

Policy Watch: Garbo and the GWOT

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Greta Garbo's 1939 film "Ninotchka" can teach us much about how the Global War on Terror (or GWOT) can be won.

In the film, Comrade Ninotchka Yakushova, played by Garbo, comes to Paris from Moscow to straighten out the mess that three subordinates have made. At first, Ninotchka is completely disdainful of the Western decadence she sees in Paris. Early on in their acquaintance, she tells the bemused Count Leon d'Algout (Melvyn Douglas): "Your type will soon be extinct."

While he merely pursues his own pleasures, she exists to serve the Revolution. And there is no question in her mind that personal interests are unimportant and inconsequential compared to the interests of the Revolution, and that the former must always give way to the latter.

Soon, though, Ninotchka falls for the charms of Paris and of Count Leon. She discovers that pursuing her own personal interests is rather pleasant. But she doesn't renounce her revolutionary goals. In fact, she tries to pursue them both simultaneously. While enjoying champagne for the first time at the elegant restaurant Count Leon takes her to, for example, she also propagandizes for communism in the ladies' room.

But the goals of the Revolution and of the individual are not the same, and Ninotchka is forced to choose between them. She decides to put Soviet interests above her own, and she and her three subordinates return to Moscow. There, however, she is surrounded by suspicion and the fear of sabotage -- the prevailing atmosphere of revolutionary regimes. It is clear that she has lost faith in the Revolution, and that she realizes she has sacrificed her personal hopes for no good reason.

Suddenly, her boss tells her she must go to Constantinople where the same three subordinates who messed up in Paris are messing up again. Indeed, her boss lets her know that the only reason they were sent to Constantinople is because of her good report on their actions in Paris. She is under suspicion.

When she arrives in Constantinople, she finds that Count Leon is there awaiting her. This time, she decides to stay with him, putting her personal interests above those of the Revolution. In fact, she and Leon agree that her pursuit of her personal interests also serves Russia's true interests.

What does Greta Garbo tell us in this 1939 movie about how to win the Global War on Terror in the 21st century?

First, she reminds us of what is attractive about the West to others. What appealed to Ninotchka was neither democracy nor capitalism, but what they permit -- the freedom to pursue one's personal goals, no matter how frivolous. Osama bin Laden and other Islamic radicals understand and fear how this aspect of the West is very attractive to so many young Muslim men and women.

Second, she shows us that while a revolutionary ideal can inspire people for a while, sooner or later it becomes tiresome. Revolutionary zealots, such as communists or Islamic radicals, insist on suppressing the pursuit of simple human pleasures for fear that permitting them will undermine loyalty to their cause. But suppressing individual pursuits eventually disillusion and

alienates those living under their austere rule.

Third, she explains to us that this process of disillusionment and alienation does not occur as quickly as we in the West would like it to occur, whether with communists back then or with Islamists now. As irrational as they seem to us, revolutionary ideologies and the resentments that feed them are powerful forces. Instead of doing things that inflame these resentments, we need to be patient and allow the process of disillusionment and alienation in revolutionary societies to unfold of their own accord -- the way Count Leon did with Ninotchka.

The Bush administration, unfortunately, has not learned what Greta Garbo teaches us about how to deal with Islamic radicalism. But there is still time for it or -- more likely -- the next administration to do so. For Ninotchka is timeless.

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