

Book Review

How to Better Assist Democracy

by Juliana Geran Pilon

Tom Carothers' most recent book, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*, is long overdue. As he rightly observes, "though vast and relatively open to public view, the burgeoning domain of democratic assistance is not well understood." Few people know that the U.S. spends around \$700 million a year in over 100 countries on such assistance. Although vast enough, it actually represents less than one-fifth of the world's contribution (having shrunk from 60 percent in the 1960s). Nevertheless, the potential impact of such funding is far-reaching, encompassing a wide range of activities such as: establishing and enforcing the rule of law; encouraging the growth of civil society; promoting free, fair, and legitimate elections; encouraging the growth of pluralism and viable political parties; and assisting the independent media. A tall order, truly. Too tall perhaps? Or not tall enough? Is it even the right order?

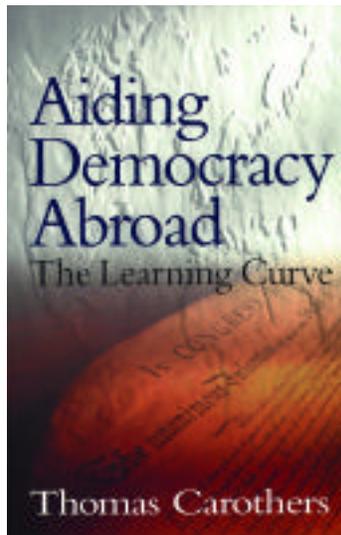
Carothers, Vice President for Global Affairs at the Carnegie Endowment, explains why aiding democracy is no easy task. All too often, the U.S. is unclear as to what it wants and expectations are often unrealistic. Democracy has sometimes been promoted in ways that could be described as clumsy and even counterproductive. While facing these problems squarely, Carothers concludes that they are not insuperable. Lessons having been learned, we are getting better at offering the promise of freedom to others, in the interests of peace and prosperity.

After a brief overview of political assistance in the U.S. over the past several decades, he focuses on the post-1990 era, whose beginning was characterized by a spectacular shift toward liberalization throughout the world. What Carothers calls "the core strategy" of U.S. assistance was to target countries that seemed already on the right path, with the expectation that a little help would encourage them further. The assumptions behind the strategy, however, turned out to be unfounded in many cases. In some former Soviet republics, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, the road to freedom proved much rockier than anticipated. The expectation that democratic transitions follow a certain regular and orderly sequence proved highly unrealistic.

Many organizations suddenly appeared on the scene, both for profit and not-for-profit, political and non-partisan, ready to engage in promoting democratic change. Alongside the U.S. government, principally, the Agency for International Development (USAID), funding has come from many private foundations, notably Ford and Rockefeller Brothers, as well as philanthropists like George Soros, whose Open Society foundations are present throughout the former Soviet bloc. Carothers' analysis focuses principally on USAID, but his conclusions echo those of a 1997 study by Kevin Quigley, entitled *For Democracy's Sake* (reviewed in *Elections Today*, Vol. 7, No.3),

which mainly evaluated privately funded democracy assistance to Eastern Europe. While USAID, too, has conducted many evaluations of its work, Carothers is the first to scan so broad a range of programs, in historical context, with an eye to their purpose, effectiveness, and political implications.

Surely, the most fundamental question is whether democratic assistance has actually been effective. "Backsliding" in such countries as Zambia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, and Peru has raised this question to the forefront, as has the deplorably slow pace of reform in Russia, Ukraine and, of course, the infamous Balkans. It has decidedly corroded congressional enthusiasm, so evident a decade ago, for exporting democracy.



Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999. ISBN 0-87003-168-6.

Courtesy of Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Carothers admits that its implementers sometimes made mistakes. For instance: a simplistic belief that American models and institutions fit easily in other countries with very different cultural and political histories; insensitivity to people's real needs; inability to locate the precise points of political opportunity; ignorance of local mores, realities, and even languages; and, most importantly, unrealistically inflated expectations of how quickly political and economic change can take place. To illustrate his point, Carothers takes on four case studies — Guatemala, Zambia, Nepal, and Romania — citing a variety of specific lessons, both theoretical and practical.

It may come as a surprise that the U.S. is currently engaged in "the most extensive, systematic effort ever undertaken to foster democracy around the world." The fact that this commitment, however, is still inconsistent, tentative, and relatively meager, reflects the continuing soul-searching and debate regarding its relative value. Carothers' book is an invaluable tool in that debate. He firmly believes that promoting democracy — or perhaps better, "liberalization" — should be an intrinsic broad-ranging element of American foreign policy in general. The U.S., he believes, must be the beacon of freedom to the rest of the world, not by military means, but through education, training, and encouragement of democratic processes. If the U.S. does it well, the benefits should be obvious; but if it does it ineffectively and clumsily, the result will be wasteful and even harmful. Constant evaluations such as Carothers' must continue to be conducted, and with equal objectivity. □

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