

Do Not Celebrate the Death of a Dictator

Written by Daryl Morini

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DARYL MORINI, OCT 24 2011

My blood curdled upon seeing images of a dying Gaddafi, dragged onto the back of a pick-up truck, moments before perishing from his wounds or, more likely, being lynched and summarily executed. Like most other spectators, I shed no tears for the dead dictator. But I could not cheer; could not celebrate; could not understand the simple-minded reactions reminiscent of the 'we got him' moment when Saddam was captured and hanged. I felt oppressed by the beaming face of the golden pistol-wielding kid who claimed to have captured and shot his former leader; one of the many young Libyans who will later discover the traumatism of having grown up celebrating violence. I also felt moral compunction from the sight children parading in front of Gaddafi's icy body in a macabre public display. "I wasn't scared," a teenager told journalists. "I was happy to see him [dead]."

So begins the new Libya, drenched in blood, celebrating the death of its 40-year dictator. In a sense, I fully understand the Libyans. If I were a Libyan on Friday, I may have shot my Ak-47 in the air and cried "God is great!" If I were an American on 2 May, I probably would have jumped around in the streets screaming "USA, USA!" But I am neither. And I cannot bring myself to glorifying death.

Of course I recognise that the acts of barbaric violence perpetrated by both Gaddafi against his own people, and bin Laden against his thousands of Western and Muslim victims, mean that these two personalities forfeited any credibility as morally-upright members of the human family. I know that millions of innocent individuals worldwide have been affected by the murderous dictates of terrorist masterminds like bin Laden and eccentric dictators like Gaddafi. Let it be clear: I am no apologist for the butchers of 9/11, the rapists of Misrata, or the killers of innocent men, women and children worldwide.

But I recall what the great German chronicler and historian of Nazi Germany, Raimund Pretzel – writing under the pseudonym Sebastian Haffner – said about post-war attempts to portray Hitler as a madman or monster. By dehumanising evil-doers, he suggested, what we are doing is trying to distance ourselves from their morally-repulsive acts. "I could never do something like that," we attempt to convince ourselves, "because *he* was an evil monster, and *I* am a good person." But good and evil belong in fairy tales and Hollywood, not foreign policy. What we are in fact trying to deny is the dual human capacities for, both, acts of extreme selflessness and creation, and deeds of senseless violence and destruction. Both extremes bracket the spectrum of the human condition.

What we're trying to efface from our collective memory, of course, is that Hitler was as much a human being as any of his contemporaries; a product, as much as a shaper, of the era and society from whence he sprang. It is extremely disturbing to admit to oneself that we share the same basic humanity, the same skin, the same organs, the same feelings and urges as morally-repugnant dictators do. But it also provides a healthy dose of humility, honesty and humanity – three ingredients that we desperately need in an era of worldwide political upheaval and instantaneously-mediated violence.

Dehumanising dictators may be a natural enough reaction, excusable for traumatised children and survivors of war, but it is plainly childish and irresponsible for those trying to seriously analyse the long-term implications of intervening in other peoples' wars. It is also among the most potent instruments of propaganda available to harness the raw emotion of image-sensitive democratic publics. You only need to compare two images in your mind to see the point. Think back to 20th Century posters depicting enemy soldiers as deformed creatures, Jews as rats or reptiles,

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counter-revolutionaries as horned devils. Now think of the powerful political imagery of evil Middle Eastern dictators, or crazy religious fanatics oppressing women in Afghanistan.

You would be irrational *not* to want to see those fanatics and dictators killed off, right? Who wouldn't wish Hitler dead? But once you have applauded the death of a fellow human being, no matter their crime, how visible is the line between moral self-righteousness and the devaluing of human life altogether? If they 'had it coming' or 'got what they deserved', does that mean that lynching them was the correct mode of meting out justice? Which moral stories will you teach your children – an eye for an eye, or turning the other cheek?

Our world is violent enough as it stands. We must never forget the disarming and forgiving humanism of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, who did not resort to hatred and vilification of monsters wearing Swastikas, but saw the humans behind the uniforms – the child carrying the gun. He who fights monsters, wrote Nietzsche, should see to it that he does not become a monster himself.

Let's be honest with ourselves. As others have already remarked, the hard work in Libya begins today. Perhaps many great revolutions in history – from America, to France, to Libya – must pass through violence to create life anew from the burden of past oppression, when the crumbling regime does not give its population the choice of peaceful reform and change. I only hope that the Libyans and the West can remain magnanimous in victory, lest they risk becoming what they most despised. That begins by not applauding Gaddafi's death, but having the humility to consign his memory to a suitably small and fleeting footnote in the history book of mankind's development. No more, no less.

Daryl Morini is Deputy Editor of e-IR.

About the author:

Daryl Morini is an editor-at-large of E-IR. He is pursuing a PhD in preventive diplomacy at the University of Queensland, Australia. Follow him on Twitter @DarylMorini