Sunnyside Daycare: An Authoritarian Regime's Playdate with Destiny

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Introduction

After its highly anticipated release, Disney Pixar's *Toy Story 3* (2010) was heralded by critics as a heartwarming, poignant film that tells a timeless story of abandonment, growing up, and unconditional friendship. Curiously, and surely secondarily in the eyes of the average moviegoer, *Toy Story 3* also tells a story of the dramatic fall of an oppressive authoritarian regime during a time of unprecedented social unrest. Although the beautiful way it celebrates love and friendship is what *Toy Story 3* will rightfully be remembered for, its political overtones deserve just as much attention.

Toy Story 3 conveys its political themes throughout the scenes that take place within the walls of the tragically misnomered Sunnyside Daycare. After escaping the garbage bag in which they were mistakenly placed, Andy's toys—a close-knit crew of clever, wise-cracking children's playthings led by America's favorite cowboy doll, Woody—take refuge in a box marked for donation and are delivered to Sunnyside Daycare. Though at first the toys are excited to start their new lives—they haven't been played with in years—things quickly go south when they discover that Lotso, the warm, hospitable, strawberry-scented bear in charge of Sunnyside's day-to-day toy operations, is actually a despotic tyrant who exploits new toys for their labor. Like any dictator, Lotso relies on a military to maintain order in his regime. To preserve his stranglehold on the daycare's affairs and keep the toys from escaping, Lotso employs a militaristic cadre of loyal, physically imposing toys whom he entirely subordinates to his will. Ultimately, Lotso's reign of terror only comes to an end when his military defects and ceases to defend him. After the toys escape, the final scene reveals that Sunnyside Daycare has

undergone a dramatic facelift; it now appears to be an open, democratic society in which former military members and formerly oppressed toys live in picture-perfect harmony with one another (Anderson & Arndt, 2010).

The manner in which Lotso's regime is organized, the way in which it falls, and the political transition that follows in its wake mean that it can be analyzed as any other case of regime change can be: in the comparative perspective. In what proved to be an uncanny coincidence, the film was released almost exactly six months before the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the event which set off a series of uprisings and mass protests that we now refer to as the Arab Spring. And as this paper will illustrate, *Toy Story 3*'s main conflict—that of Andy's toys against the authoritarian Sunnyside Daycare regime—is a case study that bears both a remarkable resemblance, as well as a stark contrast, to the real-life cases that unfolded during the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa.

Treating Sunnyside Daycare as a case study, I will first use a comparative political theoretical framework to analyze the "institutional interests" of Lotso's military, as well as the "coup-proofing" measures instituted by Lotso to prevent the military from defecting. Then, I will examine the moment in which the military turns against Lotso—what was the ultimate factor underpinning its decision to defect, and which "coup-proofing" measures failed? I will then proceed to compare Sunnyside Daycare to cases of attempted regime change during the Arab Spring. By treating the film as a case study, I will explore and contextualize *Toy Story 3's* political themes and messages, specifically regarding democratization.

Theoretical Framework

Before 2010, scholars studying authoritarian regime change often ignored, or at least glossed over, the role of the military (Bellin, 2012; Makara, 2013; Pion-Berlin, 2016). However, the Arab uprisings of the early 2010's dramatically altered this dynamic (Bellin, 2012; Lutterbeck, 2013; Makara, 2016). The Arab Spring consisted of a wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa, all of which were organized in opposition to each country's authoritarian governments. In a few cases, this social unrest resulted in relatively peaceful regime change, but these cases proved to be aberrations—a majority of the Arab uprisings resulted in violent repression of the demonstrators, or worse, full-fledged civil war. While the Arab Spring precipitated a spectacular torrent of social unrest, it resulted in a decidedly unspectacular amount of regime change and an even lesser amount of democratization.

In analyzing these different cases, scholars noted a pattern: the fate of each Arab uprising seemed to lie squarely in the hands of the military. In Egypt and Tunisia, the military defected, and both regimes fell; in Syria and Libya, the military splintered, and both countries erupted in civil war; and in Bahrain and Jordan, the military stayed loyal to the regime, and the uprisings failed (Bou Nassif, 2014; Gause, 2011).

As a result of this trend, post-Arab Spring scholarship has centered around two main questions:

1) What factors underpin a military's decision whether or not to defect?

2) What "coup-proofing" measures are commonly deployed by regimes to prevent military defections, and which are effective?

Institutional and Individual Interests

Bellin (2012), one of the few comparativists studying militaries in the Middle East before the Arab Spring, sees a military's decision whether or not to defect as a binary. For Bellin, if a given military deems defection to be in its "institutional interests," then it will

defect, either by taking up arms against the regime or "staying in the barracks" while the regime is overthrown. Likewise, if defection is not within its institutional interests, the military will stay loyal to the regime and put down the rebellion. Many comparativists have adopted Bellin's theoretical framework and devoted research to classifying the institutional interests of militaries—or members of a military—that influence its decision whether or not to defect.

Some scholars theorize that a crucial factor in whether or not a military will repress social uprisings is the state of "civil-military relations"—that is, the relationship between the military and the people. Thus, if the military is sympathetic to the cause of the protesters, it will be in its institutional interests to make way for reform instead of obstructing it (Lutterbeck, 2013). Furthermore, if the leaders of an uprising have personal ties to the military elite, this can reassure the military that they would be well-served by defection (Morency-Laflamme, 2018).

Another line of thinking is that a military will defect when the regime is perceived to be weak or destined to fail (Bellin, 2012; Brooks, 2013; Makara, 2013; Pion-Berlin, 2016). If a military "bets on the wrong horse" and supports the losing side, its reputation, and even survival, as an institution will be gravely threatened (Pion-Berlin, 2016). The perceived strength of a regime is difficult to quantify, but highly important in accounting for military behavior.

Another comparative theory is that a military will act largely based on economic and material factors when deciding whether or not to defect (Bellin, 2012; Pion-Berlin, D., Esparza, D., & Grisham, K., 2014; Tofalvi, 2013). Under this line of thinking, if a military deems it to be more economically expedient to stay aligned with the regime—owing to patronage, the stability of the economy, defense-related resources, or any variety of monetary reasons—it will do so.

The realm of material interests is a useful place to examine a major theoretical fault line among comparativists. Especially when considering economic factors, some scholars argue for a disaggregated comparative approach in which the military is treated not as a *singular entity* but as a group of *individual actors* (Albrecht & Ohl, 2016; Bou Nassif, 2014). Bou Nassif (2014) stresses that, while a military typically acts as a unified bloc, during times of social unrest, scholars should view the military as a collection of individuals, each with their own distinct interests. For example, many comparativists believe that the economic interests of *individuals* in the elite echelon of the military are a salient factor informing individual and factional choices whether or not to defect (McLauchlin, 2010; Tofalvi, 2013). In other words, individual military members weigh the defection question with a keen eye for their own economic well-being.

Beyond material interests, some theorize that "organizational factionalization"—internal disputes between the regime's leaders and factions (or individual members) within the military—can cause individuals to disobey regime orders even as others within the military do not (Albrecht, H. & Eibl, F., 2018; Makara, 2016). In addition, individual members of militaries care deeply about their own well-being, meaning they may be unwilling to defect if they fear severe retribution for their disloyalty (Pion-Berlin, 2016).

Coup-Proofing

Having defined the general institutional and individual interests of the military, I will now shift gears and examine the ways in which regimes manipulate the military in order to assure its loyalty during times of social unrest. This practice is known as coup-proofing, and authoritarian regimes have used it throughout history (Quinlivan, 1999). The theoretical framework in which scholars evaluate modern forms of coup-proofing has been shaped in large part by Quinlivan's 1999 article, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and

Consequences in the Middle East." In this paper, Quinlivan defines several typical modes of coup-proofing, exploring what each tactic seeks to accomplish and in what scenarios each tactic might be effective.

"Counterbalancing"—the practice of creating parallel security structures that use force on behalf of the regime—is one common technique used to dissuade the military from defecting (Quinlivan, 1999). Counterbalancing hypothetically weakens the position of military by creating other powerful state apparatuses (police, militias, intelligence agencies, etc.). This practice seeks to keep the military in check by closely monitoring its actions and imposing harsh penalties for disloyalty. This not only disincentivizes a military from defecting, but also partially disarms them of the ability to do so (Albrecht, 2018; Bou-Nassif 2015). In a counterbalanced regime, military defection may not be enough to topple the regime, provided that other apparatuses remain loyal.

Another method of coup-proofing is organizing a military along patrimonial lines (Bellin, 2012; Morency-Laflamme, 2018; Tofalvi, 2013). A patrimonial military is one in which the elite echelon is made up of family or close friends of the regime's leader(s). During times of social unrest, a patrimonial military will hypothetically remain loyal to the regime because it consists of the regime's closest allies.

To ensure that a military does not defect for economic reasons, regimes often coup-proof by providing the military with ample material incentives to stay loyal (Quinlivan, 1999). By supplying the military with substantial access to rents (extracted resources) and arms, a regime aims to accomplish two things at once: improve relations with the military, and dissuade the military from defecting for fear of losing access to these resources (Pion-Berlin, 2016). Additionally, Makara (2013) and Lee (2015) both note that regimes can coup-proof not just by providing the military *as a whole* with access to rents, but also individual members of the military elite.

Below, I apply this theoretical framework to the case study of Lotso's military.

Case Study of Lotso's Regime

Lotso's Command

Sunnyside Daycare is organized in the vein of a typical personalist regime: Lotso is its dictator, and he holds absolute power over his servants and subjects. Though Lotso is an elderly toy—he walks with a cane and talks in a slow, Southern drawl—he exudes strength and grit. Like any effective dictator, he maintains a stranglehold on Sunnyside's affairs in part through intimidation and toughness. However, his methods of control supersede those of simple displays of strength; he practices it too. Lotso is the commander of a powerful, fearful military that consists of various loyal toys who carry out his orders. The military's duties include arresting troublemaking toys, policing the daycare's halls, and patrolling the border that separates Sunnyside from the outside world. Nothing comes in or out without the military's knowledge.

As with any military, Lotso's military has a certain set of institutional and individual interests, as well as a certain set of coup-proofing measures put in place to assure its allegiance. Thanks to his coup-proofing measures, Lotso's military has a low level of institutional interest in protecting the toys living in Sunnyside. The military does not coexist with the other toys; they have separate living quarters, and there is no evidence of any intermingling between the two groups. In fact, at one point, a flashback shows several toys desperately attempting to escape Sunnyside Daycare, only to be swiftly and violently quelled by the military. This is proof of a strained, if not hostile, state of civil-military relations. This is clearly by design—Lotso has coup-proofed by ensuring that the military has virtually no connection to the people.

Lotso's coup-proofing measures also manipulate the material interests of the military. He organizes the military on patrimonial lines and doles out patronage left and right. Lotso allows his military to live in the Butterfly Room, the section of the daycare in which the older kids play. This is an immense privilege; Butterfly Room residents are free from the horrors of what can only be described as a "toddler anarcho-hellscape" that unfolds every day during playtime in the Caterpillar Room. Lotso also gives the military access to rents in the form of searchlights, an advanced alarm system, and fast toy trucks. Additionally, Lotso allows members of the military to gamble in a special room in the top of a vending machine and accrue individual material wealth—luxuries the rest of the toys in Sunnyside Daycare are not afforded. By providing the military with access to rents and economic privileges, Lotso creates a class barrier between the military and the other toys. Lotso intentionally ties the military's material well-being and elevated class status to his own status as dictator—if another ruler or governing structure were to come to power, the military would fear losing its economic privileges. Consequently, if the military wants Lotso to keep providing these privileges, it's implied that they must unconditionally follow his every order.

Lotso also levies coup-proofing measures aimed at dissuading individual members from disloyalty. In a surprisingly dark torture scene, Lotso ties up Buzz Lightyear in a chair and forcibly sets him back to "demo mode" in front of the military, using him as an example of the dire consequences for those who dare to defy him. He also counterbalances the military's power by creating a parallel security structure. Sunnyside Daycare is kept under close watch by a toy monkey who spends every night fixated on the daycare's twelve security cameras. The monkey functions as an intelligence agency, allowing Lotso to keep tabs on every corner of the daycare. Although the monkey's role

is ostensibly to prevent toys from escaping, he also is an effective means by which to surveil the military and guarantee their complete loyalty to the regime.

Lotso's Downfall

The constitution of Lotso's regime seems to be rock solid. He has instituted coup-proofing measures to manipulate the military's institutional and individual interests to be in line with his own. His military has shown no signs of insubordination throughout the majority of the film. How, then, does the state of Sunnyside Daycare deteriorate to the point of the all-powerful Lotso being thrown into a dumpster by his most loyal military confidant? As with many authoritarian regimes, the catalyst for the downfall of Lotso's regime is social unrest.

After executing an elaborate escape plan that Andrew Dufresne would be proud of, Woody and the rest of Andy's toys reach the precipice of liberation, only to be stopped by Lotso and his military. Andy's toys were trying to escape Sunnyside through the trash chute, but now find themselves cornered by Lotso's henchmen, precariously close to the dumpster while a garbage truck quickly approaches. Lotso needs the toys to stay at Sunnyside so they can be exploited in the Caterpillar Room, and he offers to peacefully accept them back into the daycare so long as they don't attempt to escape again. Andy's toys remain unified and flatly reject his offer, saying they would rather die than endure further oppression at Sunnyside. To punctuate the toys' defiance, in a comedic, off-beat declaration, Barbie proclaims that "authority should derive from the consent of the governed, not from the threat of force!" This prompts Lotso to order one of his soldiers to push them into the dumpster, and the death of Andy's toys seems imminent.

However, Barbie's proclamation of democratic values leads to the first of a series of military defections. Ken, one of Lotso's closest allies, expresses his solidarity with the

toys' cause, and momentarily stops Lotso from pushing Andy's toys to their death. Ken's insubordinate actions undoubtedly owe to his romantic relationship with Barbie—this is an example of the importance of civil-military relations on military behavior. When Lotso throws him to the edge of the trash chute to be with the other toys, Ken stands up and proudly echoes Barbie's democratic call to arms: "Sunnyside could be cool and groovy if we treated each other fair. It's Lotso! He's made us into a pyramid, and he put himself on top!" Lotso turns to his military and threateningly asks them if they agree with Ken. Unsurprisingly, they remain unmoved. With the exception of Ken, Lotso's coup-proofing has worked expertly up to this point. Whether because of the patronage Lotso has doled out, their lack of sympathy for Andy's toys, or because of fear of their own punishment, none of the other military members have shown even an inkling of disobedience.

This all changes, however, when Woody exposes a lie that undermines Lotso's relationship with Big Baby, an oversized baby doll who is Lotso's closest companion and most relied-upon strongman. Big Baby becomes visibly distraught and begins to cry, which in turn causes Lotso to taunt him, much to the dismay of the rest of his military. This conflict (which, in its purest form, is organizational factionalization) causes Big Baby to become the first and only member of Lotso's military to actively take up arms against him. In a dramatic turn of events, Big Baby hoists Lotso over his head, and, as Lotso cries for help, throws him into the open dumpster. The rest of the military defects by doing nothing to protect Lotso (i.e. "staying in the barracks"). Their defection presumably owes to the fact that the perceived strength of Lotso's regime has reached its nadir. In the end, the decaying of the relationship between the military elite and the regime, as well as the exposing of the regime's frailty, secure Lotso's downfall.

It's worth noting that, despite all logic pointing toward a military takeover of the regime and the persistence of authoritarian rule, Sunnyside defies these expectations.

During the credits scene, the movie reveals that Sunnyside Daycare has undergone a miraculous transformation into a utopian democracy. All of Sunnyside's citizens—former military and civilian toys alike—jubilantly welcome new toys to the daycare, grinning from ear to ear. Ken and Barbie proudly brandish a banner that reads "Welcome to Sunnyside! Now Cool and Groovy!" Joyous music rings out and colorful, 60s-style hipster decor abounds as the toys play in perfect harmony and bask in the glory of their newfound equality. The entire scene is a dizzying display of open democracy in its ideal state—a complete contrast to the bleakness and terror of the epoch of Lotso.

Comparative Analysis of Sunnyside's Downfall

The demise of Lotso's regime fits remarkably well in the greater narrative of military defection in the Arab Spring. First, and most simply, like every case in the Arab Spring, the regime's fate was contingent upon the military's behavior. Similar to Egypt and Tunisia, when Lotso's military defected, it resulted in the overthrow of the current regime.

More specifically, our case study provides yet another example of the importance of a regime's perceived strength during times of social unrest; all of Lotso's coup-proofing measures worked perfectly until it appeared that he was destined to lose power. This bears a resemblance to the situations of both Tunisia and Egypt, where, similarly to Lotso, Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak each made respective last-ditch attempts to save themselves after their reputations were tarnished by massive popular demonstrations. These efforts only worsened the situation, and both of their militaries stood aside while they were forced to either flee the country (Tunisia) or step down (Egypt). Although all three leaders employed a robust set of coup-proofing measures, their efforts proved to be useless when their perceived strength endured irreparable damage (Pion-Berlin,

2016). In contrast to these cases, in Bahrain, Syria, Iran, Jordan, and virtually every other country that experienced an uprising during the Arab Spring, the regime never reached a point where it appeared exceedingly weak to the military and general public. Accordingly, none of these countries experienced complete military defection (Bellin, 2012; Pion-Berlin, 2016).

Despite these similarities, the aftermath of Lotso's downfall provides a stark contrast to the events of the Arab Spring. Unlike Sunnyside Daycare's sensational transformation into a utopian democracy, every Arab Spring uprising led to either a continuation of the status quo, bloody civil war, or a drawn-out transition to tenuous, quasi-democratic rule. Even in Tunisia, supposedly the most "successful" case of Arab Spring democratization, it was only after a long period of social unrest, political assassinations, and government purges of political parties that they achieved a marginal form of representative democracy (Macdonald & Waggoner, 2018). In terms of forging a pathway for widespread democracy in the Middle East, the Arab Spring is rightly considered to have been a resounding failure. Generally speaking, the fall of an authoritarian regime rarely, if ever, leads to a process of smooth, bloodless democratization. Sunnyside Daycare is certainly an anomaly in this sense.

Analysis of Sunnyside's Democratic Transition

Although Disney Pixar's *Toy Story 3* contains a case of regime change that is tailor-made for comparative analysis, its portrayal of a seamless transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is just as well-suited to cultural critique as it is to comparative critique. The over-the-top way that the directors present Sunnyside's new "cool and groovy" democracy hints at a deeper meaning. Perhaps the directors included Barbie and Ken's vague, hollow calls for democratization—as well as the exaggerated portrayal of the

democracy itself—as subtle commentary on our unrealistic American expectations for the spread and success of democracy. Or maybe they meant the Sunnyside dystopia to symbolize the egalitarian, post-racial, and post-discriminatory America that we should aspire to be, and are so painstakingly far from realizing. *Toy Story 3* was released in 2010; both of these political statements would make sense in the greater cultural context of its time. Criticisms of democratic idealism and American exceptionalism begin to make more sense in the context of a post-Iraq War America in the midst of its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Or perhaps this is wrong—maybe the directors had no political intentions and merely included the credits scene and democratic allusions for comedic and cinematographic effect. That *Toy Story 3* is a movie whose primary target audience is very young certainly supports this conclusion. However, even if this were true, Sunnyside's abrupt democratic transition would still tell us something about how cinema pushes unrealistic narratives of American ideals. Regardless of directorial intentions, the image of Sunnyside Daycare as a shining beacon of hope after years of dictatorial darkness should stand out, not only as an outlier in the comparative political realm, but also as a way of coming to terms with the fact that Hollywood's idealistic expectations for democracy are anything but representative of the harsh realities of the physical world.

Closing Thoughts

This case study has several obvious limitations—namely, that Lotso's military is made up of only a handful of toys, which grants a disproportionate amount of power and sway to individual actors when compared with the military as a whole. In real life, militaries are much larger, and one person's defection is far less likely to influence the behavior of entire military. Also, Lotso's regime has no foreign allies or foes, unlike every

country in the Middle East and North Africa that was affected by the Arab Spring. Foreign pressures have significant ramifications for the actions of a military (Bellin 2012); this factor is not reflected at all in this case study. And most obviously, this case is a work of fiction; it cannot, and should not, carry as much weight as a real case of military behavior during a time of social unrest.

However, while *Toy Story 3* is a work of fiction, and while this fact does indeed undermine some of its credibility, it also endows it with some of its most compelling strengths. Works of fiction, such as *Toy Story 3*, grant its viewers omniscience; we get access to what happens behind the scenes and between influential individual actors in a way that real life simply doesn't allow for. We will never know the truth about interactions between the military elite and regime leaders in Egypt and Libya, nor will we know the full reasoning behind the military's choices in Tunisia and Bahrain, but *Toy Story 3* provides us with an unvarnished view of the private affairs of everyone involved. Works of fiction present third-party observers with the unique opportunity to know the full story and draw conclusions from firsthand viewership instead of unverified rumors and *a priori* reporting.

Thus, by examining *Toy Story 3* as a case study, I contributed a new case to the growing body of research on military behavior during times of social unrest. I also unearthed new meaning within *Toy Story 3* itself by examining and contextualizing its depiction of idealistic American attitudes toward democratization. These findings demonstrate the value of applying the comparative perspective to works of fiction. Future comparative research should use fictitious cases in literature and cinema as a valuable resource that contains both cultural significance and theoretical utility. This drastic expansion of the comparative lens could reveal further intersection between normative

theories in political science and pop culture, all while revolutionizing the way that comparativists think about their field as a whole.

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