Attila to Soltan: Media Savvy and Democracy

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Attila to Soltan: Media Savvy and Democracy

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Introduction

Recent events in Iran have caught my imagination, along with the rest of the world, or at least that portion with good Internet access and Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter accounts.

The media treatments of the events raise many questions. We too often simplify the idea of “democracy” and easily confuse it with emerging characteristics of modernity, such as good Internet access, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter accounts. Such confusion can indeed lead to “foreign manipulation” such as is currently being charged by the intransigent Iranian regime. Here I discuss a much earlier meeting with Attila, a survivor of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 [1] and its influence upon my reactions to similar later events.

At the Berglund Center, we hold little sympathy with the Iranian regime. [2] I am in favor of public protests when all other avenues are closed to the oppressed; my political life as an Asianist has frequently brought me into sympathetic contact with, and sometimes participation in, student movements. As a graduate student at Berkeley, the many international student movements of
the 1960’s and 1970’s, sometimes accompanied by numbers of dead and wounded, seemed to represent a unified whole.

The Hungarian Rising

My first sense of international political events and the media came in 1956, when the entire United States watched nightly TV coverage of the Hungarian Rising. This began with student demonstrations, which led to weeks of savage fighting when Hungarian military units joined the students in an attempt to oust Soviet occupiers.

A Hungarian radio station was seized briefly, and we watched Walter Cronkite nightly as he listened intently to crackling broadcasts which, as I recall (I was twelve at the time) he interpreted for us. We also were spellbound by press photographs of “Secret Police” being dragged out of their HQ and shot, with occasional snippets of black and white film on the nightly news. The graphical highlight of the events was the destruction of the massive monument to Joseph Stalin, a sort of ur-event since repeated endlessly with the subsequent literal toppling of additional bad guys, such as, of course, Saddam Hussein. [3]

The rebels were unquestionably heroic. The plucky Hungarians held the Soviets off for weeks, and the fighting became block-by-block and house-by-house as the world watched. Although the Hungarians were defeated, they left a legend which has had significant power ever since, and I suspect, was also a learning event for government intelligence agencies all over the world studying intently the impact of the emerging international television media.

My own realization that the Hungarian events were highly mediated rather than purely factual came in the late 1980’s. My wife, Christine Richardson, and I were doing research down the Gold Rush Highway and stopped at a motel owned by a man by the name of Attila. As an Asianist, I had to pry into his ethnicity and discovered that he was a descendent of Asian invaders into Hungary. He was also a refugee from the 1956 rising. I told him what these heroic events had meant to me.

Attila angrily replied that it was the fault of the United States that virtually his entire training battalion in the Hungarian army had risen up and been killed. He said that the Voice of America (VOA) had promised guns, money, and quick international recognition. They had, he said, held out for weeks waiting for that American support, which was continually reiterated via the VOA.

Attila said that the rebels had done so well that many Soviet units had refused to fight, or fought half-heartedly. Finally, however, the Russians brought in Mongolian troops, very hard men unconcerned with freedom or democracy, and the rebels were driven steadily back.

At the bloody conclusion, the survivors of his unit occupied a semi-destroyed factory overlooking a large river. One by one his comrades’ firing positions fell silent. A friend rushed into the room where Attila was fighting and told him that Mongols were crawling through the factory in the dark, killing everybody with knives. The two chose to try to swim the river in an attempt to work
their way to the West. Attila made it across; his friend did not.

By the end of his narrative, Attila was literally punching me in the chest with a hard finger, finishing, “It was you f***ing Americans’ fault. Go away!” I slunk off to my room, but Attila left me with quite a different view of the events of 1956.

**From Budapest to Beijing**

The skepticism Attila engendered has served me well since. I was in China for the latter stages of the Tiananmen events of 1989, then in Taiwan for the savage finale. In Guilin, among Chinese friends, mostly educators, I heard a great deal of concern about the Tiananmen events. They worried that the students might be the early stages of something like the Red Guard of the Cultural Revolution which had been so destructive of their own lives and careers.

After returning to Taiwan, the day of the climactic events I heard over the English language radio station that the VOA was reporting that troops in Beijing had refused to move against the students, that Premier Li Peng had been assassinated, and that rebel units were moving against the government cloistered in the Great Hall of the People. Later, I also heard that the VOA had reported that dorms at the elite colleges in Beijing’s Wu Dao Kou district had been attacked and student bodies were hanging out windows. None of these events ever happened but all had the effect of encouraging Beijing workers and students, like the earlier doomed Hungarians, to take a stand.

The night of the events I saw news clips in Taiwan which seemed to show murky videos of Chinese soldiers moving in lock step with blazing machine guns with the cupola of the Temple of Heaven in the background. However, the scene was recognizably the Taiwan Provincial Historical Museum which had a similar cupola. I went down later and found the angle from which the films had been shot, in my opinion. The films were phony; intended, I believe, to further inflame Chinese people.

I returned from Taiwan and did the best I could to research the events in this broader context. First, I prepared to ask for VOA transcripts through a Freedom of Information Act request. I was informed that the VOA was specifically exempted by law from the Freedom of Information Act. Then I proceeded to create a very lengthy time line of events from English and Chinese national and international reports, reading everything I could find.

Finally, I decided, like some few other observers, notably Carma Hinton, who produced the very powerful revisionist film, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* [4], that a myth had been created and that the underlying facts presented a much more nuanced view of the Tiananmen events than that with which most of us are familiar.

**The Students were Just**

None of the foregoing should be taken to mean that I believe that the Chinese government did
not blunder enormously in 1989, or that the students or the Beijing residents in the districts surrounding the square (nor the earlier Hungarian patriots) were ever less than heroic. The Chinese government did and yet needs reforms.

Rather, I am arguing that events abroad are easily shaped, both by media attempts to find the most attractive possible story and by misreporting which then creates the desired story, as with the VOA broadcasts. If, however, there were no underlying local issues, no inflamed workers or students, such manipulation would not be possible.

And with time, as we proceed from primitive TV broadcasts to a globalized media world, the velocity and scope of the events increase exponentially. We turn now to Iran, where the political impact of the Internet and Web 2.0 social applications are very clear. [5]

**Iran: The Tragic Death of Miss Soltan**

The Iranian events have been treated from the beginning via a very broad set of media, unlike previous events discussed above, including interactive Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs, YouTube, and most notably, Twitter.

As the events have continued, again all nuance is being lost and where interpretation is possible, it is the worst possible ones which have become dominant. Like the media, we take as our exemplar here Miss Neda Agha-Soltan. She was an attractive 26 year-old Iranian student who died as a result of a gunshot wound in the street, while apparently observing a demonstration. [6]

Early reports, including a statement from her companion, the music teacher with whom she had just had a lesson, suggest that she had not planned to attend a demonstration. The teacher’s car got caught in crowds on the fringes of a demonstration and as the air conditioner was working poorly they got out of the car and walked toward the demonstrations. Statements from her fiancee describe her as rather apolitical.

A shot was fired, though nobody knows where or why or by whom in the early reporting and she died more or less instantly from a wound in the upper chest which penetrated her heart and perhaps a lung as well. The death was captured on video and sent outside the country (including to the VOA) and placed on YouTube where it continues to build audience and to attract politically oriented tributes. [7]

The above truths do not matter as the myth is constructed. Miss Soltan is now the “Voice” of the Iranian demonstrations, an “Angel” fallen from heaven to unite the world in the defense of democracy—or was at least until Michael Jackson died and swept the stories out of the public eye. On the face of it, Miss Soltan is hardly an ideal representative for democracy, being largely apolitical, but what we have learned is that it does not matter. Ten years from now, when we are marched through the commemoration of these events in the media, she will appear in her mythic role, the feminist heroine of Iranian democracy.
Meanwhile, she serves as a focus for anti-Iranian and frankly anti-Muslim forces and even as a tool for the American right to use to lever President Obama into a more activist policy against the Iranian government. [8] And in the usual self-referential media approach, the story becomes not only Miss Soltan’s tragic death, but the Twitter storm itself. [9]


It is, of course, almost impossible to now consider evidence contrary to the myth. For example, If I live in Tehran and my neighborhood was peacefully going about its business, not entirely content with the recent elections, but not that bothered either—perhaps much like many Americans after the 2004 elections—what were my chances of getting a photo of a flower market in The New York Times or a video of children playing in The Guardian?

Having established that an innocent died protesting election results in Iran, we have established, apparently, that the elections were indeed stolen, and by soliciting photos and videos of violence, we establish that the protests are widespread. Now the pressing question becomes, what should we do about it? Need Soltan have died in vain? [12]

As an historian, now I must ask some rather pedantic questions: What should be the standard of evidence to prove the nature of events that, if correct, may well inspire people to take to the streets in Tehran to be killed in something like Tiananmen? Is an anonymous photo enough? Two? Two plus a video? Two photos, two videos and a hundred thousand Tweets?

Now a more difficult question: through whose eyes are we to interpret that evidence? Iranian eyes? American eyes? This leads us to cultural centrism.

**Cultural Centrism**

Too often, we are quick to condemn others while explaining away useful analogues within our own history and culture which might serve to nuance our outrage. For example, we firmly believe that the Chinese government deliberately shot its students at Tiananmen; but American students at Kent and Jackson State died through unfortunate misunderstandings, or through the actions of frightened or overzealous National Guardsmen or State troopers—men somewhat like those on the streets in Tehran we assume.

We believe now that the Iranian government fixed its election to illicitly perpetuate a despotic regime. But events in Florida in 2004 were, we have agreed to agree, simply a result of confusion or bad, but not deliberate, planning.

Our President patiently lectures the Iranians on international norms. But acts of our troops abroad should not be evaluated by accepted norms, or judged even by local courts, let alone...
international bodies.

These are all examples of judging global events, many capable of a broad range of interpretations, by our own narrow culturally bound perspective. This can cause serious problems, both for us and for others.

**Conclusion**

There are a number of problems with misunderstanding or, worse, deliberately misrepresenting events in other countries. First, to do so causes bad policy founded on erroneous assumptions. Surely there is no need to belabor the consequences of our mistaken analysis of the desire of Iraqis to be liberated. As of this writing, major Iraqi political figures are portraying the impending American withdrawal as an Iraqi victory. [13]

Our indignation and avid interest can also mislead other to assume that we will follow up such manifestations with action; that we will put our gold and guns where our Twitters are. This can cause others to take positions that are often fatal, as Attila so impatiently explained to me. So, as some at Tiananmen tragically found out, does deliberately misrepresenting events. Students who had heard that their nemesis Premier Li Peng had been assassinated and that his troops were in rebellion, met instead overwhelming force.

Many journalists have argued that an important consequence of the spread of the Internet has been the demise of newspapers with established bureaus abroad, staffed with skilled and experienced journalists. These evaluated evidence appropriately to the weight of the matters at hand, and even presented contrary evidence. Now we rush to judgment on the basis of Web 2.0 social noise. The Internet can open the world for us more or less instantly, but we have to evaluate the evidence carefully before we rush to judgment.

**Endnotes**


[2] See Jeffrey Barlow, CYBERJACKED! Again... and Again...at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2006/02/edit.php

[3] See the photo at the Wikipedia link above.


[5] As I write, (8 a.m. June 26, 2009) I have just heard via my cell phone reports that there has been a military coup in Tehran. I cannot yet confirm that the reports are true, and unavoidably think of the distorted reports of a Chinese military coup before Tiananmen.

[7] See one such page, containing the video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD7UjH9FYis Accessed 6/26/09


[9] For an example of the level of discourse provided by such social sites see the reports and discussion collated at The Guardian at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog/2009/jun/24/iran-crisis Accessed 6/26/09


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5 THOUGHTS ON “ATTILA TO SOLTAN: MEDIA SAVVY AND DEMOCRACY”

http://dellviewarea.org/?key=michael+kors+handbags+outlet on February 3, 2014 at 6:50 AM said:
I pay a quick visit day-to-day some web pages and sites to read articles or reviews, however this blog provides quality based posts.

Greetings! I know this is somewhat off topic but I was wondering if you knew where I could get a captcha plugin for my comment form? I’m using the same blog platform as yours and I’m having difficulty finding one?

Thanks a lot!

When I initially commented I clicked the “Notify me when new comments are added” checkbox and now each time a comment is added I get several e-mails with the same comment. Is there any way you can remove people from that service? Many thanks!

Hmm is anyone else encountering problems with the pictures on this blog loading? I’m trying to figure out if its a problem on my end or if it’s the blog. Any suggestions would be greatly appreciated.

Kristina
I was wondering if you ever thought of changing the layout of your site? It's very well written; I love what you've got to say.

But maybe you could a little more in the way of content so people could connect with it better. You've got an awful lot of text for only having 1 or 2 images. Maybe you could space it out better?