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Fareed Zakaria is an important and usually critical observer of the current Administration’s foreign policy. As editor of Newsweek International, and former editor of the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs, he has a privileged vantage point on the writings of journalists and scholars. As a regular member of the roundtable of ABC News’s Sunday news show, This Week, he provides an internationalist counterpoint to the more nationalistic commentary of George Will. In short, Zakaria’s ideas and insights matter.

Zakaria provides a world-wind and world-wide tour of political history and theory. His broad sweep reaches back to the classical Greeks and Romans through current politics in Russia, China, the Arab world, and even extends to California politics (which he cites as the US case of democracy as too much of a good thing). The book’s opening chapter provides his overall critique of the enthusiastic post-Cold War commentaries on the emergence of a new democratic wave. Instead of the initial promises of peace dividends and a world order based on democratic peace, Zakaria points out the trend towards what he terms the dark side of this period of democratic transformation. While democratic in name, many of the political forces let loose provide more chaos than freedom or democracy.

Zakaria’s purpose is to educate the reader on the broad history of democratic theory. He calls for a new balance of thinking. Zakaria’s view is that democracy, as power-down populism, in its political, economic, and even cultural manifestations, has gone too far. Instead, he argues for a return to “self control” and balanced thinking with respect to the concepts of democracy and liberty and their practical applications for governing. The book’s main purpose is to draw attention to the history of illiberal or constitutional liberalism. That is, political systems that balance individual liberty and freedom, and “illiberal” representative governing institutions. In addition to free and fair elections, illiberal governing includes the rule of law and separation of powers, as well as the basic liberal freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, and property. In short, Zakaria provides a civics lesson for his readers in the context of current events and challenges for governing institutions in all corners of the globe.

Zakaria goes beyond abstract political philosophy. He is not above tongue-in-cheek advice to Chinese leaders to read Marx and realize the inevitable clash coming between the forces of capitalism and communism. He reserves an especially blunt account of government corruption in his native India, referred to ironically as the world’s largest democracy (no model there). He notes the conflicts in “moderate” Arab states, such as Egypt, where autocrats rule with heavy hands, yet they claim, offer a better model than the alternatives. His chapter on the Islamic Exception notes the failures of Muslim theocratic governing institutions and movements in light of the forces of economic and technological globalization. He writes of the lure of Islamic fundamentalism, especially in important US regional allies, such Pakistan and Turkey, as well as in Iran, but judges that they do not provide workable alternatives for governing in the modern era.
It is doubtful that the Bin Laden’s of the world will read Zakaria’s book or take his very Western ideas to heart. Deep questions remain as to the appropriate diplomatic tools needed to inform and convince the Muslim world of the benefits of democratic governance.

At the very end of the book, in the Notes section, Zakaria points out that “This is not a work of historical scholarship.” Instead, the author intends the book as a “contribution to the debate” of value for “its ideas and argument.” Fair enough. Most international political analysts know that without legitimate governing institutions, either democratic or autocratic, chaos is the order of the day. More scholars should build on Zakaria’s ideas to develop a deep understanding of the conditions necessary for transitioning from the current flawed state of affairs to democratic government-building, if not nation-building. Hopefully, the ongoing lessons in the important work in creating governing institutions in current hot spots will be forthcoming from the pens of statesman, soldiers, and scholars alike. In the meantime, as soldiers continue to lay their lives on the line in the either “democratizing” or “ungovernable” states of Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Liberia, the intellectual community, from history and all the social sciences, should be encouraged to focus their guns on what Alexander George refers to as generic knowledge, that is, political theory for policymakers. What are scholar’s practical insights for the great debate on how to proceed in building viable, legitimate governments, especially in states without democratic traditions? In the many centuries of human experience with democratic theory and government, are there relevant insights for bridging the theory-practice gap regarding establishing democratic forms of governance in a wide variety of cultural settings?

Zakaria’s rising status, perhaps even in contention to becoming the Walter Lippmann of this generation (in competition with the likes of Thomas Friedman, Francis Fukuyama, and the many disciples of Samuel Huntington) deserves notice in the defense intellectual community. Military leaders at all stages of the professional education experience, and especially at the senior service college level, should be exposed to the ideas and arguments of international scholars such as Fareed Zakaria. Military relationships with serious opinion leaders are essential for the mutual educational processes for both groups. Zakaria’s significant book provides a sound foundation for balanced political thinking, as strategic theorists, practitioners, and leaders continue to wrestle with the thorny issues of governance in this age of globalization and terrorism and, let us hope, an age of democracy as well.

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