

“let them eat cake”

First Tunisia, now Egypt, but also Yemen, probably other countries. Tunisians probably inspired others. I try to seek out on the computer the kind of “news” that seems reasonably reasonable. Today I heard three of my favorite news anchors (what a strange term) on the phone with reporters in Egypt, all asking the same question in slightly different words, “but where are their leaders; specifically, what do they want?” The different reporters in Cairo, on the other end of the live interviews, tried to get across that *there really are no leaders, no organization; not the opposition party; what the people want is change. The people are pissed (over the phone you can say that). They are tired not only of being oppressed but by not having a voice, not being heard. They want another kind of government. How and what shape or color that better government might take has not emerged yet.* The people on this side all wanted to know *what America’s role was, were people mad at Americans? No, but they are very distrustful of our foreign policies.* And, yes, Egypt is “a valuable partner” and has been “bribed” for many, many years with as much as two billion a year, most of that military aid, even though Egypt has no known enemies. It is easy to guess why our largesse.

Evidently Americans are convinced that movements have to have a leader, a program. But these uprisings are not politics, not organized movements, they are “the masses” rising up. Psychology, sociology, not politics. The men in Cairo being interviewed kept repeating, *It is not just the poor but people who have an education and cannot get a job; there are women on the street; young and old people, the middle class. They ignore curfews.* The third or fourth day it became obvious that the specially trained riot police had given up; they disappeared. On one web interview someone showed canisters of tear gas, clearly printed “made in America.” *No, the American in Cairo said, the people are not against Americans. I have lived here for fifteen years and people have always accepted me, I have never met anyone who was against me. But they are against an American presence in the Middle East, against American foreign policies.*

The twenty-first century’s version of the French Revolution. Pitchforks against guns. In Egypt and elsewhere, a population that explosively rebels against rulers they see as an elite totally out of touch with We the People. Queen Marie Antoinette of France, when told the people were hungry, is said to have responded: *Qu’ils mangent de la brioche* — freely translated as Let them eat cake. (Brioche is an exceptionally rich bread, half of its batter is butter, eggs, and sugar, obviously something only the very rich could afford).

When a government, a dictator, oppresses without let, force begets counter force. The only “program” the mob has is to get rid of what oppresses them, what or who doesn’t listen to them. A president who has ruled for thirty years, never listening to his people. As in Tunisia a dictator and his relatives who have stolen perhaps billions that they sent to Swiss bank accounts.

This uprising is not about politics. It is not even about religion. It is about our dignity as human beings. The lesson seems very clear: a powerful elite can oppress only

so long and then, regardless of murders and teargas canisters made in America, the oppressed explode. An elite extremely out-of-touch must give way to the rage of the oppressed. "Days of Rage."

From our point of view such blind rage is dangerous. We live in a tightly controlled society with a million laws to keep us in our place, while the elite thinks itself beyond the law. The first response is always Law and Order: turn on the screws tighter, bloodier. President Obama had it right when he urged the Egyptian government to "*listen* to the people." In Tunisia the power elite fled; in Egypt so far only the wife and son of Mubarak fled to London. He does not seem to listen.

The French Revolution lasted not only for the day or days when the populace stormed the Bastille (a symbol of the oppression) but it lasted from 1789 to 1792. The end of a monarchy; the bloody birth of a republic.

Again and again we are reminded of the consequences of oppressive rule, of extreme inequalities between rich and poor, the rulers and the ruled. We the People need to be heard and, more important, listened to. That means we want to be acknowledged as persons who have something worth listening to. We want the dignity as humans. We are not the faceless, thoughtless "masses." We want to be able to speak up about who we are, what we think. Worth being listened to. That is what this and all uprisings are about.

robert wolff, 29 january 2011