10-18-2002

Trends. When Governments Want Government To Change

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Recommended Citation

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Abstract: This Trends article discusses regime change in Germany and Iraq in a political psychological context.

It is certainly possible that the public discourse on coerced regime change in Iraq, on military intervention against Iraq, and on the "giving up" by Iraq of weapons of mass destruction might be enlightened by research on political change in other geographical locales for other political Issues. A case in point is a study by Kirkcaldy et al. (2002) in the European Psychologist that focuses on Germany and contemporary efforts to change the East German economy to approach that of West Germany.

Kirkcaldy et al. have found that there are psychological differences between West and East German managers as to external locus of control, type A personality, and self-reported psychological and physical health. And these psychological differences, others yet to be identified, and even similarities that may be expressed differently may well be implicated in the political change process, e.g., what change strategies would be successful, the likely scope and time for change, etc.

The relevance for United Nations, other multilateral and bilateral, and unilateral foreign policy towards Iraq is in the identification of psychological factors as well as political structural, functional, and process factors as germane to planning, effecting, and evaluating change. The identification of psychological factors may also serve to implicitly reinforce a sense of humanity among would-be adversaries, even if psychological factors may also be demonized through the dynamics of political conflict. Moreover, the salience of psychological factors may also highlight stress phenomena that too frequently may impel disastrous decision making.

The search for wisdom in managing conflict through efforts at change may take one down many pathways whose relevance may not be immediately apparent. The psychological road, the essence of political psychology, may need to be traveled at least as much as regional studies, weapons analyses, political modeling, and paeans to religious and natural law. (See Kirkcaldy, B., Petersen, L.-E., & Hübner, G. (2002). Managing the Stress of Bringing the Economy in the Eastern German States to the Level of the Western German States A Comparison of Occupational Stress, Physical and Psychological Well-Being and Coping Among Managers from West and the Former East Germany. European Psychologist, 7, 53-62; Patchen, M., & Bogumil, D. D. (1997). Comparative reciprocity during the Cold War. Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 3, 37-58; Serpell, R. (2002). The embeddedness of human development within sociocultural context: Pedagogical, and political implications. Social Development, 11, 290-295; Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2002). Accepting threatening information: Self-affirmation and the reduction of defensive biases. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 11, 119-123.)

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