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[A Revolutionary Change](#)

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Each political revolution is unique, but in all revolutions the decisive moment comes when the crowd surges and the dictator turns to his military leaders and gives the order to shoot. If the order is obeyed and the army shoots into the crowd, there's a good chance the revolution will fail and the dictator will survive, at least for a while. But if the order to shoot isn't obeyed - it's over.

With each passing year, it becomes less likely that the order to shoot will be obeyed - which means it's becoming more likely that revolutions against dictatorships will succeed. This is precisely what has already happened in Georgia and Ukraine. The question now is whether this also will happen in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iran, and in suddenly-volatile Kyrgyzstan. And will it happen - down the road a bit - in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and - still further down the road - perhaps in Russia, China and even in North Korea.

There are several reasons why the generals are growing ever more reluctant to shoot into the crowds, including the presence of television cameras and the very real fear of one day being hauled before the International Court of Justice as a war criminal. But the overriding reason why the generals are growing reluctant to shoot is this: they don't want to shoot their own children.

The Power Elite

Simply put, today's dictatorships aren't what they used to be. Back in the old days, a dictator held power by creating an elite, or by winning leadership of an elite created by his predecessors, and then keeping this elite hermetically sealed off from the population at large. Members of this elite included the political leadership, of course, but also leaders of the dictatorship's military and security services.

In the days of the Soviet Union, for example, this elite was called the *nomenklatura*, and if you were lucky enough to be a member life was good. You lived in a restricted neighborhood or housing complex whose inhabitants were also members of the *nomenklatura*, your health care was provided at private hospitals staffed by highly-trained physicians and equipped with the world's most advanced medical technologies, your children were enrolled in private schools, your family vacationed at resorts open only to *nomenklatura* families, and your wives had access

to stores barred to members of the to the general public and stocked with all sorts of goodies from beef, to caviar, to fancy faucets for the bathroom sink to household items such as babies' disposable diapers not available in local shops.

It is much the same in other dictatorships. Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq in just this way through the Ba'athist elite. Bashir Assad controls Syria through the Alawite elite, and in Saudi Arabia it's the royal family. Hosni Mubarek relies on Egypt's elite to keep control of his country. And the structure of China's elite resembles that of the Soviet Union's *nomenclatura*.

Smart dictators -- dumb ones don't last very long -- all understand the first rule of totalitarian survival: take extra-good care of the guys with the guns. After all, if push ever comes to shove, it will be the generals who actually defend the regime; who have hands-on control of the weapons and the troops to crush any revolution that might arise. That is why being a senior military officer in a dictatorship has always been a ticket to the good life - the best housing, the best medical care, the best possible education for the kids and guaranteed jobs upon graduation to secure their own membership in the elite.

And in virtually every dictatorship, smart generals take the same very clever step to protect the capital from a revolutionary mob: they bring in troops from as far away as possible. Soviet generals, for instance, used troops from non-Russian-speaking republics of the Soviet Union, such as Uzbekistan, to guard Moscow. This minimized the chances that the young soldiers who actually would be doing the shooting would know anyone in the crowd - or even understand what the demonstrators were shouting. China's generals do the same thing; when the students demonstrated in Tiananmen Square in 1989 it was soldiers whose families lived far from Beijing who drove those tanks that ran over the kids.

What's happening now is that the hermetic seal around the elite, which has been drying out for years, is finally starting to crumble.

In today's world of satellite television, the Internet and cell phones it's become impossible for even the most vicious and determined dictatorship to fully block the flow of information. George Orwell was perhaps the 20th century's most astute observer of totalitarianism, but in his great novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he had it precisely backwards when he predicted that technology would give government a monopoly on information. In fact, technology has put information beyond the control of government forever.

What Ordinary People Know

As a result, oppressed citizens of every dictatorship have a better idea than ever before about what's going on in the world. The grown-ups tend to focus on political developments and - unlike so many intellectuals here in the West - they have quickly figured out that people live better in countries whose governments combine democracy with free enterprise. And while the grown-ups grow more and more angry with their own governments, their kids are tuning-in to the emerging global culture. They know which television series are hits in the US, which rock bands top the charts in London and Tokyo, which style jeans are in this year and which are out,

and they probably know more about which Hollywood movie stars are divorcing their spouses and running off together than do any of you who are reading this essay. And, like young people everywhere, their overwhelming desire is simply to be a part of it all.

And, guess what? The children of the elite also want to be a part of the global youth culture; to watch the hit movies, listen to the coolest music, wear the right clothes. Remaining hermetically sealed off from all this, and eventually building careers in their parents' world, just isn't something that appeals to them. Rather like the children of so many American industrialists, they have no interest in joining the family business; starting work at the old man's auto-transmission factory and eventually taking it over may be the sensible thing to do, but it's also very boring. Instead, a lot of industrialists' kids want to go do their own thing - to study abroad, to travel, to pursue careers in the media or to launch their own commercial ventures.

The generals' kids are no different. They want to jump into the big world and carve out their own niches. And because this requires the Western combination of democracy and free enterprise, the dictatorship that has given them so many privileges is standing in their way. This is why so many children of the elite were right out there in the middle of the crowds we saw on television in Tbilisi and in Kiev. To his great credit Georgia's falling dictator, Eduard Shevardnadze, never gave the order to shoot, in part because he was at heart a decent man and in part because he knew the order wouldn't be obeyed. In Ukraine the order to shoot was given by Leonid Kuchma as his miserable regime started to collapse, but the generals ignored it and the revolution ran its course.

Human Factors Matter

In the intelligence business, it's always a mistake to focus exclusively on political and military issues, and to ignore the human factor. No one understood this better than President Reagan's great Director of Central Intelligence, Bill Casey. I remember one evening when we were sitting in Bill's office, putting the finishing touches on a National Intelligence Estimate projecting how the Soviet Union might respond to the increasing pressure that the U.S. was putting on the Kremlin around the world - our support for anti-communist insurgencies, installation of medium-range missiles in Western Europe to counter the Soviet SS-20s, and of course President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

"I'll bet it isn't much fun to be a member of the Politburo right now," Bill mused, leaning back in his big blue-leather chair and idly bending a paper clip back and forth. "Things really started going their way once Carter got in, and they figured by the 1980s they'd have us nailed. But it hasn't worked out that way, and the strain on these guys right now must be enormous. I bet they're dead tired after one of those six-hour Politburo meetings, and when they climb into their limos they're not thinking about how to stick it to us in Nicaragua. They're thinking about getting to their dachas and pouring themselves a drink."

It wasn't a coincidence that the Reagan strategy for winning the Cold War involved a whole range of initiatives designed explicitly to demoralize Soviet leaders and make them realize that

taking on the US would require a lot more energy than they had to give.

Now think about the generals in today's remaining dictatorships. They cannot be having much fun, or feeling very confident about the future. George W. Bush is secure in his second term, and he's made freedom around the world his personal mission. Georgia and Ukraine have had their revolutions, and Afghanistan and Iraq are moving steadily toward democracy. Crowds are surging in Lebanon, Syria looks to be in Washington's cross-hairs, and demonstrations have been taking place every day, for months, in Iran. Even little Kyrgyzstan is starting to come apart, and over in The Hague a score of Serbian generals are on trial for their lives. Throughout the world, the very idea of revolution is in the air. This is the 21st century, and ordinary people everywhere understand that the combination of democracy and free enterprise is the only thing that works. They see it, and they want it.

It would be foolish to suggest that everything has changed, and that the generals and the demonstrators will all be sitting in a circle, holding hands and singing *It's a Small, Small World*. There is still the very real possibility of horrific violence in Lebanon, Iran, or in any of the countries where trouble is brewing. But it would be even more foolish to believe that nothing has changed, and that the dictatorships that were built in the 20th century will survive for long in the 21st.

It is late at night in Damascus, or Teheran, or Cairo, or maybe even Moscow, and the general is sitting in his easy chair with his tie loosened, his shoes off and perhaps with a drink in his hand. He is exhausted, but he cannot sleep. All day he has been reading reports of growing unrest, of strikes, of demonstrations against the regime he is sworn to defend. It is getting out of hand, and sooner rather than later he will be given the order to shoot. Scenes of the resulting carnage will be played and re-played on televisions around the world - including the one in his wife's bedroom. And even if the revolution is stopped, surely it will start again before long and even more blood will flow through the streets. The general finishes his drink, turns out the lamp beside his chair, walks slowly toward his bedroom - and realizes that his two teen-agers aren't home....

Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council. His DVD on *The Siege of Western Civilization* (www.siegeofwesternciv.com) has become an international best-seller.

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