

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION: SERVING U.S. VALUES AND INTERESTS

*Kenneth Wollack**

Following the end of the Cold War, we entered into a rare period in American history when fundamental assumptions were challenged. It was an exciting time for those who would presume to define a new American foreign policy. We found ourselves entangled in numerous international commitments with many responsibilities we could ignore only at our peril. Many of these commitments we wished to reaffirm and even strengthen. The challenge was to make sensible choices about those prior commitments and to be sure that new directions were not only relevant, but capable of receiving broad popular support, for without such support, as we have discovered in Iraq, we possess neither the coherence nor the resources to succeed.

Needless to say, threats to American interests still exist. They include international terrorism; economic competition that could produce dangerous regional trade blocs and trade wars; environmental degradation reaching crisis proportions; the proliferation of weapons, both conventional and nuclear; and ethnic and national conflicts that could lead to war. These threats and others may not be easy to encapsulate in the public's mind, but any one of them could affect, fundamentally, our way of life—what Tom Friedman would call “our flat world.”¹ And together they constitute ample reason for an engaged America in the international arena.

The answer to today's threats is not to win a metaphorical war against a single adversary. The answer lies in creating an overall environment in which international cooperation is emphasized, and in which conflict can be managed and terrorism effectively confronted militarily, economically, and politically. In this context, foreign assistance is not only a charitable endeavor, but also an exercise in enlightened self-interest and the promotion of democracy—not some idealistic crusade, but rather quintessentially an exercise in realpolitik. Nothing better serves the interests of this country—economic, political, or ideological—than the promotion of democratic prac-

* Kenneth Wollack is President of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. Before joining the Institute, he coedited the *Middle East Policy Survey* and wrote regularly on foreign affairs for the *Los Angeles Times*. Mr. Wollack originally delivered these remarks during Showcase Panel I, entitled *Limited Government and Spreading Democracy: Uneasy Cousins?*, at the Federalist Society's 2006 National Lawyers Convention, on Thursday, November 16, 2006, in Washington, D.C.

¹ THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *THE WORLD IS FLAT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* (2006).

tices and institutions. A more democratic world is not simply a more orderly and humane place: It is a more peaceful and prosperous place.

The notion that there should be a dichotomy between our moral preferences and our strategic goals is a false one. Our ultimate foreign policy goal is a world that is secure, stable, humane, and safe, where the risk of war is minimal. Yet, the undeniable reality is that the geostrategic hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are nondemocratic, or where governments are antidemocratic. Even from the traditional foreign assistance perspective, the establishment of democratic institutions has been found to assure sustainable development. Deforestation, rural dislocation, environmental degradation, and agricultural policies that lead to famine all trace to political systems in which the victims have no political voice; in which government institutions feel no obligation to answer to the people; and in which special interests feel free to exploit the resources, land, and people without fear of oversight or the need to account.

Terrorism and political extremism pose an immediate security threat that must be confronted directly and forcefully. Concurrently, there must be a new urgency in the promotion of the rule of law, pluralism, and the respect for human rights. Democracy and human rights are not only ideals to be pursued by all nations; they are also pragmatic tools that are powerful weapons against extremism.

During the 1980s, an important lesson was learned about political transformations in countries like the Philippines and Chile: that political forces on the far left and the far right enjoy a mutually reinforcing relationship, drawing strength from each other, and in the process marginalizing the democrats in the middle. Prospects for peace and stability only emerged once democratic political parties and civic groups were able to offer a viable alternative to the two extremes. These democratic forces benefited from the solidarity and support they received from the international community, and in the United States, Republicans and Democrats joined together to champion their cause. Today, these conditions find their parallel in the Middle East and in Asia.

The U.S. agenda in these countries can help support those working for the so-called third way between autocratic regimes and religious extremists: for freedom of speech and expression, fair elections that reflect the will of the voters, representative political institutions that are not corrupt and are accountable to the public, and judiciaries that uphold the rule of law.

Future programs can identify key areas where democracy assistance can be effective, particularly concentrating on encouraging women's participation, strengthening democratic institutions and practices at the local and municipal level, and supporting journalists and activists in opening up debate throughout the region. Such initiatives should explore subregional and regional approaches that facilitate experience-sharing and help build linkages between democratic activists in the region. This strategy focuses

on building institutions that pull together disparate voices that constitute civil and political society and helping them to identify common interests, channeling them for common ends.

I would like to conclude by answering four questions. First, is this costly? The entire democracy promotion budget of the United States government reflects about three percent of our total foreign assistance budget.² Are the programs effective? In some places, yes; other places, no. We are still learning how to deliver this assistance even more effectively. But it is important to talk to the beneficiaries of this outside engagement—in places like the Philippines, Chile, Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and today in the Middle East—to determine whether they believe that the international community has the responsibility to engage in this endeavor.

Is it an imposition? No. If we can put Iraq to the side, there are close to a hundred countries over the last thirty years that have moved in one form or another toward a democratic transition.³ The United States has probably invaded only five of those. Something else is going on here. Democratic aspirations, we have found, are universal. If you study public opinion polls in every region of the world, there is no clash of civilizations.⁴ People all over the world want the same thing. They want to put food on the table, but they also want to have a say in the political issues that govern their lives. They want to have the right to elect their leaders, guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They want an independent judiciary. They want a parliament that can debate and enact laws. They want freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. These are issues that you will find across boundaries, across regions.

Finally, are we alone in this effort? The answer is a resounding no. My organization, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, is now part of an international network made up of other American organizations, organizations in other countries, nongovernmental groups, other governments now engaged in this effort, intergovernmental organizations, and even some unlikely international financial institutions that have come to recognize the interdependence between economic development, human development, and more open political systems. So, with this grow-

² USAID, FISCAL YEAR 2008 BUDGET REQUEST, SUMMARY AND HIGHLIGHTS 1 (2007), available at http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2008/fy2008cbj_highlights.pdf.

³ See, e.g., Thomas Carothers, *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, 13 J. OF DEMOCRACY 5, 6–7 (2002) (discussing the nearly one hundred countries considered “transitional” with respect to democratization).

⁴ See, e.g., Michael Bratton & Robert Mattes, *Support for Democracy in Africa: Intrinsic or Instrumental?*, 31 BRIT. J. POL. SCI. 447 (2001) (discussing the apparently intrinsic nature of support for democracy in Africa); Carol Graham & Sandip Sukhtankar, *Does Economic Crisis Reduce Support for Markets and Democracy in Latin America? Some Evidence from Surveys of Public Opinion and Well Being*, 36 J. LATIN AM. STUD. 349 (2004) (showing Latin American public opinion surveys demonstrate increased support for democracy as a form of government, even when economic conditions and political leaders are viewed negatively).

ing consensus among the economic development field, the political development field, and politicians across the political spectrum, an international solidarity network has developed. This is not about ceding something to the United States. It is about joining something larger than yourselves in the pursuit of what I believe will be a more stable, democratic, and prosperous world.