

# FREE IN AMERICA: *Fact or Fiction?*

**Dr. Amaal V.E. Tokars**

The recent debate over illegal immigration in America has generated a lot of talk about freedom. Political pundits have taken center stage on nightly news programs to champion reasons for and against why illegal immigrants should enjoy the same freedoms generations of Americans have fought to ensure. But all this talk about freedom has failed to raise one crucial question: are we, citizens of what many consider the freest nation on earth, really as free as we think we are? The short answer, of course, is yes. The Constitution guarantees certain freedoms, such as those of assembly and speech. The long answer, however, is more complicated.

Like most things worthwhile, real, authentic freedom requires work. At its most basic level, freedom requires us to make choices. But it also endows us with a civic duty-- the duty to learn and examine as much as we can about issues which affect us so that we make the best choices possible. But in order to make sound choices, we must have information—factual, uncensored information that examines and exposes all sides of an issue. Simply put, freedom of the mind promotes creativity in thinking. Citizens who do not access or do not have access to all aspects of a given issue or situation do not have full choice about what they come to understand about the issue or situation. So while they may be free in theory, in reality, they are not unlike

slaves, forfeiting their right to ask questions and receive truthful answers about current issues and ideas, opting, instead, to view issues and ideas through the lens of the nation's power and information brokers.

Consider the issue of Iraq. The now four-year old occupation of the tiny Middle Eastern country is fodder for nightly newscasts, but if one were to ask most Americans the reason for this occupation, their answers would, at the very least, be full of factual inaccuracies (wrong names and dates, for example). Very likely, their answers would reveal an undercurrent of suspicion linking all Iraqis and other Middle Easterners to terrorists. But is this any surprise, considering the words and pictures, the tex-



tual imagery, through which Iraq and the War on Terror are covered in the news media?

From the very beginning of the conflict, the media have portrayed Iraq and its people as barbarians and terrorists, perpetrators of 9-11 who harbored weapons of mass destruction; as rogues desperately in need of liberation and democratization. Even after United Nations inspectors failed to find any evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the media and current American administration continued to present that country in such negative, unidimensional light. The Administration even went so far as to frequently issue color-coded terrorist alerts to warn Americans of impending danger; these warnings were often issued without any discussion about the reasons for the alert. The only thing the warnings did was to strike fear in American citizens, perpetuating the negative textual imagery of Iraq and its people.

What was missing from this onslaught of media images were the voices of innocent Iraqis, pictures of the suffering, video montages of lives blown apart at the seams by a war many now believe was senseless. As an Iraqi who visited my country after the war's outbreak, and as one who witnessed firsthand the needless suffering and loss of so many, including my own family, I can't help but wonder if Americans would ever have supported the invasion had they been given a chance to hear the voices at the center of the conflict? Would they have challenged some of the legislation spawned by the War, such as passage of the Patriot Act and subsequent intrusions

into telephone and library records it allows? Would they have demanded that the nation's power brokers be accountable for upholding the freedoms that more than two-thousand United States G.I.'s have so far shed their blood to protect?

I think so. After all, it is the license to question and debate, to expect truthful answers from those in authority, and to choose those paths one feels would be most beneficial, that prompted America's forebears to call this the "land of the

free." As citizens of this land, we wouldn't be earning our keep, or performing our civic duty, if we exercised anything less than this basic freedom. ■

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*ed to leadership and policy. Her interests range from adult education, community development, crisis intervention, crisis response, and cultural competence. Dr. Tokars is Canadian, Iraqi, and a citizen of the United States. She resides in the Chicago area with her family. It is her hope that such work will promote dialogue on the meaning of citizenship in a global society. She hopes that all citizens will be valued as having a voice in the shaping of their lived history.*

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In her upcoming book, *America & Iraq: Seduced by Fear*, Dr. Amaal Tokars takes you on a journey before 9-11 and after, demonstrating why **the average citizen should have been prepared for war** and how the notion of our freedom has been relegated to a diminished voice.

Dr. Tokars guides us toward the process of becoming an **Organic Citizenry** by learning how to discern truth with clarity and discover where to go to acquire the facts, renewing our authentic voice and true freedom. Dr. Tokars challenges her readers to be *Organic Citizens*, to commit themselves to decipher and challenge all *Textual Imagery*—to think, question, act, and participate. Dr. Tokars gives us an intriguing analysis and a challenge to live our lives as better citizens of the world.

**IN THIS BOOK YOU WILL LEARN:**

- Without knowledge citizens do not have genuine choice, and without choice, there is no freedom.
- Groups that use misinformation to shut out the knowledge of other groups isolate themselves and isolate those they claim to inform.
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- Fear-producing alerts about other countries precede every war.

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