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## Come the Revolution

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**C**AIRO

To read the Arab press is to think that the entire Arab world is enraged with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and to some extent that's true. But here's what you don't read: underneath the rage, there is also a grudging, skeptical curiosity — a curiosity about whether the Americans will actually do what they claim and build a new, more liberal Iraq.

While they may not be able to describe it, many Arabs intuit that this U.S. invasion of Iraq is something they've never seen before — the revolutionary side of U.S. power. Let me explain: for Arabs, American culture has always been revolutionary — from blue jeans to "Baywatch" — but American power, since the cold war, has only been used to preserve the status quo here, keeping in place friendly Arab kings and autocrats.

Even after the cold war ended and America supported, and celebrated, the flowering of democracy from Eastern Europe to Latin America, the Arab world was excluded. In this neighborhood, because of America's desire for steady oil supplies and a safe Israel, America continued to support the status quo and any Arab government that preserved it. Indeed, Gulf War I simply sought to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait to restore the Kuwaiti monarchy and the flow of oil. Once that was done, Saddam was left alone.

And that is why Gulf War II is such a shock to the Arab system, on a par with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt or the Six-Day War. But different people are shocked in different ways.

To begin with, there is the shock of Arab liberals, still a tiny minority, who can't believe that America has finally used its revolutionary power in the Arab world. They are desperate for America to succeed because they think Iraq is too big to ignore, and therefore a real election there would shake the whole Arab region.

Second is the shock of those Arabs in the silent majority. They recognize this is the revolutionary side of U.S. power, but they see it through their own narrative, which says the U.S. is upsetting the status quo not to lift the Arab world up, but rather to put it down so it will submit to whatever America and Israel demand. That's the dominant theme in the Arab media: this war is simply another version of colonialism and imperialism. Al Jazeera uses the same terms for U.S. actions in Iraq as it does for Israeli actions in the West Bank — Iraq is under U.S. "occupation," and Iraqis killed are "martyrs."

As Raymond Stock, a longtime Cairo resident and the biographer of the novelist Naguib Mahfouz, remarked, "People here, particularly the chattering classes who watch the Arab satellite channels, are so much better misinformed than you think. The Arab media generally tells them what they want to hear and shows them what they want to see. There is a narrative that is deeply embedded, and no amount of

embedded reporting from the other side will change it. Only a different Iraq can do that."

But there is a third school: Egyptian officials, who are instinctively pro-American but are shocked that the Bush team would use its revolutionary power to try to remake Iraq. Egyptian officials view this as a fool's errand because they view Iraq as a congenitally divided, tribal country that can be ruled only by an iron fist.

Whose view will be redeemed depends on how Iraq plays out, but, trust me, everyone's watching. I spent this afternoon with the American studies class at Cairo University. The professor, Mohamed Kamel, summed up the mood: "In 1975, Richard Nixon came to Egypt and the government turned out huge crowds. Some Americans made fun of Nixon for this, and Nixon defended himself by saying, 'You can force people to go out and welcome a foreign leader, but you can't force them to smile.' Maybe the Iraqis will eventually stop resisting you. But that will not make this war legitimate. What the U.S. needs to do is make the Iraqis smile. If you do that, people will consider this a success."

There is a lot riding on that smile, Mr. Kamel added, because this is the first "Arab-American war." This is not about Arabs and Israelis. This is about America getting inside the Arab world — not just with its power or culture, but with its ideals. It is a war for what America stands for. "If it backfires," Mr. Kamel concluded, "if you don't deliver, it will really have a big impact. People will not just say your policies are bad, but that your ideas are a fake, you don't really believe them or you don't know how to implement them."

In short, we need to finish the peace better than we started the war.