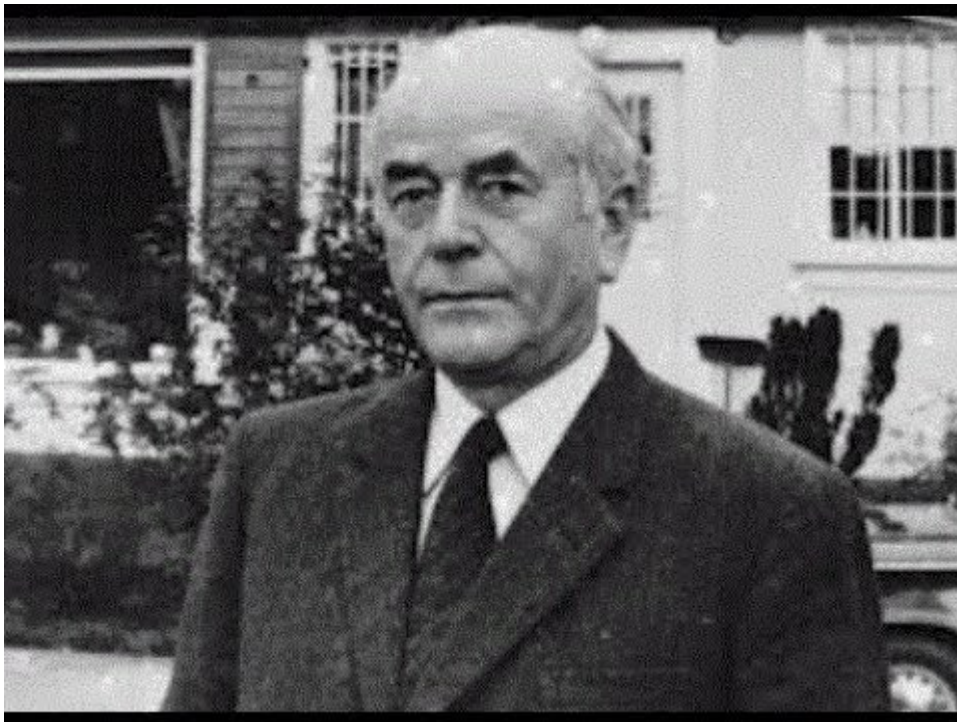


Freedom, tyranny, and talent



Phyllis Chesler's [review of a documentary](#) based on reminiscences of the Nazi minister of armaments Albert Speer who escaped a noose at the Nuremberg Trial focuses on her astonishment at the fact that "Speer is handsome, charming, cultured, sophisticated, multi-lingual, well-spoken" which contrasts with her mental image of typical Nazis as "hot-tempered sadists, degenerates, predators, envious and greedy riff-raff, with cold, cold hearts." I find her astonishment rather surprising, given what we see all around us, both in the US and abroad – "handsome, charming, cultured, sophisticated, multi-lingual, well-spoken" individuals happily serving to uphold egregiously false causes and egregiously amoral, if not outright tyrannical, regimes.

During World War II, America was an "arsenal of democracy" that marshaled the talent and the resources to build armaments that defeated the Nazis – but equal talent and comparable resources go into building "arsenals of tyranny," too. What kind of people built the Soviet nuclear arsenal, or the Chinese and North Korean ones? What kind of people work around

the clock to advance Iran's nuclear program? "Hot-tempered sadists, degenerates, predators, envious and greedy riff-raff?" Those don't have the highly specialized knowledge required for that task, knowledge that the institutions like MIT or Caltech impart to the elite of the elites, the most talented scientists capable of mustering modern math and physics, whom those institutions of learning polish into "charming, cultured, sophisticated, multi-lingual, well-spoken" individuals. As to what causes those individuals will espouse, serve, and promote will largely depend on the accident of birth. Talent is spread out pretty equally throughout the globe, talented Americans enhancing the "arsenal of democracy," talented Iranians, Chinese, or North Koreans forging the "arsenals of tyranny."

The exceptions only prove the rule. Andrey Sakharov, appalled by the destructive power of thermonuclear weapon he created for the Soviet regime, had a moral awakening and became Communism's mortal foe. But thousands other Soviets who were equally talented at math and physics, didn't. Nor did the hugely talented A.Q. Khan, "the father of the Pakistani atom bomb" who in fact decided to monetize his nuclear knowledge and sold his designs to North Korea and Libya, starting the major nuclear proliferation outbreak that benefited Iran's nuclear effort, too.

This points to the huge problem with talent: it is extremely selfish, and seeks to realize itself no matter what. Who will benefit from it, is none of its business. A talent of a person born in a tyranny will benefit that tyranny. A talented person born in the West will benefit the West. Allegiance can be switched, too. The great rocket scientist Wernher von Braun was equally happy designing and building (using slave labor) the deadly V-2 rockets by which Hitler hoped to obliterate London, and advancing space exploration by building Apollo spacecraft.

Clearly, morality and talent are two totally separate things.

We humans seek personal safety and comfort – and as a rule, will accept it from whoever offers it. Self-preservation and self-fulfillment come first; only true martyrs – ever a tiny minority – are capable of suppressing the urge for self-fulfillment so as not to allow their talent to benefit a tyrant.

Hannah Arendt wrote of the “banality of evil;” in fact, the problem is the “banality of talent.” Talent is both widespread, and available for purchase. It depends on the purchaser to what uses the talent will be put. A Nazi/Communist/Islamist regime will use it to enhance its position; the free societies will use it to increase their power.

It is simply unrealistic to appeal to morality of those who live under tyrannical regimes like China, North Korea, or Iran, and ask them to sabotage their talent. Instead, everything should be done to upend the regimes themselves. In that regard, it is vital to promote freedom, freedom of thought and expression. Unfortunately, our media does not practice the freedom it preaches, either; American mainstream media stonewalls, for instance, any meaningful discussion of how the judiciary functions, leaving one branch of US government – the federal judiciary – act as it pleases, rather than make it stick to “due process of the law” that Constitution seemingly obligates judges to follow. Mainstream media’s worship of the judges becomes absurd when papers refuse to cover even something as egregious as judges’ self-given, in *Pierson v Ray* right to act from the bench “maliciously and corruptly.” Thomas Jefferson saw judiciary becoming, as he put it, a “despotic branch” – a vision that fully materialized in the absence of public scrutiny of arbitrary judicial decision-making methods that have nothing to do with “due process.” So even in America we are very far indeed from living up to the republican ideas of the Founding Fathers – all because of the cravenness of the talent that

goes into mainstream journalism – talent that would not rebel, and report what mainstream editors think should not be said, the “banality of talent” in journalism preventing factual coverage in favor of political one, giving a pass to our own “despotic branch.” After all, journalists have to eat too – and therefore, to conform.

If talent in America, the country that prides itself on being the freest country in the world, being not free. why be surprised that such should be the case elsewhere too, that the world over – in Islamist Iran, or in the Communist North Korea and China, a huge number of “handsome, charming, cultured, sophisticated, multi-lingual, well-spoken” people like Speer serve the purposes of evil?