



The Democratic Ideal

By Joshua Muravchik

President George W. Bush's inaugural call to spread liberty across the globe has been criticized as overly ambitious and optimistic, yet history shows that democracy can take root even under the most difficult conditions and that democratic societies are largely peaceful.

Wouldn't. Couldn't. Shouldn't. These were the refrains of the cognoscenti in response to President Bush's inaugural address. Many conceded that the speech had moments of eloquence. But as a framework for U.S. policy, they found it had no hope of success and could lead to a passel of troubles. They took comfort only in the thought that the president did not really mean what he said. Peggy Noonan reminded the president that "this is not heaven, it's earth." In a similar vein, Mark Helprin called the president's advocacy of "evangelical democracy" a "manic idea." "Will we refuse to buy Saudi oil?" asked William Buckley, mockingly. Not to worry, soothed the *New York Times's* David Sanger, the whole thing was "hopelessly vague and without a time frame."

Those who are skeptical of injecting issues of freedom, democracy, and human rights into the conduct of foreign policy call themselves "realists," and they accuse their opposite numbers—the so-called idealists—of an almost juvenile enthusiasm. But a sober reading of the historical evidence shows that President Bush and his fellow idealists are more realistic than the "realists."

Democratic Advances

To begin with, the idealists are right about the possibility for freedom and democracy to spread across borders and cultures. In 1775 there were

no democracies. Then came the American Revolution, which raised the number to one. Some 230 years later there are 117, accounting for 61 percent of the world's governments.

This historic transformation in the norms of governance has not occurred at a steady pace. Rather, it has accelerated. Just over thirty years ago, the proportion of democracies was about half of what it is today. Political scientist Samuel Huntington has dubbed these years of rapid transition democracy's "third wave." The wave metaphor, however, gives the impression of an inevitable ebb. But each of Huntington's first two waves left the world considerably freer and more democratic than it had been before. And there is no telling how long a democracy "wave" will last.

The first wave began with the American Revolution and continued through the peacemaking that followed World War I, which created many fledgling states with short-lived democratic systems. The second wave began with decolonization after World War II and lasted only until the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia lapsed into dictatorship. The "third wave" began in 1974 with the transition of Portugal from military rule. The remaining dictatorships of southern Europe (Greece and Spain) soon disappeared. Then, the wave swept over Latin America and Eastern Europe and lapped the shores of East Asia and Africa. The rest of the world might well go democratic before this tide is spent.

Moreover, there is the factor of example and momentum: as the proportion of democracies

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rises, it will become harder for the remaining authoritarians to hold out. The skeptics ridicule President Bush for declaring his ultimate goal to be the end of tyranny. But today probably no more than 20 percent of the world's governments could rightly be called by that name, whereas once the proportion was vastly higher. Why shouldn't that 20 percent go the way of the others?

The skeptics continue to point to cultural differences to explain why democracy is absent from various non-Western states. But this is the true picture: In Latin America and the Caribbean, 32 out of 35 states have elected governments. In Asia and the Pacific, the share is 23 out of 39. In the states of the former Soviet Union and its satellites, 17 out of 27 are democratic. And in sub-Saharan Africa, 19 out of 48, or 40 percent, of the governments have been elected by their people, despite the familiar litany of disabilities: poverty, illiteracy, AIDS, tribalism, and borders drawn artificially by former foreign rulers.

Transforming the Middle East

The one region completely left behind, until now, by this democratic revolution is the Middle East and North Africa, where Israel remains the only democracy among eighteen states. In the wake of 9/11, President Bush concluded that it was no accident that this region where democracy was uniquely absent was the epicenter of global terrorism, and it was here that he launched his campaign for freedom, of which his second inaugural address was a broader statement.

Already, he has made a dent. Democracy has begun in Afghanistan (a part of Asia, not the Middle East, properly speaking, but linked to the latter politically as the former base of radical Islam). President Bush held out for democratic reform of the Palestinian Authority, and in the last month there have been municipal and presidential elections. Legislative and more municipal elections will come in the months ahead. Iraq's recent election, although held under tortuous conditions, will nonetheless move that country along the path to democracy.

Elsewhere in the region, despite America's unpopularity, President Bush's advocacy of democracy has

emboldened democrats and elicited concessions from rulers. In Egypt, dissident Saad-Eddin Ibrahim has said he aims to run for president against twenty-four-year incumbent Hosni Mubarak, although Mubarak clapped him in jail for a lesser act of defiance only a few years ago. In Saudi Arabia, men will vote to fill half of the

seats of municipal councils over the next three months, a small break with absolutism. In Lebanon, a multiethnic slate will run in legislative elections in the spring on a platform opposed to Syrian occupation. Other elections will be held in Yemen and Oman.

In addition, Egypt's first independent daily newspaper was launched last year. In May, a new network, Democracy Television, owned and run by Arab liberals, will begin broadcasting to the region by satellite from London. Almost every month a new statement demanding democratic reform is issued by Arab intellectuals, recently for example in Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

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Others warn that to recklessly overthrow benign dictators will pave the way for less benign radicals. But there is no need to simply topple regimes: Our goal will surely be incremental change. And our key method should be to strengthen indigenous democrats through moral, political, and material support, so they can be the agents of peaceful political transitions.

Still others make the reverse argument, saying that if we do not move single-mindedly for regime change then we are not sincere. But, democratization cannot be the only item on our diplomatic agenda. There will be other pressing issues like security and economics. The test of President Bush's sincerity is not whether he pursues freedom to the exclusion of everything else, but whether he insists on including it consistently among our priorities.

A foreign policy that makes freedom a touchstone will of course entail some self-contradictions and hypocrisies and doubts about our sincerity. The same was

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true when President Carter elevated human rights to a new prominence. Nonetheless, in doing so he changed the world for the better and advanced America's interests. It was embarrassing when President Carter fawned over the Shah of Iran and the Communist dictators of Poland, Romania, and the USSR. But where are those men now, or the governments they headed?

Despite the skeptics, all historical evidence suggests that democracy can indeed spread further, that America can serve as an agent of its advancement, as it has done all over the world, and that democracy's spread will make the world safer. And for those who doubt that President Bush is earnest about his campaign for freedom, I refer them to Mullah Omar or Saddam Hussein.