
SECURITY ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVES

Support for Democracy and the U.S. National Interest

By

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My topic this afternoon is support for democracy as a factor in American foreign policy and as a means of advancing our national-security interest abroad. Of course, it is not the only such factor. Democratization is part of a much broader, complex, drawn-out, often painful and erratic process of political, social, and economic transformation. But it is nonetheless a crucial component of that larger process.

Isaiah Berlin, in his famous essay on Tolstoy, made much of the contrast between the fox, "who knows many things" and the hedgehog, "who knows one big thing." Sir Isaiah was distinguishing between those, on the one hand, who try to relate everything to a single, universal organizing principle, and those, on the other, who are comfortable with the full range of human experiences and interests, with all its disorder and diversity and internal contradictions.

At first glance, American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era seems best suited to the fox. Rather than focusing on a single, overriding goal—such as the containment of Soviet Communism—we now face a wide variety of often competing economic and security concerns that require our active, constant, and simultaneous attention.

To mention just the most obvious and pressing of those: our prosperity depends on our ability to create opportunities for international trade and investment. Our health and safety depend on our success in countering transnational threats like environmental degradation, terrorism, and the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Our security requires constructive relations with the other great powers—our long-standing allies in Western Europe, and Japan, as well as our former adversaries in Russia and China. At the same time, we must contend with threats posed by rogue states and failed states, as well as with regional conflicts, from the Balkans to Central Africa to the Persian Gulf to the Korean peninsula.

Nevertheless, there is still a place for the hedgehog in the terrain of U.S. foreign policy. We will advance all the objectives I just enumerated, and others as well, if we also strengthen associations among established democracies and support the transition to democracy in states that are emerging from dictatorship or civil strife. Democracy, in short, is the one big thing that we must defend, sustain, and promote wherever possible, even as we deal with the many other tasks that face us.

This is, of course, not a new theme in American foreign policy. Far from it. It is time-honored and bipartisan. Support for democracy goes back not just to Truman's rationale for the Marshall Plan and Franklin Roosevelt's for Lend-Lease and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, but also to Henry Clay's American System and Thomas Paine's aggressive defense of "The Rights of Man."

When American soldiers and sailors went off to fight in this century's two World Wars, they knew they were going to defend American ideals as well as American interests. The Cold War, too, was, at its core, not just about the international behavior of states—it was also very much about competing visions of the relationship between the individual citizen and his or her government.

While NATO has proven to be the most successful military alliance in history, it is also the most successful democratic alliance. And the Cold War finally ended because there were proponents of democracy on both sides of what used to be the Iron Curtain.

Today, there is, around the globe, more grass-roots support for democracy than at any other time in human history. In part this is because of modern communications. The Soviet Communist system collapsed not just because it was contained by military power but also because it was penetrated and subverted by information and ideas. Even the most heavily fortified borders became increasingly permeable first to radio, then to television, and eventually to the interactive influences of telefax and e-mail. Contrary to George Orwell's prediction for 1984, the technological revolution weakened Big Brother rather than strengthened him.

The demise of Soviet-style Communism has created an historic opportunity for the United States to forge and lead a global coalition based on, and in support of, democratic principles. Over the past two decades we've made genuine progress in that regard. Jimmy Carter institutionalized support for human rights in the State Department by creating a bureau dedicated to their promotion and defense (under the supervision, by the way, of then Deputy Secretary, Warren Christopher). Among its other contributions, the Reagan Administration played a crucial role in easing out Ferdinand Marcos and making way for "people power" in the Philippines during the last week of February 1986, almost exactly ten years ago. Our host, Mort Abramowitz, is among those who deserve the credit for our steadfast support for Cory Aquino and all that she represented. George Bush responded to the fall of the Berlin Wall with a series of initiatives intended to assure the emergence of "a Europe whole and free."

President Clinton has made it a priority of his presidency to nurture political reform throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where two dozen countries are struggling, with varying degrees of success, to overcome decades of totalitarian rule: in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia, where a generation of emerging democracies is working to undo the damage caused by military regimes, presidents-for-life, and other forms of despotism; in the Middle East, where advocates of peaceful political change are bravely confronting those who resort to terrorism and assassination; and in East Asia and the Pacific, where the citizens of newly industrialized nations are increasingly asserting their political rights.

We are doing all of this for the reason that Bill Clinton invoked in his very first campaign speech, at Georgetown University in December of 1991, and that he has reiterated many times since: namely, that the promotion of democracy is a means of advancing American interests as well as American values. It's an issue not just of moralpolitik, but of realpolitik. Why? Because democracies are more likely to be reliable partners in trade and diplomacy, and more likely to pursue foreign and defense policies that are compatible with American interests.

Democracies are less likely to go to war with each other, to unleash tidal waves of refugees, to create environmental catastrophes, or to engage in terrorism. As borders become more porous and as people, technologies, ideas, weapons and money, dirty and otherwise, flow back and forth—Americans have an increasing stake in how other societies around the world govern, or misgovern, themselves. The larger and more closely-knit the community of democracies, the safer and more prosperous we Americans will be.

But new democracies present a special challenge for American diplomacy. Our experience of the last few years, while encouraging in many respects, has also contained plenty of vivid reminders that democratic politics are often messy, unpredictable, fraught with contradictions between the exigencies of getting elected or re-elected on the one hand, and the requirements of good governance and sound statesmanship on the other. This is true even in countries with long histories of representative government and well established institutions, including our own. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in fledgling democracies—in countries where the wounds of civil war are still raw and where the legacy of tyranny is still heavy—politics can be especially volatile. The ruling elites of the old regime and violent factions look for ways to dominate the new order—or exploit the new disorder. Newly-elected leaders, unsure of their hold on power or too sure of their infallibility and indispensability, sometimes use a heavy hand to silence the opposition, loyal and otherwise.

Democracy depends on the effectiveness of institutions such as a non-political police force and an independent judiciary and on civilian control of the military institutions that are either altogether missing or woefully inadequate in countries just leaving behind a dictatorial past. Moreover, institutional reforms must be matched by a corresponding change in public attitudes, or what is sometimes called political culture. Democracy depends on a willingness to reconcile with old enemies and tolerate the expression of dissenting viewpoints. It means building bridges across different segments and classes of society.

Conversely, democracy tends to break down—or, in the case of transitional states, never gets off the ground—when voter allegiance is excessively or exclusively based on ethnic, clan, religious, or regional loyalties, rather than on the choice of parties or candidates for their proposed programs and policies. When group affiliations become the pretext for denying individual citizens their basic human and civil rights, then democracy is in mortal peril.

Another point: all democracies—and all elections—operate under the slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid!” And many incipient democracies must grapple with huge economic disadvantages. Poverty, underdevelopment, and economic stagnation should not be alibis for tyranny, but there is no question that they are obstacles to democracy. Yet, those conditions are often present in states that have just emerged from dictatorship. In much of Africa and Asia, they have the added burden of unsustainable population growth.

Even with a well-intentioned, enlightened political leadership, a country that remains wretchedly poor is much less likely to sustain democratic rule. Without enduring, broad-based economic development, voters are likely to become disillusioned with politics and politicians, and thus with democracy itself.

In the post-Communist world especially, a sense of relief and good-riddance over the dismantlement of the old, inefficient top-heavy command system has given way to widespread resentment at what often seems to be the capriciousness and inequity of the market, and insecurity over the absence of a safety net. Newly enfranchised citizens tend to have unrealistically high expectations of what their elected leaders can accomplish, how long it will take, and with what degree of attendant hardship and pain. When those expectations are

disappointed, voters become vulnerable to demagogues, to purveyors of foolish, even dangerous nostrums based on nostalgia for the past or fear of the future.

For all these reasons, we have made it a priority of U.S. foreign policy to help nascent democracies through their period of greatest fragility. We have done so through a variety of mechanisms, some bilateral and others multilateral, and we have done so in ways that concentrate on the economic as well as the political infrastructure of countries in transition. Let me give you four very different examples of where American engagement has already been instrumental and where it continues to be crucial. I'm deliberately concentrating on cases that illustrate the dilemmas and difficulties associated with support for democracy, as well as the imperative that we persist in providing that support: Cambodia, Haiti, South Africa, and Russia.

Cambodia has come a long way in a short time, under the most difficult of circumstances. I remember visiting Mort Abramovitz in Bangkok in the late 1970's, and his wife Sheppy was spending much of her time with Cambodian refugees on the border. Cambodia had already bestowed on our language the phrase "the killing fields," and it was in the midst of one of the most horrible mass murders since the holocaust.

Yet, two and a half years ago, a United Nations mission, with strong backing from first the Bush and then the Clinton Administration, helped the Cambodians hold the first free, fair, and comprehensive elections in their country's history. More than ninety percent of the eligible voters participated, many of them literally walking through minefields to vote. Since that election, and the formation of a coalition government, political violence has dropped sharply, and some 370,000 refugees have returned to their homes and resumed normal lives.

That said, as Mort will affirm, Cambodia still has a long way to go. It suffers from widespread corruption, an inadequately staffed and trained judicial system, and a weakened but stubborn Khmer Rouge insurgency. And while we're mindful of the need to preserve political stability in a precarious situation, we're nevertheless concerned about the continued mistreatment of rival political leaders and the attacks on opposition newspapers.

The Cambodian people have a difficult journey ahead. They will quite simply not make it if they have to go it alone. We will stay with them, as will Japan and Australia, two of the region's oldest democracies, along with France, the region's former colonial power.

One handicap that the Cambodian people—and their friends in the international community—will have to overcome is that Cambodia is situated in a less-than-hospitable neighborhood. Of its four Southeast Asian neighbors, only one, Thailand, is a democracy. Laos and Vietnam are anachronisms in that they are still under Communist rule. Burma, governed by a brutal military regime, is one of the world largest exporters of illegal narcotics.

By contrast, Haiti lives in a good neighborhood, which of course also happens to be our neighborhood. As recently as seventeen years ago, most of the nations in this hemisphere suffered some form of dictatorship. Today, every government except one, which is very much on our minds at the moment—Cuba's—has a claim to democratic legitimacy.

This trend toward democratization in Latin America and the Caribbean has proved to be self-reinforcing. When democracy was threatened in Guatemala in June 1993, the thirty-four member nations of the Organization of American States moved quickly and unanimously to head off a presidential auto-golpe. In recent years, the OAS member states have also provided essential support for democracy in El Salvador, Peru, Nicaragua, Suriname, and the Dominican Republic.

Now, at last, Haiti is part of this regional—and increasingly global—consensus. Last month, my wife Brooke and I had the satisfaction of being part of Madeleine Albright's delegation at the inauguration in Port-au-Prince of one democratically elected president who was succeeding another, peacefully, in an atmosphere of celebration. That is a first in Haitian history. Contrary to the skeptical predictions of many, Jean-Bertrand Aristide has now moved out of the Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince. He's establishing a private foundation devoted to promoting both literacy and democracy, because he understands the connection between the two.

Aristide's aspiration to lead his people, as he memorably and repeatedly put it, "from misery to poverty with dignity" resonates across Africa as well. It is now nearly two years since Nelson Mandela took the oath of office as South Africa's first popularly-elected President. That event has had a ripple effect across the region. Today, in southern Africa, after decades of struggling against apartheid, regional leaders are now refocusing much of their energies on strengthening democratic rule—not only in their own states, but also through a "good neighbor" policy that we have actively supported.

But even in South Africa itself, the hard work of building a multi-ethnic, multi-racial democracy is far from over. While political violence has declined in that country, criminal violence is reaching dangerous proportions. The old apartheid-based bureaucracy, layered with redundant offices for each race and homeland, still wastes vast resources. Those resources need to be put to better use, so that the government can make good on its promise of jobs and housing.

Just as South Africa's future will have a dramatic impact on all of the other countries in its region, so too will the fate of democracy in Russia have ramifications far beyond its own borders—certainly throughout Eurasia. And it will also have profound implications for us—for our future, for our security.

The high voter turnout in December's parliamentary elections suggests that the Russian people are getting used to choosing their leaders. But as Russia's June Presidential election approaches, there are troubling trends. Communists and ultra-nationalists are riding high in the polls, in the parliament, and on the campaign trail, while reformers and centrists are divided.

Even—perhaps I should say especially—when the direction of Russian politics is uncertain, the fundamentals of American policy must remain clear and consistent. One of those fundamentals is that we support democracy in Russia as we do elsewhere. It is not our responsibility to choose Russia's leaders. It never was. The Russian people now have the power to do that themselves. And that is a good thing. It is, and must remain, a fundamental premise of American policy that the enfranchisement of Russian citizens will, if sustained, be good for their country, for the world, and for U.S. national interests.

My point here is that the difficulties through which Haiti, Cambodia, South Africa, and Russia are all going should not, by any means, discourage us from supporting democracy in those countries or anywhere else. Quite the contrary. We must have the courage of our own democratic convictions. Freedom of choice and freedom of speech will, over time, help move these and other new democracies toward civil society, rule of law, and the other attributes of states that will be welcome as fully integrated and constructive members of the international community.

We should resist and reject the notion that some races or cultures are "unsuited" to democracy. We should be wary of stereotypes about national character, particularly ones that would, if they became the basis for our policy, consign whole nations to tyranny or civil war

or unending chaos on the perverse theory that that is the fate they deserve, or that that fate is encoded in their genes.

Still, the more somber and cautionary aspects of the four cases I've cited should deter us from speaking about a "democratic revolution." Democratization is, by definition, not revolutionary at all—it is evolutionary. No society can transform the way it governs itself overnight. Even with the support of the United States and our democratic allies, it will take decades or even generations for many of these nations to make the transition. That is in part because establishing a real democracy means more than simply drafting a constitution and having a single election, or even two or three elections on schedule. Our own Founding Fathers understood that the piece of paper they drafted in 1787—eleven years after we achieved independence—depended on the rule of law and on guarantees of individual liberties. And it's worth recalling that African-Americans did not receive the protections contained in the Bill of Rights until the 1960s, nearly two centuries late. In short, our own experience argues for some forbearance of others who are in the early stages of an experiment that is in our interest to see succeed.

Our recent and current experience also argues for fundamental confidence that the benefits and sustaining power of democracy will prevail over the imperfections and the setbacks. Leaders of—and apologists for—authoritarian regimes sometimes claim that backward, or developing, countries are somehow "not ready" for democracy. Yet the last half century has shown that poor nations need democracy as much as rich ones, and they need it for economic as well as political reasons. Even in the world's poorest countries, from Haiti and Nicaragua to Malawi to Albania to Cambodia, democratically-elected leaders have shown themselves more inclined than their authoritarian or totalitarian predecessors to choose the economic and social policies that will best benefit their people. Elected leaders, because they know they will be held accountable at the ballot box, are more likely to pay attention to their citizens' basic needs. The Harvard economist Amartya Sen has argued, with a good deal of supporting data, that "no substantial famine has ever occurred in a country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press."

Likewise, in more developed states, from Argentina to Estonia to the Philippines, popularly-elected governments are more likely to have the legitimacy—that is, the support of constituents—to make painful but necessary economic choices. And as we move into the next century, open societies will be the best prepared to take advantage of emerging information technologies: in the age of the microchip and the modem, economic development will falter when citizens must fight suspicious, dictatorial authorities simply for the right to own a fax machine, make copies of a document, or talk on the telephone. That truth will be increasingly apparent not just to dissidents and reformers in those countries, but to the powers-that-be as well—or at least to the take-over generation.

A final point: whatever the domestic impediments to democratization, the international environment for the process is increasingly conducive. Democratization in Russia, Cambodia, Haiti, and South Africa is taking place against the backdrop of globalization, interdependence, the communications revolution—that same complex of trends, some revolutionary and others evolutionary, that helped tear down the Iron Curtain, empower the people of the Philippines and send the colonels back to the barracks in Latin America during the 80s. All those facts of international life will continue to have a salutary effect on the national life of countries struggling with democratic transition.

America's role as a supporter and sponsor of that process will continue to be critical—and it will continue to pay dividends to us. We gain not just from the success of democracy in other lands, but also from our own championship of the cause of freedom. Our nation's track

record of standing up for our democratic ideals gives us a unique authority and credibility in international affairs. The world continues to look to us for leadership not just because of our economic and military might, but also because we are at our best when we are promoting and defending the same political principles abroad that we cherish here at home. Our foreign policy, in short, must continue to be based on our nature as a society as well as on our interests as a state. This is not a question of charity or “social work”—it’s a matter of securing and expanding the community of nations that share our values and thus have compatible interests. It is an investment in our long-term security. The watchwords of this enduring feature of American foreign policy should be: patience, steadiness, and focus. If animals could talk, that’s what you’d expect to hear from a hedgehog.