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Bush's Mistaken View of U.S. Democracy: Two Visions of America

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President George W. Bush's efforts to build democracy in Iraq are underpinned by a misguided view of America's own democracy. He believes that American democracy works because Americans are innately good people, believing in values of tolerance and respect for others and guided by religious faith.

In his view, Americans don't need checks and balances so much as reminders of basic American values and America's overriding moral mission to bring freedom to the world. Similarly, abuses of power, as at Abu Ghraib prison and beyond, do not represent the failure of the system, but rather the deviant behavior of a few bad people.

In a speech last month, former Vice President Al Gore articulated a very different vision of American democracy, one that derives not from the Bible but from the U.S. Constitution. The founding fathers of the United States assumed that unrestrained power is dangerous. It not only enables bad people to commit abuses; it tends to corrupt ordinary, generally decent people. As James Madison said in the Federalist Papers: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary ... A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."

The "auxiliary precautions" decided upon were America's system of checks and balances, by which Congress, the president and the courts each check each other, as do the states and the federal government, to ensure that the power of the government is both limited and controlled.

These are not simply theoretical differences about the core of American democracy. They have profound implications for how we think about and control the role of the United States in the world.

If, in the president's view, the goodness of Americans and the nobility of our mission are self-evident, then the failure of peoples around the world to see the struggle in Iraq the same way we do means that they are "enemies of freedom." Fighters opposing American power, even if they are residents of occupied countries, do not merit the protections of international law. Institutional restraints on the exercise of power by Americans in detention centers and prisons can, in this view, safely be relaxed. Moreover, constitutional protections can be denied even to American citizens, arrested in the United States, when they are suspected of being "enemy combatants."

From James Madison's point of view, on the other hand, the abuses of Abu Ghraib would have been entirely explicable. The founding fathers, and great American leaders ever since,

understood that without institutional restraints, voluntarily followed and supported by the top leadership, such abuses are virtually inevitable. This doesn't mean that Americans are "bad" people, just that they are human -- like Iraqis, Afghans, Germans, Japanese, and every other nationality and race.

If the struggle against terrorism were to be carried out consistently with the institutional theory embedded in the U.S. Constitution, America's leaders would be well aware of the potential for abuse -- even by decent patriots. They would have ensured not only that the Constitution was upheld at home, but that the more limited protections embodied in international law would have been conscientiously applied to people living under American occupation, or otherwise within U.S. control.

Behind the debate about the conduct of the war in Iraq, and the occupation, is a larger divide -- between those Americans who believe that their unique virtues should permit them to act above the law, and those who believe that people in authority, necessarily imperfect, must be constrained by institutions and by law. Those who understand and believe in the theory of the American Constitution should reject the Bush administration's political theory of personal good and evil. We must continue to insist that the United States is a "government of laws and not of men."