

Lifestyle Changes, Regime Changes

Fear doesn't work--whether it's in politics or at the breakfast table.

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Love may seem an unlikely emotion at a place like the U.S. Army War College, where generals and generals-in-training from all four branches of the military spend a year studying together. These are tough, smart men and women, the elite of the elite, the leaders of the leaders. I just returned from giving a presentation about health and wellness to the entering class there. In our conversations, a common theme emerged. They spoke about how passionately they felt in their love of our country. It's what motivates them to put their life on the line, to make huge sacrifices in their lives. It got me thinking about the relationship between regime changes and lifestyle changes, between national security and personal security.

In short, the personal and the political are one. Lessons learned in one arena may have applications in another. The conditions that allow for sustainable personal lifestyle changes are the same as those that allow for sustainable political changes: love and freedom, not fear, repression and coercion. In both arenas, fear may work in the short run but is usually counterproductive in the long term. Joy of living is a more powerful and much more sustainable motivator than fear of dying, both politically and personally.

For more than 30 years, I have directed a series of randomized controlled trials and demonstration projects showing that comprehensive lifestyle changes can prevent or even reverse the progression of coronary heart disease, prostate cancer, diabetes, hypertension, elevated cholesterol levels, obesity and other chronic conditions and can even improve how our genes are expressed. Along the way, we've learned what really motivates people to make sustainable changes in their lifestyles and in their lives.

Even more than feeling healthy, most people want to feel free and in control of their lives. Repression and coercion are not sustainable motivators. If I tell people, "Eat this and don't eat that," or "Don't smoke," they immediately want to do the opposite. It's just human nature, and it goes back to the first dietary intervention that failed--"Don't eat the apple"--and that was God talking, so we're not likely to do better than that. And no matter how well intended, if a spouse says, "Honey, you know you're not supposed to be eating that," people sometimes start to feel a little violent.

The same is true on a political level: repression and coercion are not sustainable. Of course, military strength is important, just as personal strength is important--but what we do with that power determines how sustainable and successful changes can be. Seen from this perspective, imposing democracy in Iraq is a contradiction in terms, as democracy is all about freedom. It's like sex: great when it's freely chosen, but not when it's imposed.

Love of country and fellow soldiers and family is a more powerful motivator than military might alone. In Afghanistan, a small group of rebels defeated the Soviet empire when it was a superpower. In Vietnam, a small group of Vietnamese defeated the much more well-equipped U.S. military. The Berlin wall eventually was torn down. Our country was founded by a ragtag group of visionaries who were committed to personal and political freedom and defeated the British Empire, the most powerful in the world at the time. In contrast, the Iraqi leaders did not meet secretly in 2003, draft a Declaration of Independence and invite the United States to invade their country. For the first time in U.S. history, we invaded another country without being first attacked by them. So, it's not surprising that democracy has not flowered there despite our best efforts. As the former U.S. diplomat John Brady Kiesling [wrote](#), "*Has *oderint dum metuant* ["let them hate us as long as they fear us"] really become our motto?"* Fear, repression, and coercion may temporarily work in the short run; eventually, though, people rebel, both individually and politically.

Similarly, many people try to motivate themselves and others to change their diet and lifestyle out of fear that something bad may happen if they don't. However, trying to scare people into changing doesn't work very well, at least not for long. Why not? We all know we're going to die one day--the mortality rate is still 100 percent--but who wants to think about it? Even those who have had a heart attack usually change for only a few weeks before they go back to their old patterns of living and eating if it's fear-based.

Like most parents, I would sacrifice my life to defend my wife and son in a heartbeat. Imagine how passionately we would be defending our country if we were invaded. Likewise, I have found that people will often make changes in their diet and lifestyle for the sake of their loved ones even more than for themselves. When a child says, "Mommy, Daddy, please don't smoke, I don't want you to die," it is more effective than "smoking causes lung cancer."

Both love and fear become self-fulfilling. We become what we most fear and we create what we most fear. When we torture others in the name of increasing our national security, we actually diminish it. If we declare that we have the right to invade any country unilaterally, then it should come as no surprise that countries like Iran and North Korea are accelerating the development of nuclear weapons since this is the only military deterrent to the threat of a U.S. invasion. I'm not excusing or condoning this, but it's not hard to understand.

Also, as technology for nuclear weapons becomes miniaturized, it becomes increasingly difficult to defend against. In 1997, former Russian national-security adviser Alexander Lebed made [public claims](#) about lost "suitcase nukes" following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nuclear "dirty bombs" are technologically feasible today. Even if we stop 99 percent of terrorists, it only takes one with a 10-kiloton suitcase bomb to wreak incalculable damage if it were to explode in Manhattan. And since modern terrorists exist outside of traditional nation-states, the cold-war tactics of threat of reprisal and mutual assured destruction are no longer effective.

Acting in ways that cause other countries to love us rather than to hate or fear us may be our strongest defense. If we had put the trillion dollars that the Iraq war is said to have cost to date into a 21st-century Marshall Plan, building hospitals and schools instead of destroying them, perhaps that might have been better for our national security.

Yes, I know that this may sound hopelessly naive, and I'm not advocating that we unilaterally disarm and sit around the campfire singing "Kumbaya." But those who have made the most sustainable and lasting political changes--Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, among others--have preached love and nonviolence, often at great personal sacrifice to themselves. Effective and enlightened. Love and freedom, not fear and coercion, inspire lasting transformation, both personally and politically. When we turn on the light, it drives out the darkness.

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