people in the city of Hama after an insurrection, and then bulldozed over the city.
- The late North Korean dictator, Kim Il-Sung, who kept a tight rein on his totalitarian state, advocated what he called a self-reliance policy. The net effect? He caused the starvation of millions of his people. He also lived happily ever after, and died peacefully in his bed.
- Few people recall the holocaust inflicted by the Ottoman Empire on Armenians in 1915, although more than a million people died. Nobody was ever held
accountable for this “troublesome” mass murder. In fact, the Turks never even acknowledged that it happened.

This pattern of denial is changing, however. Since the milestone International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1946, where war crimes and crimes against humanity were prosecuted, the world has been taking increasing notice of despots. That tribunal, and the subsequent tribunal in Tokyo (which reviewed war crimes committed by the command of the Japanese Imperial Army), established a precedent for holding the leader of a country accountable for crimes committed by that country. Unfortunately, these trials did not lead to the establishment of a permanent international court that would be specially empowered to deal with crimes against humanity. In the decades just after these two large tribunals, the prosecution of war criminals lessened significantly again—most likely due to the effects of the Cold War—and power politics froze meaningful decision-making. During (and because of) this passivity, Pol Pot, a criminal responsible for the deaths of over two million Cambodians, was never brought to justice.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, however, the United Nations has been taking a more active position against despots. Shamed into action by the tragic events in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the Security Council established two specialized ad hoc tribunals. The first, the International Criminal Tribunal, set up in The Hague, began by bringing to justice the instigators of various crimes against humanity in Yugoslavia, convicting a number of the key players, the most important one being Slobodan Milošević. Similar steps were then taken to bring to justice the people responsible for the genocide in Rwanda. The second International Criminal Tribunal, convened in Arusha, sentenced Jean Kambanda, former prime minister of Rwanda, to life imprisonment (the harshest penalty available) for supporting and promoting the massacre of some eight hundred thousand Tutsis, when the Hutus briefly held power. Though these results have been encouraging, even more needs to be done. This means that the serious political, practical, linguistic, and financial difficulties presented by the international tribunals need to be overcome, and without delay.
Difficulties notwithstanding, these tribunal convictions—further milestones in the effort to bring high-level perpetrators of crimes against humanity to justice—are a warning to dictators everywhere that the world is changing and that they can no longer expect to escape consequences. Another positive step is the willingness of many national courts to bring charges against dictators. The court in Chile, for example, acted against Augusto Pinochet, former president of that country, for human rights abuses that occurred during a period when many members of the political opposition disappeared. The same is now happening in Iraq, where his fellow citizens will judge Saddam Hussein. Such indictments are a signal by and to the world community that nobody stands above the law.

These changing attitudes toward instigators of crimes against humanity, including mass murder and the repression of various freedoms, have led to open discussion on what more could be done to prevent a despot’s genocide. The United Nations, accused by many of doing too little too late in both former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, entered that discussion with serious soul-searching concerning its proper role in the twenty-first century. One of the primary objectives of the United Nations is securing universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals throughout the world. Its reluctance to intervene against war crimes and other crimes against humanity—to halt them immediately, rather than condemn them later—has come to haunt the institution. Many politicians and military strategists believe that if the UN had taken preventive action in hot spots around the world, considerable violence could have been avoided, millions of lives could have been saved, and many countries could have avoided political and economic ruin.

Such discussions have contributed to a greater preparedness on the part of the UN and the world community generally to deal with situations of tyranny. The world community today is reluctant to turn a blind eye to leaders and regimes that engage in civil war, mass murder, ideological intolerance, and murderous repression. The mass media have played a huge role in that shift, awakening the conscience of the world. In this day and age, atrocities are difficult to conceal. The work done by a despot’s henchmen today may be
broadcast tomorrow on CNN or BBC World News. That visual awareness of human atrocities, projected by television into billions of homes, has helped many of the world’s key decision-makers—always attuned to the pressure of their citizens—to recognize the exponential costs in human suffering of standing by as spectators. These leaders have seen that preventive action would be a bargain, in cost-benefit terms, compared to an after-the-fact salvage operation.

The lessons learned from the events in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda have made the United Nations increasingly prepared to engage in military intervention. The disastrous attacks of 9/11 were another wake-up call to the world. Those attacks, which announced that acts of terror do not honor national boundaries, succeeded in weakening the isolationist position of the United States. It is now clear to the world—and to the United States in particular—that certain regimes consider terrorism as one of their finest export products. Although we have long known that despots will not hesitate to alienate whole segments of their society, destroying their civil, civic culture in the process, it is now clear that those alienated citizens—unable to find a level playing field in their own society—will readily look for scapegoats outside. We now see that if we want to prevent further 9/11s, we have to get to the root of the problem: alienation and brutalization of any population must be stopped at all costs.

The activities of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and Iraq’s ruling elite have made it clear that sometimes the only way to get rid of despots and totalitarianism is through outside intervention. Like it or not, force is often the only way to change such regimes. In the past, the world community has been reluctant to violate any nation’s territorial integrity, believing that war should be instigated only for defensive purposes. The questions of territorial integrity and defensive war become less significant, however, if the price of inaction is the terrorization and impoverishment of an entire population, or the imprisonment or murder of opposition groups. Territorial integrity is even less an issue when a despotic regime itself ignores borders, exporting terror by threat or action.
Having just ended the bloodiest century in human history, the international community is now more prepared than before to send UN troops, or troops from specific countries, to prevent or stop civil war or mass murder fostered by despotic regimes—in other words, to take preemptive military action. The international community is also eager to build on the successes of its ad hoc tribunals by establishing, under the auspices of the United Nations, an independent International Criminal Court (ICC), a permanent international judicial body, specially set up to try individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. This body became official in 2002, when the so-called Rome Statute received adequate ratification and was “entered into force.”

Unfortunately, the United States has not been willing to ratify the treaty, fearing that US service members and officials could be brought before the court in politically motivated cases. This fear is unwarranted: the treaty stipulates that the ICC will take on only cases that national courts are demonstrably unable or unwilling to prosecute, and it includes numerous safeguards to protect against frivolous or unwarranted prosecutions.

The ICC will have a much wider jurisdiction than the earlier tribunals. This international court will complement existing national judicial systems, however, stepping in only if national courts are unwilling or unable to investigate or prosecute crimes falling under the mandate of the ICC. The ICC will also help defend the rights of groups that have often had little recourse to justice, such as women and children. The establishment of such a court is more than just a symbolic move; it promises to end the impunity long enjoyed by gangster-like world leaders. It is a much-needed step in the direction of universal, global criminal justice.

The ICC will make international standards of conduct more specific, provide an important mechanism for implementation of these standards, and ensure that potential violators are brought to justice. In addition to determining the criminal responsibility of today’s despots, it is expected to serve as a strong deterrent for possible future despots. Because it will be able to investigate and begin prosecutions at an early stage, it is also expected to shorten the span of violence and hasten expedient resolution of conflict.
Furthermore, it may have a positive impact on national laws around the world, because ratifying nations will want to ensure that crimes covered by the ICC can be tried within their own borders. It is the hope of the international community that the ICC will ensure that future Hitlers, Pinochets, Pol Pots, Mengistus, Amins, Savimbis, and Mobutus will not escape justice. With the help of this new council, all despots will face a day of reckoning. Budding despots the world over had best beware.

That is the hope. Is it realistic? Will the existence of such a criminal court affect the behavior of potential despots? Will it make them less violent—or at least less determined to act out their violent disposition? Will it lead to more humanitarian nation-building? Or is it true, as many people believe, that personality is destiny? We will always have despots among us!

Winston Churchill is reputed to have said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all the other forms that have been tried. While acknowledging the imperfections of democracy, our choices seem to be limited. We need to make the best of a bad thing. From what we know about our own struggles with our inner demons, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the death of democracy is not likely to be a sudden implosion. More likely, it will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and lack of care. To save the next generation from human misery that would accompany such extinction, we should do everything in our power to prevent such a situation from coming to the fore!


