

Democracy: The Case for Opportunistic Idealism

George W. Bush's second inaugural address on January 20, 2005 was clearly written with the history books in mind. In ringing terms, the president proclaimed, "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."¹ The pro-democracy rhetoric of the Bush era, however, already looks hubristic, and even somewhat hypocritical, as a new president prepares to take office in the United States. The sweeping universalism of the language employed by Bush was always vulnerable to qualification, when principle encountered local realities. Certainly in some of the United States' closest democratic allies, such as India, Israel, and the United Kingdom, there is an increasingly open skepticism about the idea of placing democracy promotion at the heart of foreign policy.

The inconsistencies in the foreign policy of the Bush administration have ensured that this skepticism has now entered the domestic debate in the United States as well, making the very idea of democracy promotion overseas controversial. So should a new administration ditch the entire policy? Or are there other, better, ways of pursuing the same goal?

Bush's Inconsistent Freedom Agenda

In the United Kingdom, it is a common belief that the attempt to export democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of invasions was a mistake. David Cameron, the leader of UK's Conservative Party, argued on a recent trip to Pakistan that "we should accept that we cannot impose democracy at the barrel of a gun. We cannot drop democracy from 10,000 feet and we should not

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The Washington Quarterly • 32:1 pp. 119–127

try.”² A senior official in the UK Foreign Office broadly concurs with this analysis, arguing that the West’s initial mistake in Afghanistan was “to think we could go in there and turn it into a mini-Switzerland. That was clearly a mistake. And we’re now retreating to a more realistic policy goal, which is just to stop the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorism.”³

It was an Israeli thinker and politician, Natan Sharansky, whose book *The Case for Democracy* is said to have done a lot to inspire Bush’s faith in democracy promotion. Yet, to judge from a visit I paid to the country in late 2007, many in the Israeli foreign policy establishment are less convinced. Some fear that democratization in their Arab neighbors would lead to the rise of Islamist parties and an increased security threat to Israel. Some senior Israeli diplomats even mused that it might be best if Iraq were once again governed by a “Sunni strong-man.”

Hard-headed realism also seems to prevail in India. Indian officials, like the British and the Israelis, have a general bias in favor of democratic governance and are sympathetic to democracy activists. Yet, when democracy promotion runs into national interest, they have little hesitation about where their priorities lie. So, for example, the Indian government has downplayed its support for Aung San Suu Kyi, the imprisoned democratic leader in neighboring Burma, in favor of a pragmatic effort to cultivate a good working relationship with the Burmese military junta. Indian officials argue that shunning the junta would simply push Burma into the arms of the Chinese. It would also mean that the Indians would lose the cooperation of the Burmese military in the struggle against insurgents in northeastern India.

U.S. officials and politicians tend to be less blunt about adopting a realist approach to the world. The language of human rights and democracy promotion is too deeply entrenched in U.S. political culture to make that feasible. Yet, a tack back toward realism appears to have been taking place under the Bush administration. For a brief period, it did seem that the administration might put real pressure on key authoritarian allies like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia to liberalize.

In June 2005, a few months after the president’s second inaugural address, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a speech in Cairo that was interpreted as a rallying call for democratic forces across the Middle East, and a not so subtle hint to her Egyptian hosts. Citing Bush’s second inaugural address in her support, Rice argued that “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”⁴ Yet, the sense that the United States was about to put real pressure on autocratic allies in the Middle East did not last long. Some trace the change of attitude to the electoral success

of Hamas in Palestine in January 2006, which made U.S. officials realize late that democratic elections in the Arab world could lead to the rise of Islamists, who are generally hostile to the United States.

In the aftermath of the election of Hamas, efforts to put pressure on President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were swiftly watered down. The U.S. attitude toward the return of democracy in Pakistan, and the loss of President Pervez Musharraf as a reliable ally, was also highly equivocal. Washington stuck by Musharraf, even after his democratic credentials had been severely tarnished by an assault on the independence of the judiciary in March 2007. U.S. democracy promotion policy in the Persian Gulf was also clearly inconsistent. The United States remained closely allied to Saudi Arabia, a feudal autocracy. Ironically Iran, the biggest U.S. foe, is clearly more democratic than Saudi Arabia, its closest ally.

These obvious inconsistencies led some to argue that Bush had actually discredited the very notion of democracy promotion. Lawrence Freedman, professor of war studies at King's College, London has written acerbically that "When a president routinely describes every act of policy as a blow for 'freedom,' the word gets devalued, just as the word 'peace' did when it became a staple of Soviet propaganda."⁵ The charge that democracy promotion has fallen foul of hubris and hypocrisy is also made with increasing strength within the United States itself, where liberal critics blame neoconservative ideologues for embroiling the United States in a bloody war in Iraq. Indeed it is one of Bush's more peculiar achievements that he has turned democracy promotion from a bipartisan U.S. tradition, closely associated with Democratic presidents like Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy, into a subject of partisan dispute. Many believe that the Bush administration pushed democracy promotion too far, while others still argue that that United States should "pay any price, bear any burden" to promote liberty and democracy.

The judgment within the United States is further complicated by the fact that many observers of international politics are beginning to suspect that a long wave of democratization is coming to a close. Timothy Garton Ash, an Oxford academic and journalist, suggests that "Future historians may regard the three decades from Portugal's revolution of the carnations in 1974 to Ukraine's orange revolution in 2004 as *trente glorieuses* (thirty glorious years) for the spread of liberty, in Europe, but also in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia."⁶ Ash further suggests that 08/08/08 or August 8, 2008—when the Chinese staged a spectacular Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing while Russia rolled its tanks

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into Georgia—may mark the moment when authoritarianism regained its confidence in the face of the onward march of democracy.

Lessons from the *Trente Glorieuses*

Well before the start of the Beijing summer Olympics, there were plenty of signs during 2008 that the democratic gains of the last 30 years are

far from irreversible. In Russia itself, the carefully stage-managed election of President Dmitry Medvedev was another sign that the democratic hopes of the Yeltsin era were being gradually interred. In Africa, Zimbabwean democracy was crushed by the Mugabe government, and in Kenya, a democratic presidential election brought the country to the brink of war.

It seems unlikely that these setbacks will lead to a wholesale conversion to realism in upper echelons of the U.S. government. The rhetoric of freedom and liberty is too deeply entrenched in U.S. politics—and was deployed by both John McCain and Barack Obama in the presidential campaign. Indeed McCain made forming a new global alliance, or League of Democracies, one of the centerpieces of his foreign policy platform.

Yet, any new attempt to frame a policy of democracy promotion should start by trying to understand what happened during the “*trente glorieuses*.” The biggest lesson is that the emergence of democracy was strongest when it was the result of indigenous processes. When democracy was imported from outside, either through invasion or an internationally sponsored peace process, it was much less likely to stick. Changes in external circumstances allowed the countries of Eastern Europe to make a break for freedom. Yet, it was actions such as East Germans crossing the Berlin wall, Poles forming the Solidarity trade union, or Czechs filling the Wenceslas Square in Prague that enabled Eastern Europeans to seize liberty for themselves. When the chance came, they were able to draw upon democratic traditions and memories, as well as reasonable levels of wealth, to make democracy stick.

By contrast Cambodia, a much poorer country with much weaker democratic traditions, has been unable to sustain a transition to democracy. Despite a massive UN-sponsored effort to bring peace and free elections to the country in 1993, the country has essentially reverted to a one-party autocracy. In the past couple of years, democracies have also been rolled back in other relatively poor countries such as Bangladesh and Nigeria. The violence and instability surrounding the Kenyan and Pakistani elections has only underlined the difficulties of holding democratic votes in relatively poor countries with deep ethnic and tribal divisions.

Bush resolutely refused to acknowledge all these setbacks. Speaking in the United Arab Emirates on January 13, 2008, he hailed a “great new era” of “the advance of freedom.” “My friends,” he proclaimed to the assembled sheikhs, “a future of liberty stands before you.”⁷ Then Bush flew onto Egypt and lavished praise on Mubarak, who had thrown the last man who ran against him for the presidency into jail. As Bush traipsed around the Arab world, Freedom House, which monitors political and civil liberties around the world, issued its annual report, lamenting that “2007 was marked by a notable setback for global freedom.”⁸ The group pointed to setbacks across the world from South Asia to the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

While Freedom House and others will bemoan the setbacks to democracy in places like Egypt, Kenya, and Pakistan, there will be plenty of others who will shrug and say, in effect, “What did you expect?” The Bush administration has been naïve. It is pointless and often counterproductive to push democracy in countries that are not ready for it. Stability and economic growth must come first. The constituency for enlightened despotism is particularly strong among international businessmen. Multinationals know that many of their most promising markets exist in countries that do not do very well in the Freedom House rankings, such as China, the Gulf states, Russia, and Singapore, and yet these countries are getting richer, often at spectacular rates. Businessmen in rapidly growing autocracies will often enthusiastically endorse the line that authoritarian rule has its virtues. Peace and prosperity are what is needed, and a premature move to democracy would only invite anarchy. The fact that both Kenya and Pakistan enjoyed a rare bout of strong economic growth in recent years, which has now weakened because of election-related instability, will only embolden the advocates of enlightened despotism.

The argument that a certain level of prosperity is needed before democracy has a real chance of survival is neither new nor particularly controversial. In fact, Seymour Martin Lipset, a celebrated sociologist, noted in 1959 that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater its chances to sustain democracy.”⁹ Modern political scientists have fleshed out this claim. Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi have calculated that democracies very rarely fail in countries with a per-capita GDP of more than \$6,000. Yet, democratic governments rarely survive long in countries with per-capita GDPs of less than \$1,500. Both Kenya and Pakistan currently have per-capita GDPs that are less than \$1,000 in nominal terms, according to the IMF. Faced with facts like these, and the various setbacks for the “freedom agenda,” the very phrase “democracy promotion” is going out

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of fashion. One activist with ties to Freedom House muses that, perhaps, “good governance” is a better term to use.¹⁰

The Chinese and Russians have been quick to do the tango on the grave of the “freedom agenda.” China’s *People’s Daily* argued following the Kenyan elections that “western-style democracy simply isn’t suited to African conditions, but rather carries with it the roots of disaster.”¹¹ Yet, anybody

who finds themselves nodding in agreement with an editorial in the *People’s Daily* should probably pause for reflection. While it seems to be true that there is a connection between the wealth of a country and its ability to sustain a democracy, that connection is not absolute. India’s nominal per-capita GDP is still just below the \$1,000 level—a signal for trouble. Yet, the country has a long-established democracy, a lively press, and a strong legal tradition. In fact, India’s rapid economic growth has also disproved the idea that countries must go through an authoritarian phase if they are to achieve economic success. By contrast, the comforting assumption that a country will inevitably become more democratic as it becomes richer is not supported by the numbers. Russian per-capita GDP is now over \$8,000 a head, but Russian democracy is sliding backwards. So much for that \$6,000 threshold.

History does suggest that most democracies emerge gradually, that liberal political systems are about a lot more than voting, and that democracy is most likely to survive in wealthy countries. U.S. and Western policymakers should be aware of that history as they decide when and where to support democracy around the world. Yet, they need to be careful about how far they push this argument. Taken too far, it might lead to the implication that it is somehow acceptable to torture your opponents and shut down the media if the GDP per capita is below \$1,500.

As the democratic world examines the mess that has become of the outgoing administration’s “freedom agenda,” it is important that the backlash should not go too far. The Iraq debacle has discredited the export of democracy by force of arms. Yet, even if it is accepted that durable democracies generally emerge gradually and as part of a historical process, which is internal to the countries themselves, it does not absolve outsiders from having to make decisions and, sometimes, to take sides. Historical events usually throw up events and people who will push for political freedom at crucial moments. When such people emerge, whether they are Chinese students in Tiananmen Square, Burmese monks in Rangoon, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, or Ayman Nour in Egypt, they deserve the strong support of the outside world. The problem with Bush’s

freedom agenda is not the idea of supporting democrats around the world. It is that, by the end of the Bush era, the policy appeared delusional and hypocritical.

It is right to favor the spread of democracy for principled and practical reasons. No Western government should be comfortable about shaking hands with autocrats who torture and imprison their political opponents. History also suggests that, in the long run, embracing these autocrats frequently backfires on the United States. Countries where the United States is believed to have propped up dictatorships frequently become bastions of anti-Americanism once the transition to democracy has been made—Greece and Spain are examples. By contrast, countries where the United States was associated with opposition to dictatorship often become firm allies once the transition to democracy had been made, such as in Poland. More broadly, it does seem to be the case that, with some notable exceptions, democratic countries are more likely to want to work with the United States.

While the long-term trends suggest that democracy promotion is both a moral and a self-interested policy for the United States to pursue, U.S. policymakers have to deal with the here and now, where things are often more complicated and where there are trade-offs to be made. In the short term, it is clearly naive to believe that democratically-elected governments will inevitably be friendlier to the United States. Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections should be enough to prove that. In areas such as the Middle East, where U.S. troops are on the ground and terrorism remains a big concern, it is legitimate to relegate democracy down the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities.

This is all the more the case when there are legitimate doubts about a society's ability to sustain a democracy. Cynics have long joked that in poor Middle Eastern countries, where the opposition is dominated by Muslim fundamentalists, it will be a case of "one man, one vote, one time." In such societies, the United States should not twist the arms of friendly but reluctant governments to make a rapid transition to democracy. It would make more sense to focus on improving the respect for human rights in the short term, while trying to foster the social and economic trends that in the long run will create the indigenous forces able to sustain a democracy. In both Egypt and Pakistan, for example, too much aid from the United States has gone toward the military. A focus on primary education would do more, in the long term, to create the social base for a sustainable transition to democracy.

Conclusion

The next U.S. administration should adopt a policy of opportunistic idealism, which would mean retaining the idea that freedom and democracy are important foreign policy goals of the United States. The new administration, however, also

has to recognize that the goal must be pursued pragmatically and only when the opportunity rises.

Pragmatism dictates that in the short term the United States will frequently have to deal with governments it does not like. Yet, it can aspire to foster the social and economic underpinnings of future democratic development in such countries by carefully directed aid policies, educational exchanges, and supporting democratic forces when the “right” opportunity arises. The “right” opportunity is most likely to occur when a combination of indigenous economic and political forces produces a democratic movement with real social roots. And, when such forces emerge, a well-timed U.S. intervention can make all the difference. A classic example of this kind of opportunistic idealism was the U.S. action in the Philippines in 1986. After long years of supporting Ferdinand Marcos, the United States was able to intervene decisively to persuade Marcos to leave the country, and to cede power to an indigenous democratic revolution led by Cory Aquino.

There are sound diplomatic reasons for taking a pragmatic, long-term view of the spread and promotion of democracy. But there are also sound analytic reasons. Democracy is most likely to last, not because of intervention by the 82nd Airborne Division, but when it is the product of a long process of indigenous social and economic change. That is the central lesson of the last thirty years.

Notes

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