



The Follies of Democratic Imperialism

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President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq signaled the unambiguous return of "democratic imperialism" in American foreign policy. Entailing what is tantamount to the imposition of democracy upon a foreign country, this can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of America's traditional obsession with its role as a global moral crusader.¹ Bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq is expected to impart a "domino-like" effect throughout the Middle East, resulting in the collapse of one autocracy after another. President Bush elaborated his vision in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) on February 27, 2003, by any measure a presidential manifesto on the virtues of spreading democracy abroad. Removing Saddam Hussein from power and replacing him with a democratically elected government, Bush asserted, "would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region."²

This robust rebirth of democratic imperialism could hardly have been imagined only a few years ago. As a candidate in 2000, Bush faulted the Clinton administration for its intervention in Haiti in 1994 with the goal of restoring democracy there as well as for its "humanitarian interventions" in Somalia and Kosovo. His stance was in keeping with the conservative realpolitik of his closest advisers, who regarded the moralistic impulse in American foreign policy as at best a distraction and at worst counterproductive.³ It was now Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who then advised Bush to adopt a hard-nosed realist view of international relations that left little room for the

spread of democracy by force or other means.⁴ Her predecessor at the State Department, Colin Powell, who Bush entrusted with the task of selling the war in Iraq to the world, had opposed ousting Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf war and advised against intervention to stop genocide in Bosnia, contending that neither case posed a threat to the national interest.

Indeed, the attempt to democratize the Middle East is little short of revolutionary. Unlike in Asia, Africa, and especially Latin America, promoting democracy in the Middle East has never been an explicit U.S. goal. Over the years, American policymakers have been reticent to push democratization there on the grounds that friendly authoritarians in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt provided a defense against the spread of radical Islam. Conventional wisdom held that the advent of real reforms in the Arab world could result in legitimately elected Islamist governments that were "anti-American and ultimately anti-democratic in orientation."⁵ This scenario materialized in Algeria during the 1990s. To prevent the all-but-certain electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the Algerian military staged a coup in January 1992, condoned by the United States and other Western powers, which opened the way for a civil war that has claimed an estimated 150,000 lives.

September 11 was obviously the most important factor behind the roaring return of democratic imperialism. The events of that fateful day engendered the belief that Islamic authoritarianism nurtured political

extremism, and that the essential corrective was the democratization of the Muslim, and especially the Arab, world. As expounded by Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky, "The advancement of human rights and democracy is the bedrock of our war on terrorism. A stable government that responds to the legitimate desires of its people and respects their rights, and shares power is a powerful antidote to extremism."⁶ These views echoed influential neoconservative voices in the Bush administration who maintained that American power should not be limited to the defense of vital interests but should also be employed to defeat ideologies opposing freedom and democracy.⁷ Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a pivotal figure in the "neocon" movement, argued that the challenge facing the United States after 9/11 was far wider than a fight against terrorism: "It is a war of ideas, a struggle over modernity and secularism, pluralism and democracy and real economic development."⁸

However outwardly attractive and compelling, the return of democratic imperialism is rooted in faulty premises that are not merely quixotic but actually counterproductive in spreading democracy, peace, and order around the world. These "follies of democratic imperialism," as I call them, were first formulated by President Woodrow Wilson to justify his democratic crusades in Latin America during an earlier era when America's imperial impulses were in full bloom. They have been adopted virtually unvarnished eight decades later by President Bush, "the most Wilsonian president since Wilson himself,"⁹ conjuring the image of America as "the New Rome."¹⁰ Oddly, the ideals underpinning democratic imperialism are probably more problematic today than when they were first unveiled. Now, as then, they encourage false and unrealistic expectations about the benefits of spreading democracy abroad and the capacity of the United States to develop

democratic practices in places where none existed before.

From Wilson to Bush: Quixotic Ideals

In sending U.S. troops to Mexico in 1914 with the intention of toppling the dictatorship of Gen. Victoriano Huerta, who had seized power through a violent coup the year before, Wilson articulated three principles that comprise the essence of "Wilsonianism," and by extension, democratic imperialism. First is the view that spreading democracy abroad, even by force, is an unqualified blessing. Wilson saw democracy as the source of trust, order, and peace in international relations. "A steadfast concert of peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants," declared Wilson as he dispatched the Marines to occupy the port of Veracruz and force a showdown with what he called "a government of butchers."¹¹ Wilson's faith flowed from what is known today as "democratic peace theory," which contends that democracies, owing to their very constitution, do not go to war with each other.¹² Thus, Wilson reasoned, the more democratic the world, the more peaceful it would become.

Second was Wilson's belief in democracy as a universal value capable of succeeding everywhere. "There is no people not fitted for self government," asserted Wilson as he undertook to bring "an orderly and righteous government" to Mexico.¹³ This cut against the grain of the era's conventional wisdom about Latin America, given its Catholic faith, colonial experience, warm climate, mixed racial heritage, and presumed volatile temperament.¹⁴ A *New York Times* editorial published at the time of Wilson's intervention in Mexico observed that a great part of the Latin American public was "hopelessly ignorant while those of high intelligence, often of pure Spanish blood and free from that racial mixture which has been so prolific, remain aloof from politics."¹⁵

Finally, there was Wilson's conviction that America was the bearer of the moral task of democratizing the world. He believed that "as the definite example of democracy, the United States had a special obligation to extend its benefits and to instruct backward peoples in its uses."¹⁶ This was squarely within the tradition that it was America's "manifest destiny" to create "an exemplary state separate from the corrupt and fallen world devoted to pushing the world along by means of regenerative intervention."¹⁷ Such a providential mandate was rooted in America's unique history: its revolutionary origins, its republican and federal constitution, and its flourishing economy. In Wilson's words: "We are friends of constitutional government in America; we are more than its friends, we are its champions. I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men!"¹⁸ This mission required a hands-on approach, as Wilson stressed in his struggle to redeem Mexico:

The duty of the United States was not to act as a policeman who established order and then left, but rather to provide a strong guiding hand of the great nation on this continent. America must assist these warring people back to the path of quiet and prosperity. After that was accomplished, the United States might leave the Mexicans to work out their own destiny watching them narrowly and insisting that they shall take help when help is needed.¹⁹

Although separated by nearly a century, Wilson's zeal for changing the world anticipates Bush's in strikingly similar ways. "The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values because stable and free nations do not breed ideologies of murder. They encourage the peaceful pursuit of a better life," the president asserted in his AEI speech. In a subsequent address at Whitehall in London in November 2003 meant to

shore up European support for the war in Iraq, Bush reiterated the theme: "Democracy and the hope and progress it brings are the alternative to instability and to hatred and terror. Lasting peace is gained as justice and democracy advance."

Like Wilson, Bush alludes to the universal appeal of democracy, especially in connection to the Middle East which, like Latin America in years past, is today regarded by many as culturally unsuited to democracy. This view has its roots in the perceived incompatibility of Islam and democracy and is underscored by the fact that not a single Arab society can credibly be deemed democratic.²⁰ No less an authority than Princeton's Bernard Lewis, the doyen of Middle East studies, has stated that "Islam is incompatible with democracy as the fundamentalists themselves would be the first to say: they regard liberal democracy as a corrupt and corrupting form of government."²¹ To such skeptics Bush responds: "It is presumptuous and insulting to suggest that a whole region of the world or the one fifth of humanity that is Muslim is somehow untouched by the most basic aspirations of life. Human cultures can be vastly different, yet the human heart desires the same good things everywhere on earth."

And like Wilson, Bush sees America as the chosen agent for transforming the world. "By the resolve and purpose of America and of our friends and allies, we will make this an age of progress and liberty. Free people will set the course of history," Bush proclaimed in his AEI speech. As with Wilson, this mandate to spread democracy is joined to heavily messianic language intended to convey a highly ethical (if not providential) purpose to American foreign policy. "Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world," said the president at the April 13, 2004 press conference defending his policy in Iraq. "And as the greatest power on the face of the earth, we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom."

Despite their allure, these lofty goals account for many a misguided attempt to impose democracy upon others. Especially telling is the fate of Wilson's crusade in Latin America. He had hoped that uprooting despotic regimes in countries like Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Nicaragua would serve as an antidote to revolution. But the democracies fostered by his administration in 1914–21 collapsed almost as soon as they were created. In a cruel twist of fate, some of the regimes born out of the American occupation turned out to be more violent and repressive than their predecessors.

It does not follow, certainly, that Wilson's experience in Latin America will repeat itself in Iraq. Still, it is instructive that the same misguided principles that doomed Wilson's project in Latin America explain much of what has already gone wrong in Iraq.²² Although it is premature to declare the American mission in Iraq a failure, it is obvious to everyone including its architects in Washington and Baghdad that things have not turned out the way they were once envisioned. Two years after the arrival of the Americans, the goal of creating a viable Iraqi democracy remains no more likely than the rise of a dictatorship with Islamic fundamentalists at the helm, or worse yet, a civil war.

Misreading the Democratic Peace

At first glance, the reliance of American presidents on democratic peace theory to rationalize democratic imperialism appears to rest on solid footing. Democratic peace theory is, after all, "the closest thing we have to an empirical law in international relations."²³ Although it is not true that democracies never go to war with each other, it is an irrefutable fact that they rarely do so.²⁴ According to the *Economist*, of the 416 wars between sovereign states recorded between 1816 and 1980, only 12 were fought between democracies.²⁵ But this aversion that democracies appear to have toward war,

however real, is a problematic assumption upon which to build policies of coercive democratization.

The most serious objection is that democratic peace theory leads to an anachronistic way of thinking about war and peace in our own era. While ending wars between states might have given hope for world peace during Wilson's era, this is hardly the case today. The classic view of war as an epic struggle between rival states has been out of date for decades. Nothing suggests this better than the ongoing war on terror. The enemy is not another state but rather an array of cells scattered around the globe. These cells, as in the case of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization, operate not only in autocratic states but also in democracies such as the United States, Britain, and Spain.

Moreover, the greatest sources of instability nowadays are ethnic and religious differences that tend to fuel "intrastate" rather than "interstate" wars. Alas, democratic peace theory does not apply to civil wars, which are harder to contain. Consequently, despite the dramatic spread of democratic governance (depending upon the criteria, as many as three dozen new democracies have been created since the mid-1970s), this appears to have had little discernable impact on diminishing global anarchy, violence, and indeed war.²⁶ According to a study of violent conflicts by Ted Gurr of the University of Maryland, since 1945 ethnic conflict has played a major role in half of all wars and is responsible for millions of deaths and countless refugees. This would appear to suggest that American administrations interested in advancing international peace and order would be better off devising ways to ameliorate conditions that lead to civil war than promoting democracy per se.

The use of democratic peace theory to justify democratic imperialism also suggests an impoverished understanding of the theory. In declaring that democracies do not attack each other or breed murderous ideologies, advocates fail to appreciate that

this proposition applies exclusively to advanced democratic societies. Only stable and mature democracies possess the structural and normative requirements believed to make democracies averse to war, including checks and balances within the political system and societal acceptance of liberal values. These conditions do not develop overnight and are generally in short supply in democratizing states. Unsurprisingly, there is a well-documented affinity between democratization and conflict, which suggests that during the early phases of democratization, countries become “more aggressive and war-prone, not less, and they fight wars with democratic states.”²⁷ This risk appears greatest in states making the sudden leap from total autocracy to mass democracy. By most indicators, this would surely include Iraq and virtually the entire Middle East.

Among the conditions that make democratizing states likely to attack other states is rising nationalism, which often goes hand in hand with the advent of democracy. The “intoxicating brew of nationalism and incipient democratization,” explain Columbia University professors Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, creates favorable conditions for driving a nation toward war. Democratizing states that show strong proclivities toward aggression include postcommunist Russia, where economic distress and belligerent nationalism has contributed to the climate that led to a bloody conflict in Chechnya. In Serbia, the political and military elites facing pressures for democratization cynically created a new basis for legitimacy through nationalist propaganda and aggressive military action against neighbors. Even Spain, the darling of democratization scholars, saw its reputation tarnished for having conducted a “dirty war” against Basque separatist groups following the demise of Generalissimo Francisco Franco’s 40-year dictatorship. For its part, the chaos and terror spawned by groups such as the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) since the advent of Spanish democracy

in 1977 strikingly belies the notion that democracy is a cure-all prescription for curbing political radicalism.

A final consideration is the oft-noted “dark side” of democratic peace theory. In the name of promoting democracy, liberal states are likely to resort to illiberal means. This contradiction has cast the United States in the odd role of a “peace loving aggressor” which uses the pretext of spreading democracy to attack and invade other countries. This scenario was first realized under Wilson in his ill-fated attempt to impose democracy by force on Latin American countries and is being resuscitated by Bush in Iraq. The paradoxical outcome is to undercut the capacity of the United States to engender peace, order, and cooperation around the world. Indeed, promoting democracy may lead to conflict, disorder and mistrust.

Wilson was caught off guard by the resistance and rise of a nationalist backlash provoked by his military intervention in Mexico in 1914. He had predicted that the Mexicans “would come to respect the strength of character of the Marines.”²⁸ Instead, the political class rallied around the Huerta dictatorship and denounced Wilson for his interventionist policies. Thousands of Mexicans volunteered to fight the invading Americans, and at U.S. consulates flags were burned. Clashes occurred along the U.S.-Mexican border and anti-American riots broke out in Mexico City, spreading to Costa Rica, Guatemala, Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay. This crisis grew so serious that Argentina, Brazil, and Chile offered to step in and mediate a settlement between the Huerta government and Washington. At the Niagara Falls, Ontario, mediation conference of May-June 1914, Wilson’s insistence that Huerta relinquish power and order free elections startled the South American mediators and led to the conference’s failure.

Having shown himself an aggressor in his dealings with Mexico, Wilson saw his

plans for a Pan American Treaty opposed and eventually derailed because constitutional democracies like Argentina and Chile feared U.S. meddling in their internal affairs. Argentine and Chilean leaders believed the United States “aimed at domination in Latin America” and “feared that the Treaty’s requirement for a republican form of government” would tend to erect United States tutelage over Latin America.²⁹ In the end, the treaty perished, “a victim of the belief that although Wilson had renounced overt imperialism, his interventionism, the growth of American economic influence, and his insistence on political conformity all added up to a sort of informal imperialism that was just as objectionable as the cruder colonialism of an earlier day.”³⁰

The Bush White House has already tasted the paradoxical and unintended consequences of democratic imperialism. In the apt words of one analyst, postwar Iraq has become “a jobs program for jihadists worldwide,” a direct reference to the way in which the invasion of Iraq has emboldened terrorists throughout the Islamic world, many of whom have flocked to Iraq to fight Americans.³¹ This, in turn, has hardly helped in making Iraq into a positive model; among ordinary Arabs, Iraq’s example has seemed “more alarming than inspiring.”³² Many view Iraq as a chaotic and violent land where thousands of civilians have been killed due to the occupation. They also regard the United States less as a purveyor of freedom and democracy, as Washington had hoped, than as the latest in a string of foreign powers attempting to subjugate their region. This negative perception has been hardened by human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and the protection accorded to Iraq’s oil reserves while the country’s cultural assets were left vulnerable to looters and robbers.

Beyond the Middle East, the consequences of the American-led war in Iraq are readily evident. Most notable is the damage done to the United Nations and longstand-

ing relationships with France and Germany, prompting some to lament “the death of American internationalism.”³³ Anti-Americanism abroad, virtually extinct in the aftermath of 9/11, reached unprecedented heights and is currently frustrating efforts by the Bush administration to secure international support for the reconstruction of Iraq.

The Bush administration has also been willing to undermine democracy in some countries in its attempt to spread it to others, including, paradoxically, places where the United States has actively supported democratization. Mexico and Chile, two members of the U.N. Security Council that refused to endorse a resolution authorizing American military action against Iraq, incurred the wrath of Washington for essentially reflecting popular sentiment, which in both cases was overwhelmingly opposed to the war. American officials assumed that Turkey, a country that Washington hopes will become a model of democracy for the Muslim world, would support an attack on Iraq, as it did in the first Gulf war. Once it seemed clear that any agreement with the Bush administration would be subjected to parliamentary approval, the United States tried to circumvent the process by essentially bribing Turkish politicians with economic and military aid. As one Turkish politician noted, “They [the Americans] were used to dealing with our generals and not with politicians trying to be democratic.”³⁴ The Bush administration underscored this very paradox while struggling to explain Turkey’s failure to support the American position in Iraq. Reflecting on the negative vote against the United States, Wolfowitz criticized Turkey’s military “for not playing the strong leadership role we would have expected.”

Misunderstanding Democratization

The thesis that democracy can grow in virtually any soil is inherently appealing and even enlightened; what could be more ideal-

istic than the notion that no culture is inimical to democracy? It may be true as well. Plenty of countries once condemned to perpetual authoritarian rule have managed to reinvent themselves as thriving democracies. The nations of Latin America during Wilson's time were regarded as a cesspool of authoritarian vices; nowadays, with the obvious exception of Cuba, they are ruled entirely by democratic governments. Spain and Portugal, paradigmatic examples of corporatism and dictatorship through the mid-1970s, are today highly successful pluralist democracies. Germany and Japan, two other miracles of postwar democratization, were once regarded as infertile ground for democracy due to the conformist culture of their people and the authoritarian orientation of their political leaders.

What appears to have turned former authoritarian enclaves into democratic models is the capacity to nurture internal conditions favorable to the maintenance of democracy. These generally include a civic culture able to accommodate compromise as well as dissent and pluralism, significant social and economic development, a strong sense of national identity, stable and competent political institutions, and a free and vibrant civil society. Whether these are "preconditions" or "by-products" of democracy and how precisely they facilitate democracy remains a source of debate among social scientists. But two things about the rise of these conditions are clear, which American presidents tend to overlook.

First, attaining the conditions that favor the installation and maintenance of democracy is a long-term process not immune to backsliding. It cannot be abbreviated, expedited, or circumvented by introducing political practices such as free elections and a democratic constitution. As Wilson learned in Latin America, "electoralism" and "constitutionalism" do not guarantee democracy; indeed, they do not even ensure its survival. The attempt to impose democratic practices throughout Mexico, Central America, and

the Caribbean in the years between 1913 and 1921 failed to yield stable democratic governance. In the wake of the American intervention of 1914, the Mexican political class turned not only authoritarian and nationalistic but also intensely anti-American. Democracy would not arrive in Mexico until 2000, following decades of economic and political modernization. In Central America and the Caribbean, Wilson's military occupations and attempts at creating democracy paved the way for a new generation of brutal tyrannies, including those of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, and Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua.

The reasons for the failure of Wilson's policy in Latin America include some of the same ones that prevented democracy from taking root in the aftermath of Iberian colonialism. Most republics that were created during the 1820s and 1830s adopted democratic institutions of their own free will and most, interestingly, took the American Constitution and presidential political system as their model. But few of these democracies were able to overcome their undemocratic colonial legacies, especially an illiberal ruling class, a powerful and reactionary Catholic Church, widespread poverty, and underdeveloped state institutions. Postindependence, this hindered a consensus on national identity, the development of coherent political institutions and autonomous civil societies, and respect for the rule of law. Reverting to authoritarianism seemed almost natural after democratic politics proved chaotic and unable to solve pressing social issues. Small wonder that in the end Wilson came to accept authoritarianism in a Mexico led by revolutionists "because he had become convinced that agrarian and other socioeconomic reforms were more pressing than electoralism."⁵⁵

Second, although the United States can assist in encouraging the conditions that favor democracy, it can neither create them nor sufficiently develop them to determine

whether democracy succeeds or fails in the long term. As noted by the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, "There is little that the United States can do to alter the basic cultural tradition and social structure of another society or to promote compromise among groups of that society that have been killing each other."³⁶ Instead, the conditions that favor democracy depend for their emergence largely upon the political skills of a given society. This is the lesson we can absorb from the experience of Germany and Japan, two countries where democracy's success is often linked to an effective American occupation. "Because we and our allies were steadfast, Germany and Japan are democratic nations that no longer threaten the world," remarked Bush in a speech, "Freedom in Iraq and the Middle East," delivered on November 6, 2003, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy.

However, much of the historiography on the democratization of postwar Germany and Japan cautions about giving too much credit to America for having engineered a democratic miracle.³⁷ It suggests instead that the talents and determination of the German and Japanese people (rather than those of the American occupying forces) were in the end chiefly responsible for their transformation. Many of the democratization schemes designed by the Americans were aborted, canceled, or evaded by the local governments soon after the Cold War broke out. Additionally, this scholarship stresses other conditions favoring democracy, a point some observers believe has been overlooked in comparisons between the American intervention in Japan and Germany and Iraq.³⁸ Prior to the Second World War, Germany and Japan were economic powerhouses with a strong sense of national identity facilitated by ethnic homogeneity and well-developed state bureaucracies. Indeed, it was economic might and ultranationalism that made these countries such formidable military powers. Both countries

were also eager to return to the generally democratic life they had during the interwar period. Although flawed and unstable, Japan's Taisho democracy and Germany's Weimar Republic provided templates for the re-creation of democracy.

Paradoxically, Iraq, where a demonstration effect is expected to serve as a catalyst for spreading democracy across the Middle East, presents one of the most challenging environments for democracy. There is a dearth of democratic consciousness within Iraqi political society. While political pluralism is on the rise, it is hard to gauge the intentions of nascent parties and social movements. Some of the country's most powerful political organizations, such as those headed by powerful Shiite clerics, including Muqtada al-Sadr, the young cleric who incited the Fallujah uprising in April 2004, and the all-powerful Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most respected religious leader, participated in the country's first democratic elections. But as the Iraqi people begin the process of crafting a new constitution it is unclear how committed to the democratic process these groups actually are. Many of them are calling for the merging of religious and secular authority so typical of other Middle Eastern societies, notably Iran.³⁹ They also oppose many liberal reforms (such as granting rights to women) and regard America as a purveyor of values that stand in contrast to their cherished traditional order.

Moreover, under Saddam, the state bureaucracy in Iraq did not function as a coherent, merit-based system (as was largely true of prewar Germany and Japan) but rather as something more typical of Latin America during Wilson's time: a hotbed of clientelism, corruption, and loyalty toward the dictator.⁴⁰ Equally worrisome are Iraq's economic prospects. In recent decades, Iraq has experienced a staggering reversal of development, best suggested by the collapse of per capita income. In 1979, when Saddam Hussein came to power, Iraq's per capita

GNP stood at \$12,000—twenty-first in the world, ahead of Spain and Hong Kong. Today it stands at less than \$3,000, behind the Philippines and Ecuador.⁴¹ According to democratization experts, for democracy to endure in Iraq, per capita income will need to almost double (to \$5,500).⁴² This is a tall order, to be sure; one that the Bush administration hopes will be made possible by Iraq's oil riches. But this assumption is contradicted by cross-national data on the connection between oil and democracy. In Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, Venezuela, and much of the Middle East, an oil-dependent economy has become the seedbed for authoritarianism, corruption, and civil war. Indeed, the collective experience of these nations has given rise to the so-called resource curse, with oil becoming a hindrance to rather than a facilitator of democracy.

The picture of civil society, the social actor believed to grease the wheels of democracy by inculcating such public values as trust and tolerance and by providing a sturdy defense against state abuses, is also bleak, to say the least. Islamist groups, the most prominent face of civil society in Iraq and across the Middle East, do not commonly frame their objectives in terms of democratic values. Many of them have in recent years moved to fill the void left behind by a failing government by offering a wide range of social services from education and transportation to healthcare. But this has come at the expense of the general "Islamization" and radicalization of society resulting from the rigid and often intolerant character of religious organizations now performing functions previously in the hands of state authorities.⁴³

Lastly, there is Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity, with Shia in the south, Sunnis in the center, and Kurds in the north. This volatile mix discourages a strong sense of national identity, making it difficult for democratization to rest on widespread societal solidarity. It also increases the possibility

that democracy will become a source of conflict in its own right. In the last three decades, few multiethnic states have been able to orchestrate a successful transition to democracy: witness the case of the Soviet Union and its successor states (most notably those in Central Asia and the Caucasus). More tragically, there is the case of Yugoslavia, where "ethnic cleansing" was an early fruit of majority rule. Ironically, contributing to the collapse of these states as they undertook to democratize was the existence of federalist structures, which the Bush administration seemingly regards as a prescription for dealing with Iraq's ethnic divisions.

The Perils of Imposing Democracy

The belief that the United States is uniquely endowed and therefore especially burdened with the task of spreading democracy is problematic on many fronts. Efforts by American presidents to articulate this mission have often had unintended consequences. Early references to the war in Iraq as a democratizing "crusade" were dropped from Bush's speeches once reports from the Middle East indicated how offensive the term was to local audiences. More problematic are the political dynamics unleashed by the imposition of democracy. Democratic imperialism entails the fundamental paradox of making the transition to democracy more complicated than it otherwise would be. The liberalization of a people from dictatorship by an external force entails the abrupt, usually violent, end of the old regime. This mode of regime change is effective in purging authoritarian forces deeply ensconced within the bureaucratic structures of the state. But it sets an inauspicious stage for the transition to democracy by creating a void in political authority, not to speak of the considerable chaos that can ensue.

Iraq tellingly suggests how an occupation can itself become an obstacle to democratization. The "systematic looting and destruction of practically every public build-

ing in Baghdad” created by the American invasion made restoring basic services such as electricity more difficult to accomplish while imbuing the emerging political culture with a great deal of incivility.⁴⁴ More serious was the vacuum in political authority created with the sudden passing of the old regime. A month into the military occupation, U.S. administrator Paul Bremer announced the disbanding of the Iraqi Republican Army, some 400,000 strong, and the lustration of 50,000 members of the Baath Party. The aim was laudable: to cleanse Iraq of Saddam’s political influence once and for all. Unintentionally, Bremer’s actions created a formidable resistance to American authority and exacerbated the fault lines of domestic political conflict. As reported by one Iraqi observer, “May 15 was the day the United States made 450,000 enemies in Iraq.”⁴⁵ This resistance is, if anything, stronger than ever, and in an effort to stamp out the violence spawned by terrorist groups, Iraq’s new leaders have curtailed civil and political freedoms.

Another flaw in America’s self-anointed role as a democratic crusader is that it entails creating democracy through undemocratic means. Imposing democracy requires one country to intrude itself in the political affairs of another country, thereby robbing democracy of its indigenous legitimacy. Arguably the most intrusive step in the imposition of democracy is the creation of an interim or provisional government. They are generally designed to meet short-term interests, such as securing political order, rather than the more complex task of developing democratic institutions. Less intrusive but equally problematic is the staging of post-occupation elections, a key benchmark of democratic imperialism. In an attempt to ensure the desired outcome, the invading power will likely seek to influence (if not manipulate) the elections by deciding what groups can participate and which cannot.

Wilson’s experience in Latin America vividly illustrates how external intervention

in the construction of democracy is hardly an exercise in democracy. His administration wrote electoral laws and constitutions, and went so far as to encourage or discourage particular candidates or parties, seeking those most likely to govern effectively (and to serve U.S. interests). Unsurprisingly, forced and manipulated elections often provoked internal disputes. Complicating matters, many of the institutions relied upon to guarantee the survival of democracy evinced scant respect for democracy and its values. The task of consolidating democratic political life was often given to the military, ushering in a long and tragic history of military intervention in politics.

The case of the Dominican Republic is especially instructive. The United States ruled the country between 1916 and 1924, and oversaw the organization of the judiciary, the Treasury, and the Ministry of Agriculture, and the creation of a provisional government in 1922. Before leaving, the Americans also created a national constabulary (national guard) in the hope of improving the capacity of civilian leaders to sustain constitutional rule. This was meant to “depoliticize the armed forces, serving to bolster stable, constitutional government.”⁴⁶ This strategy backfired spectacularly. Soon after the Americans left, the Dominican Republic plunged into a civil war that ended in 1930 when Trujillo assumed control by virtue of his command of the National Guard. Trujillo abolished the liberal reforms instituted by the Americans, harshly repressed the opposition, and terrorized the country’s neighbors, not least by massacring some 12,000 Haitians along the Haitian-Dominican border in 1937. “Wilson’s dreams of a constitutional order had become a nightmare,” concludes one scholar of Wilson’s Dominican policy.⁴⁷

Similar dynamics to those of the Latin American experience are already visible in Iraq. There is the obvious lack of legitimacy of the interim governments the Americans have installed in the country. The Iraqi

Governing Council, dismantled in June 2003, was widely criticized for its lack of autonomy, for consisting primarily of Iraqi exiles, and for failing to incorporate the whole spectrum of Iraqi political factions. The same fate befell the “sovereign” government inaugurated on June 28, 2004, led by its American-approved head, Iyad Alawi, the former president of the Governing Council. Charges that these governments were essentially a cover for Washington were underscored by the restrictions on national autonomy incorporated into the declaration of sovereignty likely to perpetuate American control of Iraq for years. As of this writing, Iraq continues to be ruled by edicts enacted by the Bremer administration covering a wide range of subjects from crime to the economy to foreign affairs, including shielding every U.S. soldier, coalition employee, and private contractor from Iraqi law.

In Iraq, as in Latin America, the United States is employing intrusive political engineering with uncertain consequences for the development of democracy. Iraq’s first free democratic elections, remarkable in many respects, failed to become a symbol of national unity and reconciliation. To the contrary, the Sunni parties boycotted the elections on the grounds that they lacked legitimacy since the voting was taking place under the American occupation. Yet to be worked out are a new democratic constitution and the relationship between the new Iraqi government and the thousands of Americans expected to remain in the country. How the United States manages these sensitive tasks will play a critical role in determining whether the new government is perceived to be legitimate and working toward Iraqi, rather than American, interests.

Finally, America’s commitment to spreading democracy is often at odds with the reality of protecting the “national interest,” as defined by strategic economic and political goals. Reconciling these often contradictory objectives leaves U.S. foreign pol-

icy vulnerable to the criticism of being inconsistent, even hypocritical. It was this clash between professed ideals and the pursuit of the national interest that ended Wilson’s efforts to impose democracy in Latin America. His administration found it very difficult to insist on a uniform standard of democracy since Wilson was unprepared to defend the policy across the region. It was applied uniformly and coercively to the nations of Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, but ran afoul in South America, where Wilson was less willing to deny diplomatic recognition to authoritarian governments, much less to intervene militarily against an autocratic regime. In Peru in 1913, and again in 1919, the Wilson administration denied recognition to a provisional government because it had been established by force. However, Wilson later reversed course and granted recognition anyway.

The Bush administration is similarly caught between its desire to spread democracy and the pursuit of such “national interests” as fighting terrorism, giving American policy in the Middle East an egregious “split personality.”⁴⁸ Despite his ringing calls for democracy, President Bush actively cultivates warm relations with numerous regional tyrants. The evident hypocrisy of this approach was vividly demonstrated during his June 2003 visit to the Middle East. Rather than pressing the leaders of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to implement democratic reforms, the president spent almost all of his time talking about the fight against terrorism and extremist groups. This only reinforced “the widespread perception that the United States uses democracy as a whip to punish its enemies, like Iraq, while doing business as usual with its autocratic allies.”⁴⁹

A Second Look at Democratic Imperialism

The inescapable realities of Iraq are gradually forcing a second look at democratic imperialism. Speculation about the next target

in the Middle East for coercive democratization (Syria or Iran?), which was intense following the invasion of Iraq, has decreased. Neoconservatives are contending with a resurgent “realpolitik” critique of American policy in Iraq.⁵⁰ The *National Review*, a bible of conservative thought, has already dismissed the Wilsonian ideal of implanting democracy in Iraq and has recommended instead settling for an orderly society with a nondictatorial regime.⁵¹ This rising skepticism is welcome, although one hopes it does not signify deemphasizing democracy in American foreign policy. Despite the many faulty principles that over the years have mocked American efforts, the United States remains the main force for democratic change around the world. The real issue is what type of democratic promotion is best suited to advancing democracy abroad.

America’s own experience with democratic promotion suggests that this mission is most effective when its coercive, heavy-handed approaches are checked and its energies focused instead on facilitating the conditions that enable nations to embrace democracy of their own free will: promoting human rights, alleviating poverty, and building effective governing institutions. These were the policies that helped the people of Latin America and the former Communist bloc embrace democracy. The Republican president who subsequently sought to repair relations with Latin America following Wilson’s aggressive attempts to democratize the region understood this point. While traveling throughout South America in 1928, President Herbert Hoover promised to promote democracy by example rather than by force. In remarks that must have come as a great relief to Latin American audiences weary of American aggression, Hoover remarked: “True democracy is not and cannot be imperialistic.”⁵² ●

Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my colleague and friend James Chace, whose probing analy-

ses of U.S. foreign policy warn of the dangers of unrestrained American power even when the intent is to do good. I am grateful he was able to read and comment upon this essay before his sudden and untimely death in October 2004.

1. The origins of democratic imperialism in American history can be traced to the Spanish American war of 1898 and the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico. For a concise view of American interventions in the name of democracy see Minxin Pei, “Lessons from the Past,” *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2003).

2. Unless otherwise noted, this and other quotes from Bush’s speech to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) are taken from the transcript found in the *New York Times*, February 27, 2003.

3. On these paradigmatic views of democratic promotion see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

4. Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79 (January/February 2000). In this now famous essay, Rice identifies four key principles for American foreign policy. Direct promotion of democracy is not one of them, which Rice dismisses as “a second-order effect.”

5. Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The Promise of Arab Liberalism,” *Policy Review*, June/July 2004, pp. 64–65.

6. Quoted in Amy Hawthorne, “Can the United States Promote Democracy in the Middle East?” *Current History*, January 2003, p. 22.

7. For a broader exposition of these ideas see Charles Krauthammer, “Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World,” 2004 Irving Kristol Lecture, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., February 10, 2004.

8. Augustus Richard Norton, “America in the Middle East: Statesmanship versus Politics,” *Current History*, January 2003, p. 5.

9. Lawrence F. Kaplan, “Regime Change,” *New Republic*, March 3, 2003, p. 21.

10. Peter Bender, “America: The New Roman Empire?” *Orbis*, vol. 47 (winter 2003).

11. Woodrow Wilson quoted in G. John Ikenberry, “Why Export Democracy?” *Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 23 (spring 1999), p. 56.

12. The origins of the democratic peace theory are generally traced to Emmanuel Kant’s classic essay

Perpetual Peace (1795). For contemporary interpretations of this theory, see Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs," in *Debating the Democratic Peace: An International Security Reader*, ed. Sean Lynn-Jones, Michael Brown, and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

13. Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 70.

14. See Frederick B. Pike, "Wild People in Wild Lands: Early American Views of Latin America," in Michael LaRosa and Frank O. Mora, ed., *Neighborhoodly Adversaries: U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

15. Sidney Bell, *Righteous Conquest: Woodrow Wilson and the Evolution of the New Diplomacy* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications/Kennikat Press, 1972), p. 59.

16. Don M. Coerver and Linda B. Hall, *Tangled Destinies: Latin America and the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), p. 62.

17. Thomas G. Patterson, J. Garry Clifford, and Kenneth J. Hagan, *American Foreign Relations: A History to 1920* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 9.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

19. Bell, *Righteous Conquest*, p. 78.

20. On the perceived incompatibility of Islam and democracy see Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994). For a dissenting view see Ray Takeyh, "The Lineaments of Islamic Democracy," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 18 (winter 2001/02).

21. Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7 (April 1996), p. 54.

22. See Paul Krugman, "Who Lost Iraq?" *New York Times*, June 29, 2004; and Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83 (September/October 2004).

23. Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1988).

24. Debates about democratic peace theory are hampered by the absence of scholarly consensus as to what constitutes a democratic nation. Among the

most frequently cited examples of democracies going to war with each other are the United States and Britain in 1812, the United States and Spain in 1898, Finland and the Allied Powers during the Second World War, and Israel and Lebanon in 1981.

25. "The Politics of Peace," *Economist*, April 1, 1995, p. 17.

26. The years since the mid-1970s have been described as "the greatest period of democratic ferment in the history of modern civilization." Between 1974 and 1990, 30 new democracies were established and that number does not include the many new democracies launched with the collapse of communism. See Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

27. Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74 (May/June 1995), pp. 79–80.

28. Bell, *Righteous Conquest*, p. 79.

29. Kendrick A. Clements, *The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), p. 96.

30. *Ibid.*

31. David E. Sanger, "Failure as an Option: Looking at the Costs if Iraq Goes up in Smoke," *New York Times*, June 27, 2004.

32. Steven R. Weisman, "The Great Middle East Shake-Up," *New York Times*, January 30, 2005.

33. James Chace, "Present at the Destruction: The Death of American Internationalism," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 20 (spring 2003).

34. Deborah Sontag, "The Erdogan Experiment," *New York Times Magazine*, May 11, 2003.

35. Paul W. Drake, "From Good Men to Good Neighbors: 1912–1932," in *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America*, ed. Abraham F. Lowenthal (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 16.

36. Samuel F. Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 99 (summer 1984), p. 218.

37. See Thomas Alan Schwartz, *America's Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (Norton/Free Press, 1999).

38. See, especially, Eva Bellin, "The Iraqi Intervention and Democracy in Comparative Perspective," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 119 (winter 2004–05).
39. Edward Wong, "Top Iraq Shiites Pushing Religion in Constitution," *New York Times*, February 6, 2005.
40. See Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
41. Robert J. Barro, "A Democratic Iraq is not an Impossible Dream," *Business Week*, March 31, 2003, p. 28.
42. Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Material Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 98.
43. See Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution and Civil Society," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 1 (June 2003).
44. David Rieff, "Blueprint for a Mess," *New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 2003, p. 44.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
46. Jonathan Hartlyn, "The Dominican Republic: The Legacy of Intermittent Engagement," in Lowenthal, ed., *Exporting Democracy*, p. 58.
47. Smith, *America's Mission*, p. 73.
48. Thomas Carothers, "Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83 (January/February 2003).
49. Fawaz A. Gerges, "Can Democracy Take Root in the Islamic World? Empty Promises of Freedom," *New York Times*, July 18, 2003.
50. See John Tierney, "The Hawks Loudly Express Their Second Thoughts," *New York Times*, May 16, 2004; and James Mann, "For Bush, Realpolitik Is No Longer a Dirty Word," *New York Times*, April 11, 2004.
51. Tierney, "Hawks Loudly Express Their Second Thoughts."
52. Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 64.