

## Should Democracy Be Promoted or Demoted?

In his second inaugural address, on January 20, 2005, President George W. Bush used the word “freedom” 25 times, “liberty” 12 times, and “democracy” or “democratic” three times. Bush did not enter the White House with a mission to promote freedom around the world. As a presidential candidate, he put forward a modest foreign policy agenda that eschewed nation building. The events of September 11, 2001, however, radically jarred his thinking on the nature of international threats and triggered a fundamental reevaluation of his administration’s national security policy that elevated democracy promotion as a central objective of his foreign policy agenda.

In the years since the September 11 attacks, the rhetorical attention devoted to promoting freedom, liberty, and democracy has greatly outpaced actual progress in advancing democracy. To date, democracy has failed to take hold in the two countries in which Bush ordered the forcible ouster of autocratic regimes, Afghanistan and Iraq. In its 2006 survey of freedom around the world, Freedom House labeled Iraq as “not free” with a rating of 6 on a 1-7 scale, with 1 being most free and 7 being least free.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan barely earned the designation “partially free” with a 5 ranking.

Nor did toppling these dictatorships send liberty rippling through the greater Middle East as some Bush officials and supporters had hoped. Instead,

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autocratic regimes in the region have used the excuse of terrorism (Egypt, Pakistan) or the alleged threat of U.S. invasion (Iran) to tighten autocracy. Outside this region, some countries have made some progress toward developing democracy, such as Georgia and Ukraine; but just as many, including strategic countries such as Russia, have moved toward greater autocracy. According to Freedom House, “The year 2006 saw the emergence of a series of worrisome trends that together present a potentially serious threat to the stability of new democracies as well as obstacles to political reform in societies under authoritarian rule.... [T]he percentage of countries designated ‘free’ has failed to increase for nearly a decade.”<sup>2</sup> In sum, Bush’s new attention to democracy promotion has not resulted in more people living in freedom.

Not surprisingly, many in Washington, both on the Left and on the Right, are pressing for a change in U.S. foreign policy objectives. In a German Marshall Fund survey of European and U.S. attitudes on foreign policy in 2007, a solid majority (71 percent) of Europeans believed the European Union should promote democracy in other countries, but U.S. support for this project declined to 37 percent, down from 45 percent in 2006, and 52 percent in 2005.<sup>3</sup> When broken down along partisan lines, Democrats in the United States are about one-half as likely to support democracy promotion as Republicans. Among foreign policy elites, only those at the extreme on each end of the political spectrum advocate completely abandoning democracy promotion as a U.S. foreign policy objective. Instead, skepticism is largely couched as “realism” and a return to a greater focus on traditional U.S. national security objectives. From this perspective, democracy promotion should take a back seat to strategic aims such as securing U.S. access to energy resources, building military alliances to fight terrorist organizations, and fostering stability within states.

Although focusing on the more traditional goals of national security is important, a zero-sum trade-off does not exist between these traditional security objectives and democracy promotion. Moreover, the Bush administration’s mixed if not disappointing efforts to promote democracy in the past few years do not mean that democracy promotion should be downgraded or removed from U.S. foreign policy priorities. The United States should promote democracy, but there are new strategies and better modalities for pursuing this objective.

## **In Defense of Democracy**

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No country in the world has benefited more from the worldwide advance of democracy than the United States. Not all autocracies are or have been enemies of the United States, but every U.S. enemy has been either an autocracy or a political movement espousing antidemocratic ideas. Because of geography and U.S. military power, most autocracies over the last 200 years have lacked the

capacity to attack U.S. territory. Yet, the exceptional cases that became sufficiently powerful either did attack the United States, in the cases of Japan and al Qaeda, or threatened to attack it, as did Germany under Hitler, North Korea, and the Soviet Union. Conversely, France and the United Kingdom do have, at least theoretically, the military capacities to threaten the United States, but the thought of French or British attack is inconceivable mostly because both are democracies.

The transformation of powerful autocracies into democracies has served U.S. national security interests. Most obviously, the end of dictatorship and the consolidation of democracy in Germany, Italy, and Japan after World War II made the United States safer.

Beyond keeping imperial and autocratic leaders out of power, democratic consolidation in these countries served as the basis of U.S. military alliances in Europe and Asia.

At the end of the twentieth century, regime change in the Soviet Union ended the Cold War and greatly reduced this once-menacing threat to the United States and its allies. Russia today lacks the military strength of the Soviet Red Army of 20 years ago. Russia still remains the only country in the world capable of launching a massive military attack against the American people on U.S. soil. The threat of such an attack has significantly diminished because of regime change in the Soviet Union. It is not a coincidence, however, that Russia has become more antagonistic toward the United States and the West at the same time that the current regime there has become increasingly authoritarian.<sup>4</sup>

During the Cold War, some viewed the Soviet threat as so paramount that Washington had to embrace all enemies of communism, including dictators. They predicted that any political change to the status quo in autocratic societies would not produce democratic regimes and U.S. allies but Communist regimes and U.S. enemies. There were enough examples of this trajectory, such as Angola, Cuba, and Nicaragua, to warrant worry. Yet, these are the failed cases of democratic transition, and U.S. involvement in the internal changes of these countries could hardly be called democracy promotion. In contrast, successful democratic transitions did not undermine U.S. security interests. Transitions in Chile, the Philippines, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, and Taiwan helped to deepen U.S. ties with these countries.<sup>5</sup>

The parallels today are obvious. Once again facing a new, worldwide ideological threat in the form of radical Islamism, some U.S. strategic thinkers worry that political change in autocratic allies will produce theocratic regimes

**Pursuing traditional security objectives does not trade off with democracy promotion.**

hostile to U.S. interests. The concern is valid but often overlaid by the very autocrats who seek to retain power. The breakdown of autocracy in Iran did create the conditions for theocrats to seize power in Iran, but democratic procedures have never brought to power a government that proceeded directly to threaten the national security interests of the United States or its allies. The

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Palestinian Authority, although not a country, is the first case of such a potential outcome. Yet, Hamas's long-term commitment to democracy has always been questionable. Now that it has broken down after the coup d'état in the Gaza Strip, this territory has become a greater threat to the United States and its allies.

The destruction of fascist and Communist regimes and the emergence of more democratic ones throughout the twentieth century significantly enhanced U.S. national security. Although

it is unclear if the analogy between democratization in the wider Middle East and previous democratization in other regions will hold and yield the same benefits, it is reasonable to expect a similar outcome in the wider Middle East.

That is, in the long run, the emergence of more democratic regimes in the most autocratic region of the world should also make the United States more secure. In the long term, the consolidation of democratic regimes in the greater Middle East would be expected to increase the legitimacy of the governments and thereby reduce the appeal of antisystemic movements such as al Qaeda. In the shorter term, democratic government throughout the region would increase internal stability within states because democracies have longer life spans than autocracies. If democratic regimes ruled all countries in the region, conflicts between states would be less likely; consequently, demand for weapons, including weapons of mass destruction, would decrease. Finally, a more secure and stable region would reduce the need for a U.S. military presence, just as a Europe whole and free dramatically reduced the need for U.S. deployments in that region.

In the short run, however, there are potential risks for U.S. security associated with democratic development in the greater Middle East. Without question, the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan deprived al Qaeda of a base of operations that had more assets than its current base in Pakistan. Yet, this advantage for U.S. strategic interests is not a result of democratization. In fact, the difficult process of developing democratic institutions in Afghanistan has so far failed to produce stable government or a growing economy, a situation that has created an opening for the Taliban's resurgence. In Iraq, neither democratic government nor an effective state has taken root.

Elsewhere in the region, limited progress toward democratization in recent years has also not clearly improved U.S. security. The Cedar Revolution and subsequent 2005 pullout of Syrian troops from Lebanon raised hopes for stability there. Yet, the Hizballah-Israeli war in the summer of 2006 underscored how premature these hopes were. Soon after Bush's second inaugural speech devoted to the theme of promoting freedom abroad, President Husni Mubarak of Egypt seemed to react by implementing incremental political reforms. One year later, he rolled them back almost entirely, a development that has heightened tensions within Egypt and strained U.S.-Egyptian relations. It is yet to be seen whether partial reforms in Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia will lead to further incremental political liberalization or serve instead as camouflage for continued autocratic rule. The net effect of these reforms on U.S. security is still entirely unclear.

### **Engaging the Case against Democracy Promotion**

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Partly motivated by these uncertain gains regarding democracy's advance or U.S. security during the Bush administration, some argue that the United States should not pursue democracy promotion for four reasons: democracy is culturally rooted and not a universal good, the principle of respect for sovereignty is the basis for international order, idealism should not trump concrete national interest, and the introduction of democratic reforms is complex and problematic and therefore cannot be shaped by external actors. These serious arguments demand serious engagement.

#### **A UNIVERSAL IDEAL?**

First, some opponents argue that democracy is culturally rooted and that societies with other cultural backgrounds may choose other forms of government as they wish. Samuel Huntington, while preferring liberal democracy for the United States, makes this kind of case.<sup>6</sup> According to him, liberal democracy is rooted in Western Christianity, which proclaimed the universal dignity of man made in God's image. Thinkers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Friedrich Nietzsche have argued that modern democracy is simply a secularization of Western values. There is no particular reason why other civilizations based on other cultural premises should prefer democratic government.

Although the acceptance of democratic norms and basic human rights has spread far and wide since the onset of the Third Wave of democratization in 1974, there are still parts of the world in which they are openly rejected on cultural grounds. The Chinese government, various East Asian leaders and thinkers, Islamists of assorted stripes, and many Russian nationalists are

among those arguing that their cultures are inherently inimical to one or another aspect of liberal democracy.

Yet, democracy promotion does not imply the imposition of liberalism or democracy on a society that does not want it. By definition, this is impossible: democracy requires popular consensus and works only if the vast majority of a society's citizens believe that it is legitimate. Democracy promotion is intended only to help reveal public preferences

**In select cases, authoritarian allies indeed represent the lesser of two evils.**

in the society itself. Dictatorships often resort to violence, coercion, or fraud to prevent those preferences from carrying political weight. Democracy promoters simply try to level the playing field by eliminating the authoritarians' unfair advantages.

Moreover, human rights and the democratic institutions that spring from them are inherently universal. In keeping with the case made

by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, the historical arc toward universal human equality has been spreading providentially for the past 800 years. It has now encompassed not just the Western, culturally Christian world, but has spread and taken root in many other parts of the world as well, such as in India, Japan, Korea, and South Africa.

This suggests that democracy has spread not as a manifestation of a particular civilization's cultural preferences, but because it serves universal needs or performs functions that are universally necessary, particularly at higher levels of economic development. For example, the procedural rules of liberal democracy arguably guarantee that governments behave in a transparent, law-governed way and remain accountable to the people they serve. Even if a culture does not put a value on individual rights per se, liberal democracy is ultimately required for good governance and economic growth.

## **SOVEREIGNTY AND WORLD ORDER**

International relations realists argue that world order depends on states agreeing to respect each other's sovereignty and on mutual agreement not to meddle in the internal character of each other's regimes. This Westphalian consensus arose out of Europe's wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when European princes fought over the confessional allegiances of their neighbors. Among contemporary writers, Henry Kissinger has been one of the most articulate and consistent proponents of this view, arguing that idealistic concern with the internal character of other regimes leads to messianic crusades that in the long run provoke resistance and undermine world order.<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as it counsels a certain moderation by pointing to the potentially destabilizing effects of moralism in international politics, the Westphalian-realist position is a reasonable one. Yet, a strict respect for sovereignty is not necessarily a route to global order in the contemporary world. Globalization and the information technology revolution allow societies to interact with one another and influence one another's domestic affairs in a host of ways, regardless of the wishes of sovereign governments. Realist world order depends, moreover, on the existence of strong states that can impose order on their own territories and speak authoritatively on behalf of their populations. Such is not the case for a host of weak and failed states in the developing world, which have become magnets for disorder and undermine the stability of other states in the system. Finally, the world is filled with nonstate actors, from terrorist networks, militias, and drug gangs to multinational corporations and transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In this kind of world, it is simply not reasonable to expect states to deal only with other sovereign states and not to try to influence the behavior of the many sub- and nonstate actors in the international system.

### **REALISM VERSUS IDEALISM**

Some realists argue not from a world-order point of view but instead from the perspective of narrower U.S. interests. The United States needs oil, security, trade, and other goods that are compromised by an emphasis on human rights or democracy. These views have acquired particular resonance since the Iraq war, which was seen as being driven by a neoconservative agenda of democracy promotion and political transformation in the Middle East. These critics would argue that U.S. pressure for liberalization of political space and calls for elections have brought to power groups such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Hizballah in Lebanon, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, all of which are illiberal and hostile to U.S. interests. There has been criticism especially of the Bush administration's use of coercive regime change as a means to spur the political transformation of the Middle East.

Yet, to say that the United States should promote democracy in its foreign policy does not mean that it should put idealistic goals ahead of other types of national interests at all times and places or that it should use military force in pursuit of these goals. The United States has never made democracy promotion the overriding goal of its foreign policy. The Bush administration invaded Afghanistan to destroy an enemy and that enemy's ally, the Taliban, that had attacked the United States. Promoting democracy was not the primary motivation. The Bush administration invaded Iraq primarily out of concern over weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Democracy promotion was

a tertiary goal that received heavier emphasis only *ex post facto*, when the other justifications for the war proved hollow. To date, the American people are not safer as a result of regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, because these U.S.-led operations were neither launched to bring democracy nor followed through toward that end, the resulting new or resurgent threats to U.S. national security emanating from Afghanistan and Iraq cannot be blamed on democratization in general or U.S. democracy promotion in particular.

**The U.S. image abroad as a model for democracy has been tarnished.**

The United States has promoted democracy in places such as Germany and Japan after World War II but only when in concert with its security goals. In these cases, transformation of two former enemies into democratic countries did indeed align with U.S. strategic interests, and few realists would argue that the United States would have been better served by an alternative policy at that time.

Potential trade-offs come in regions such as the Middle East, where the United States' closest strategic allies are autocracies such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, or Saudi Arabia. The Bush administration has made the general argument that the deep root cause of terrorism and Islamist radicalism is the region's lack of democracy and that promoting democracy is therefore one route to eradicating the terrorist threat. Natan Sharansky has argued that the Oslo peace process was fatally flawed because the United States and Israel relied on Yasser Arafat's authoritarian Fatah as an interlocutor instead of pressing for democracy in the Palestinian territories prior to peace negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the invasion of Iraq, some observers similarly hoped that a democratic Iraq would be a strategic partner of the United States and recognize Israel. By this view, democracy, security, and peace with Israel all went hand in hand.

In retrospect, this reading of the sources of Arab radicalism was too simplistic. The deep sources of terrorism are much more complex than just the Middle East's democratic deficit. One can argue in fact that the modernization process produces terrorism and that more democracy is likely to exacerbate the terrorism problem, at least in the short run.<sup>9</sup> For instance, some Iraqis who went to the polls in the various elections of 2005 were Shi'a who wanted not liberal democracy but Shi'a power and who have subsequently worked to establish an Iranian-style Islamic republic in areas under their control. Whereas elections in Turkey and Morocco have empowered moderate Islamist parties committed to the democratic rules of the game, elections in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon have strengthened illiberal Islamist groups who are hostile to the United States and Israel.

The political tide in the Middle East is not running in favor of pro-Western, liberal opposition groups. In addition, the United States' authoritarian allies such as Mubarak of Egypt and President General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan have been quite clever at sidelining liberal opponents to accentuate the threat from the Islamist opposition. The assertion of Bush's second inaugural address that there is no trade-off between U.S. security interests and its idealistic goals would thus seem to be false.

The appropriate policy in response to this political landscape needs to be a calibrated one that takes particular circumstances into account. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, there is no realistic democratic alternative to the current authoritarian leadership, and likely alternatives would clearly be worse from a strategic perspective. In these cases, authoritarian allies indeed represent the lesser of two evils. Whereas quiet pressure on Egypt to liberalize might be appropriate, provoking a major showdown to strong-arm Cairo into permitting free and fair elections is not likely to work. On the other hand, there is a democratic alternative to Musharraf in the form of the newly created alliance between the Pakistan People's Party's Benazir Bhutto and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. Although this group had an uneven record when they were in power, they have pledged to crack down on the Taliban in the Northwest Frontier Province and may indeed prove to be more reliable allies than Musharraf. An open election in Pakistan might risk further gains by Islamist parties, but the country has a sizable middle-class electorate and significant public sentiment that is wary of fundamentalist movements. Recent polls show that the secular Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians would win a free and fair parliamentary election, while non-Islamists would hold a sizable majority in parliament.<sup>10</sup>

### **TRANSITIONAL CHALLENGES**

The final argument against the current agenda of democracy promotion concerns the sequencing of democratic reforms, especially elections. State building, creation of a liberal rule of law, and democracy are conceptually different phases of political development, which in most European countries occurred in a sequence that was separated by decades, if not centuries. Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield have argued that democratization's early phases pose special dangers of promoting nationalism and illiberal politics.<sup>11</sup>

State building and creation of a rule of law are more critical for economic development than democracy is. Consequently, authors from Samuel Huntington<sup>12</sup> to Fareed Zakaria<sup>13</sup> have argued that U.S. policy ought to focus on a broad governance agenda and delay pushing for democracy until a higher level of economic development has been achieved. This so-called authoritarian

transition has been followed by a number of countries, such as Chile, South Korea, and Taiwan, and it is often recommended as a model for U.S. policy in regions such as the Middle East.

Unquestionably, such liberal authoritarianism has worked quite successfully in places such as Singapore, and even less-liberal variants such as China can boast impressive economic growth rates. If these countries eventually follow the Korean and Taiwanese paths toward a broadening of political participation, it is not obvious that an accelerated democratic transition would bring about a better long-term result. In addition, there are specific instances, primarily in postconflict or failed-state settings, in which outside pressure for early elections arguably resulted not in the emergence of democratic political parties, but rather locked in the same groups responsible for the original conflict.

As Tom Carothers has recently pointed out, however, the sequencing strategy has a number of problems.<sup>14</sup> First, in most parts of the world it is very difficult to find liberal, developmentally minded authoritarians around whom such a strategy can be built. The more typical cases in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East have been characterized by authoritarian governments that are corrupt, incompetent, or self-serving. The vast majority of liberal or developmentally minded authoritarian regimes or leaders are clustered in East Asia, for reasons that probably have roots in the region's Confucian culture. This means in practice that, in most of the world, exactly the same groups want both liberal rule of law and democracy; it is simply not an option for the United States to promote the former and delay the latter.

A further problem with the sequencing strategy is that it presumes that the United States and other foreign powers can somehow control democratic transitions, holding back pressure for democratic elections while pushing for rule of law and good governance. This vastly overestimates the degree of control outsiders have over democratic transitions. The toolbox for democracy promotion is more modest.

## **American Values**

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Debates about democracy promotion cannot be couched solely as a balance sheet of material benefits and liabilities for the United States. American values must also enter the discussion. Since the beginning of the American republic, U.S. presidents have to varying degrees invoked the United States' unique moral role in international affairs. The loss of this identity, both at home and abroad, would weaken domestic support for U.S. involvement in world affairs and undermine Washington's ability to persuade other governments to support its foreign policies.

Realist policies are often difficult to sell to Congress and the American public, and their legacy of cynicism often leads to bitter domestic recrimination. For this reason, U.S. presidents, from Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman to George H. W. Bush, have always found it more effective to frame ambitious U.S. engagement in the world not just in strategic terms, but in terms of values such as freedom and democracy.

Apart from serving U.S. strategic interests, democracy promotion is also the right thing to do. First and foremost, democracy provides the best institutional form for holding rulers accountable to their people. If leaders must compete for popular support to obtain and retain power, they will be more responsive to the preferences of the people than rulers who do not govern on the basis of popular support. The institutions of democracy also prevent abusive rule, constrain bad rule, and provide a mechanism for removing corrupt or ineffective rule. Furthermore, democracy provides the setting for political competition, which in turn drives better governance. Like markets, political competition between contending leaders, ideas, and organizations produces better leaders, ideas, and organizations. In contrast, the absence of political competition in autocracies produces complacency and corruption and has no mechanism for producing new leaders.

Second, democracies tend to provide more stable physical and economic welfare for their people than do autocracies. Democracies avoid the worst threats to physical well-being, such as genocide and famine. Moreover, the old conventional wisdom that dictators are better at economic modernization than their democratic counterparts is not supported by data.<sup>15</sup> Democracies tend to produce slower rates of growth than the best autocratic performers but boast steadier rates of economic development than autocracies as whole.<sup>16</sup> For every autocracy, such as China, producing fantastic growth, there is an autocracy, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo under Mobutu, producing negative growth.

Third, the demand for and appeal of democracy as a system of government are widespread, if not universal. Public opinion surveys of people throughout the world, including the wider Middle East, show that majorities in most countries support democracy.<sup>17</sup> Ideological challengers remain, including the modernizing autocrat China and Osama bin Laden–ism. Yet, compared to earlier historical periods, these opponents of democracy have never been weaker.

The United States therefore has a moral interest in promoting democracy and a strategic interest to be on the side of moral policies. If democracy is the

**It may be better for the U.S. to dramatically tone down its democracy promotion rhetoric.**

best system of government and demanded by the majority of people around the world, then the United States should help promote its advance. Siding with this moral cause in turn strengthens the U.S. image as a force for good, which in turn increases U.S. influence in international politics more generally. U.S. leaders constantly face situations in which immediate security interests require cooperation with autocratic regimes, but such policies should not be defended on moral or ethical grounds.

## **Reenvisioning Democracy Promotion**

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To argue that the United States has strategic and moral interests in the spread of democracy does not mean that the United States is capable of spreading democracy. Domestic factors, not external forces, have driven the process of democratization in most countries. Consequently, especially in light of the tragedy in Iraq, some have argued that Americans can best promote democracy abroad by simply watching it develop naturally.<sup>18</sup>

Although the United States' ability to promote democracy abroad has limits, which have become more severe in the past few years, U.S. policies can be very important in helping nurture democratic development. The war in Iraq has fostered the false impression that military force is the only instrument of regime change in the U.S. arsenal, when in fact it is the rarest used and least effective way to promote democratic change abroad. A wiser, more effective, and more sustainable strategy must emphasize nonmilitary tools aimed at changing the balance of power between democratic forces and autocratic rulers and, only after progress toward democracy has been made, building liberal institutions.

## **RESTORING THE U.S. EXAMPLE**

Inspiration for democrats struggling against autocracy and a model for leaders in new democracies are two U.S. exports now in short supply. Since the beginning of the republic, the U.S. experiment with democracy has provided hope, ideas, and technologies for others working to build democratic institutions. Foreign visitors to the United States have been impressed by what they have seen, and U.S. diplomats, religious missionaries, and businesspeople traveling abroad have inspired others by telling the story of U.S. democracy. In the second half of the twentieth century, during which the United States developed more intentional means for promoting democracy abroad, the preservation and advertisement of the U.S. democratic model remained a core instrument.

Today, this instrument needs repair. The U.S. model has been severely undermined by the methods that the administration has used to fight the global

war on terrorism. Irrespective of the legal particulars that may or may not justify the indefinite detention of combatants/terrorists at the Guantanamo Bay detainment camp in Cuba, opinion polls demonstrate overwhelmingly that most of the world views U.S. detention policies as illegitimate and undemocratic. Thankfully, senior U.S. officials did not try to defend the inhumane treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in 2004.

The news media's exposure of the abuses committed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and adherence to the rule of law through the prosecution of guilty soldiers was a first step in correcting the problem. Yet, the failure to hold higher-level officials accountable for the breakdown in authority raised questions about how seriously the United States took the issue, and the images of torture greatly damaged the United States' international reputation.

Furthermore, the debate surrounding the unauthorized wiretappings of U.S. citizens helped create the false impression abroad that the U.S. government will sacrifice the civil liberties of individuals in the name of fighting terrorism, the very argument that autocrats across the world use to justify their repressive policies. Finally, the Bush administration's propensity for unilateralism, most centrally in its decision to invade Iraq, coupled with its general suspicion of international law and international institutions has encouraged the perception that Americans do not believe in the rule of law. Again, the merits of these claims about U.S. behavior are debatable. It is indisputable, however, that the U.S. image abroad as a model for democracy has been tarnished.

Therefore, the United States' first step toward becoming a more effective promoter of democracy abroad is to get its own house in order. The political costs to U.S. credibility as a champion of democratic values and human rights outweigh the value of holding prisoners at Guantanamo indefinitely. The facility must be closed, and the law passed in 2006 on enemy combatant detentions should be repealed or amended. In place of legalistic attempts to pretend that the United States does not engage in torture, a broader range of prohibited techniques should be explicitly defined and ruled out. More generally, the next U.S. president must demonstrate a clear commitment to restoring and perfecting the U.S. democratic system of government.

In parallel, U.S. efforts at public diplomacy must improve. The United States cannot hope to recruit people to its side or to the side of democratic values if it does not pay attention to what non-Americans say they want rather than what the United States thinks they should want. In the Middle East, many Arabs have

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argued that the United States is disliked not for its basic values, but for its one-sidedness in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its lack of sympathy for Palestinian aspirations. In Latin America, populist leaders such as President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and President Evo Morales of Bolivia have gained enormous support

**Policies that open societies and economies have usually helped spur democratic change...**

by promoting social policies aimed at the poor, an issue that Washington's democratic friends in the region have largely ignored. The starting point for better public diplomacy therefore is to stop talking and to start listening to other people, to compare the product the United States is offering to the actual aspirations of democratic publics around the world.

Indeed, in light of the Bush administration's widespread unpopularity, it may be better for the United States to dramatically tone down

its public rhetoric about democracy promotion. The loudly proclaimed instrumentalization of democracy promotion in pursuit of U.S. national interests, such as in the war on terrorism, taints democracy promotion and makes the United States seem hypocritical when security, economic, or other concerns trump its interests in democracy, as they inevitably will. Acting in concrete ways to support human rights and democratic groups around the world, while speaking more modestly about U.S. goals, might serve both its interests and ideals better.

The idealistic component of U.S. foreign policy always has been critical to maintaining a domestic U.S. consensus in favor of a strongly internationalist stance, so permanently abandoning this rhetorical stance is not recommended. Yet, the Iraq war and other events related to the war on terrorism have, for the moment, tainted valid and important concepts, such as democracy promotion and democratic regime change. This is the case not only for foreign audiences, but for many Americans as well. Until this perception changes, administrations will have to sell foreign policy to domestic audiences on different grounds.

### **REVITALIZING DUAL-TRACK DIPLOMACY**

It is naive to believe that the United States should only work with other democracies. After all, the creation of the United States as an independent country required military assistance from France's absolute monarchy. The alliance with Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, perhaps the most diabolical regime in human history, was necessary for victory in World War II. Today, the wide range of U.S. security, economic, and environmental interests around the world necessitates diplomatic engagement with autocracies.

U.S. policymakers can nonetheless conduct relations with their counterparts in autocratic regimes while pursuing policies that might facilitate democratic development in these countries. U.S. foreign policy officials must reject the false linkage between cooperation and silence on human rights abuses whenever autocrats make it a precondition of engagement. Few friendly autocratic regimes have ever stopped working with the United States on a strategic issue of mutual benefit because a U.S. official criticized their antidemocratic practices.

When it comes to autocratic regimes with which the United States is friendly, U.S. leaders have real leverage to press for evolutionary change, especially over countries dependent on U.S. military protection, military assistance, or economic aid. Rather than coercing them, U.S. officials must first try persuading their autocratic friends that they can ultimately best protect their material and security interests by proactively leading a process of evolutionary change rather than by reactively resisting an eventual process of revolutionary change. U.S. officials did exactly this when they helped coax allies in Chile, South Africa, and South Korea into embracing democratic change. Careful diplomacy in the Philippines also helped keep the end of the Marcos dictatorship peaceful.

Paradoxically, the same logic of engagement applies when considering the promotion of democracy in dictatorships hostile to the United States. Attempts to isolate or sanction these regimes have rarely worked. Sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa only succeeded because the United States and the United Kingdom and other European countries had developed deep economic ties beforehand. South African democrats, unlike the leaders of the democratic movement in Iran today, also wanted these sanctions. Sanctions worked against the Noriega regime in Panama because deep economic ties were in place before the sanctions were applied. Because the United States does not have significant trade with or investments in Iran, Cuba, or Burma, sanctions against these autocracies do little to help the pro-democracy forces inside these countries. Diplomatic relations with these regimes, however, create a more hospitable environment for internal democratic development.<sup>19</sup> In the USSR, for instance, democratic forces gained strength in the late 1980s when U.S.-Soviet relations were improving, not earlier in the decade when tensions were high. With rare exception, policies that open societies and economies up to international influence have helped spur democratic change, whereas policies that isolate societies impede such progress.

**...Policies that isolate societies impede such progress.**

## **REORGANIZING DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE**

For most of U.S. history, U.S. foreign assistance did not explicitly aim to promote democracy. President John F. Kennedy created the United States Agency of International Development (USAID) in 1961 to counter communism and Soviet foreign assistance, but the focus was economic development. Twenty years later, President Ronald Reagan made democracy promotion a central objective when he worked with Democrats in Congress to create the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 1983. At the time, however, NED's budget was a fraction of total foreign assistance. Importantly, NED also was not constituted as an organ of the U.S. government. Although it received its budget directly from Congress, NED established its own board and its own procedures for disseminating money and made its own decisions about whom it would and would not support.

With the creation of NED came four affiliated organizations with ties to U.S. nongovernmental institutions, such as the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the AFL-CIO, and the U.S. Chamber of Congress. The idea behind these affiliations was that organizations with democracy as a long-standing element of their missions could set their own agendas. Over time, however, the U.S. government has increasingly become a direct provider of democracy assistance.

As USAID funds for democracy assistance increased in the 1990s primarily in response to new opportunities in the former Communist world, several for-profit contractors joined the democracy promotion business as well. Throughout the 1990s, USAID officials gradually assumed greater responsibility for crafting democracy promotion strategies and treated the NGOs as merely implementers of their ideas. The recipients, especially the NGOs, resisted the label of implementer and instead tried to preserve their identities as independent actors. The lines between government and nongovernmental actors, already blurred, became even more ambiguous.

After the September 11 attacks, Bush to his credit increased general foreign assistance funding, including support for democracy promotion. Within the Department of State, the Bush administration established the Middle East Partnership Initiative. The State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Affairs received major increases in its democracy assistance budget. The Department of Defense also has become increasingly involved in democracy-related activities in Afghanistan and Iraq. To better coordinate civilian, military, and intelligence operations in postconflict settings, the Bush administration established the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, a new office within the State Department.

Most dramatically, under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's new transformational diplomacy initiative, the department is trying to reform the way in which foreign assistance is funded and delivered. The reform aims to con-

solidate funding accounts and to make strategic planning about assistance the purview of the State Department. As a first step, Rice created a new position within the State Department: the director of foreign assistance, who also serves as administrator of USAID.

This focus on how the government is organized to provide democracy assistance is badly needed. The reform ideas to date, however, have not been ambitious enough. Any strategy for more effective democracy promotion must include significantly greater resources as well as a reorganization of all U.S. government bureaus and agencies tasked with providing democracy assistance. A new Department of International Development should be created, and its head should be a member of the cabinet. All foreign assistance resources currently funneled through other agencies and departments, with the exception of military training and assistance, should be transferred to this new department.

This new department would largely absorb USAID, Defense Department postwar reconstruction operations, rule of law training programs currently housed in the Department of Justice, agricultural aid now located in the Department of Agriculture, technical assistance programs in the Department of the Treasury, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. It is absolutely crucial that this department be and be perceived as autonomous from the State and Defense Departments. The mandate of this new department would be very different from the traditional missions of the military and diplomacy: not regime destruction but regime construction, nurturing improved governance, economic development, and democratic consolidation. This separation of departments to fulfill different missions will help each to deepen expertise in its respective field and also clarify to the outside world which arms of the U.S. government are doing what. Soldiers should not kill terrorists one day and teach Thomas Jefferson the next. Diplomats should not negotiate a basing agreement with a government one day and then turn around and fund an opposition leader to that same government.

Once constituted, the new Department of International Development should control and administer all assistance that is delivered directly to foreign governments. When the U.S. government does provide direct assistance to a foreign government through this new department, it must be firmly conditioned on pursuit of development objectives. There will be situations in which the United States has a national security interest in providing an autocratic regime with military aid or antiterrorist assistance, but this aid must not be called democracy assistance or development aid.

**The U.S. government should get out of the business of funding NGOs in other countries.**

**Neglect of  
multilateral  
institutions  
must end.**

At the same time, this new department should not be responsible for providing democracy assistance or other forms of assistance targeted at NGOs. To the extent possible, the U.S. government should get out of the business of funding NGOs in other countries. Even if a new Department of International Development is not established, this firewall between state-to-state assistance and the aid given to nongovernmental actors should become a guiding principle for democracy assistance reform. For instance, it is appropriate for the USAID or some other part of the U.S. executive branch to fund a technical assistance program for a justice ministry in a foreign country under the rubric of a bilateral government-to-government agreement. It is not appropriate for the U.S. government to provide technical assistance to political parties or opposition groups in other countries. This kind of assistance, when appropriate, is better provided by U.S. NGOs with as much separation from the State Department and the White House as possible.

Inevitably, conflicts of interest and misinterpretations of motives arise when the State Department provides direct financial support to an NGO in another country. Is this money provided to aid democracy or to advance a concrete U.S. economic or strategic interest? Non-U.S. NGOs, especially those working in autocratic societies, are increasingly reluctant to accept U.S. assistance for fear of being labeled a lackey of the Bush administration or a spy for the United States.<sup>20</sup> Such questions come up regardless of the exact origin of U.S. funding.

Increased separation between the U.S. government and U.S. funders of nongovernmental actors thus can only be for the better. This money for direct assistance to NGOs also must be protected from any punishments or conditionality directed at the government of that country. When the White House decides to cut foreign assistance to a country to change its behavior at home or abroad, U.S. funds earmarked to promote democracy through nongovernmental actors must not be part of the conditionality.

A vastly expanded NED would be one model. To assume this role, NED would have to provide direct grants to all U.S. providers of technical and financial assistance for the nongovernmental sector, which will loosen its connection with its four main grantees and require more involvement with for-profit contractors. NED would also need to open offices around the world. Because both of these changes might dilute NED's current mission, an alternative model would be the creation of a new foundation modeled after NED, but with a wider mandate and a different mechanism for providing grants to U.S. organizations in the democracy promotion business as well as direct grants to local NGOs around the world.

Democracy promotion should be placed in a broader context of promoting economic development, reducing poverty, and furthering good governance. These four objectives are interlinked in multiple ways. Good governance is widely accepted as a requisite for economic growth, widespread poverty undermines democratic legitimacy, growth reduces poverty, democratic accountability is often required to combat corruption and poor governance, and growth creates a favorable climate for democratic consolidation. Good governance in recipient countries is also critical to maintaining congressional and popular support for assistance programs. Nothing undermines support as much as the perception that U.S. taxpayer dollars are going into a proverbial Swiss bank account.

The United States cannot limit itself to the promotion of democracy; it must also use its leverage to promote development and good governance. These connections need to be reflected in how policy is articulated as well. Senior foreign policy officials in the Bush administration rarely invoke values such as equality and justice, yet historically, U.S. leaders have considered these ideas fundamental to shaping their own government.<sup>21</sup>

#### **ENHANCING AND CREATING INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

After World War II, visionary U.S. internationalists spearheaded the creation of the NATO military alliance to contain the Soviet threat in Europe and crafted bilateral security pacts with Japan and South Korea to thwart the Communist menace in Asia. U.S. leaders also launched the Bretton Woods agreements and its institutions, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as a strategy for maintaining an open, liberal capitalist order and avoiding a repeat of the protectionist-driven meltdown of the 1930s.

Although democracy promotion was not an explicit objective of these institutions, NATO's security umbrella, combined with U.S. assistance through the Marshall Plan and other subsequent programs, did help prevent Communist coups in Western Europe, keep the peace between formerly hostile countries within the alliance, and contain Soviet military expansion in Europe, which surely would have undermined democratic institutions.

The stable security environment was conducive to deepening democracy within member states and for increasing economic and political cooperation among those states, later culminating in the creation of the EU. NATO expansion after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact offered Western multilateral connectivity to the new democracies in eastern and central Europe and served as a bridge as they prepared bids to join the EU. The gravitational pull of the EU may be the most powerful tool of democratic consolidation in the world today. The U.S. security umbrella in Asia provided a similar facilitating condi-

tion for democratic development first in Japan, then South Korea, and eventually Taiwan. More intermittently, the United States has also used its leadership within the Organization of American States to encourage democratic development in Latin America.

Given the success of these multilateral institutions in promoting democracy, it is striking how little effort has recently been devoted to creating new multi-

**Governments must come together and draft a code of conduct for democratic interventions.**

lateral institutions or reforming existing ones to advance freedom. Since the September 11 attacks, not one new major international organization has been formed to promote democratic reform. Nor has the Bush administration devoted serious effort toward boosting existing international organizations' focus on democracy promotion. This neglect of multilateral institutions must end.

More than any other region in the world, the greater Middle East is devoid of multilateral

security institutions. The United States, Canada, the EU, and other consolidated democracies should partner with their Middle Eastern counterparts to establish regional norms, confidence-building measures, and other forms of dialogue and political reassurance. The goal should be to establish a regional architecture that will affirm human rights and promote regional security based on the model of the Helsinki process in Eastern Europe, which gave rise to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and extensive human rights monitoring within and across borders.

The impetus for creating regional structures must come from within the region, but the initiative should also be supported from the outside. Such efforts can draw inspiration and lessons from past experiences in Europe and elsewhere. At the heart of the Helsinki process was the recognition that true security depended not only on relations between states, but also on the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Many Middle Eastern governments have signed statements committing themselves to democratic reform, yet the Middle East lacks a regime that can help empower citizens to hold their rulers accountable to such pledges at home and in their relations with their neighbors.

Beyond the Middle East, an expanded NATO could be an important stabilizing force in uniting democracies around the globe. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a regional organization that seems ready to adopt more rigorous norms about democratic government and human rights. The recently created Community of Democracies got off to a bad start by extending membership to nondemocracies. The idea of a new multilateral organization committed to advancing democratic practices, however, is needed.<sup>22</sup> More boldly, U.S. lead-

ers must embrace new modalities of strengthening ties within the community of democratic states, be it through a new treaty or a new alliance.<sup>23</sup>

Even the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other trade agreements must be viewed as levers that help open up economies, which in turn foster democratic development. Excluding countries such as Iran from the WTO only hurts the democratic forces inside Iran who favor more, not less, integration of their country into the world system. In some rare circumstances, such as South Africa under apartheid, economic sanctions have effectively pressured autocratic regimes to liberalize. The list of failures, including decades-long sanctions against Cuba and Iran, is equally striking. As a rule of thumb, the world democratic community should take its cues about sanctions from the democratic opposition in the target country.

### **STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL NORMS**

The collapse of communism ushered in a giddy era for democracy promotion. Because so many autocratic regimes disappeared at the same time, new post-Communist regimes welcomed Western democracy promoters into their countries with few restrictions. Today, the atmosphere for democracy promotion is markedly different. The allegedly easy cases of democratic transition in eastern and central Europe have consolidated and require no further assistance from democracy promoters. Autocratic regimes, at first weak after communism's collapse, have themselves consolidated and now have the means to push back. Finally, the war in Iraq has greatly tainted the idea of external regime change and put under suspicion all foreigners working to promote democratic change.

This new context requires a new strategy for bolstering the legitimacy of democracy promotion and the defense of human rights. Governments must come together and draft a code of conduct for democratic interventions in the same way that governments and the international human rights community have specified conditions in which external actors have the responsibility to protect threatened populations. A "right to help" doctrine is needed.<sup>24</sup> A starting point for this new normative regime would be the right to free and fair elections, which in turn would legitimize the need for international election monitors and international assistance targeted at electoral transparency. At the other extreme, a new international code of conduct could include strict prohibitions on direct financial assistance to political parties, which is too obtrusive into the internal affairs of other countries, yet affirm the legality of foreign assistance to nonpartisan NGOs. Once these rules of the road are codified, signatories to such a covenant would be obligated to respect them. If they did not, then the violation would serve as a license for further intrusive behavior from external actors.

A mutually agreeable, international code of conduct for democracy assistance will constrain the activities of some U.S. actors, but it will also enable other kinds of activities and interventions. In the long run, however, the United States and other democracies will only be effective in promoting freedom abroad if they develop international institutions that enhance mutually beneficial cooperation and then abide by the rules of these institutions in the conduct of foreign policy.

## Reconciling Objectives and Strategies

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In highlighting the moral and strategic imperatives for promoting democracy abroad, Bush has continued a long-standing tradition in U.S. foreign policy that has deep roots in the Democratic and Republican parties. Declaration of any important objective, however, must be accompanied by a realistic and comprehensive strategy for achieving it. Simply trumpeting the importance of the objective over and over again is not a strategy. The tragic result of the gap between objectives and strategies is that many Americans are starting to view this goal as no longer desirable or attainable. The next U.S. president must do better. A more effective strategy for promoting democracy and human rights is both needed and available.

## Notes

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