



*Promoting Democracy: A Modern Mission for American Citizens*

**Remarks by Richard Gephardt**

Former Democratic Leader,  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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The recent history of humankind contains good news about the advance of democracy in nations across the world. Americans have always believed that democracy is - as said by Phil Paine and Steve Muhlberger: "A moral imperative of universal application and validity to all human communities". Abraham Lincoln put it this way: "Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as a heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere".

However, the advance of democracy in the world has come in fits and starts. In 1917 there were 6 democratic nations in the world and that advanced to 21 by 1922. While World War II set the cause of democracy back substantially and the 1970's and 80's had many ups and downs the last 15 years have seen many peoples achieve some form of democracy. By the late 1990's four continents were almost entirely democratic. So the story of the last century is excellent regarding the growth of democracy in the world. At the century's beginning 5% of the globe's population had the right to choose their leaders in competitive elections, but today the

proportion of adults who democratically elect their leaders exceeds 58%.

It is also clear that not all democracies have a good track record on human rights and rule of law – but it seems clear that achieving a democratically elected government is a very important step in the development of human rights. It is also true that the recent wave of democratization has been resilient against what has often happened in the past – a reverse wave of authoritarianism. In a recent speech, Carl Gershman, the President of the National Endowment of Democracy said: “One of the remarkable developments of the recent past, which I would put in the category of the dog that didn’t bark, is the absence of a reverse wave of authoritarianism following the historic expansion of democracy from the mid 1970’s to the early 1990’s”. Carl went on to explain that “the most compelling explanation for this remarkable absence of a democratic reversal is the enormous support that democracy now enjoys in non-Western countries and cultures.

I believe we are seeing a very important confluence of events that have caused democracy to enjoy this enormous support across the world. The first is the incredible information flow that washes all over the world through radio, television, and the internet. We now truly live in the global village. Who is to say that the pictures of Iraqis standing in line to vote, at risk of being blown up by a suicide bomber, did not have an enormous impact elsewhere – just as the pictures of the orange revolution in the Ukraine did a few weeks earlier?

Second, is the fact that the American government now funds an impressive array of efforts to aid the process of democratization going on in countries all across the globe. As a recent member of the Board of the National Endowment for Democracy I have had a chance to review the grants the Endowment makes to a wide variety of organizations world-wide. I am convinced that these

grants have made an enormous contribution to the rapid growth of democracy in the world.

Third, is the fact that 9/11 woke a lot of people in the world up to the fact that the new threat of terrorism can only be overcome if many countries that have had authoritarian forms of governance are changed to democracies. Before 9/11 the cause of democracy was an academic interest but after 9/11 it was seen as an essential ingredient in preventing people from deciding to become terrorists. This belief, about democracy helping to prevent terrorism, has provided much more support from democratic governments for the cause of spreading democracy.

With all that I have said as background – I want to advocate today that the current progress toward greater and rapid democratization cannot be sustained and retained without a great increase of American citizen volunteers going across the globe to teach people how to be citizens in a democracy.

Let me relate some personal stories to support this position. First, I have a good friend who used to be a member of the Russian Duma and in fact he ran for President of Russia in the recent past. Because he lost for President I may have a sense of kinship with him. A few years ago I asked him what the biggest problem in Russia was. He said: “We have no citizens – people don’t know how to vote, how to form political parties, how to draft agendas or platforms, how to campaign, how to support candidates – and until we have citizens we won’t have democracy”. He went on to say that the only way to teach people to be citizens is to have people who know how to be citizens to teach Russians about citizenship.

I am fond of saying that Americans don’t know how much they know about citizenship – just by being a citizen, in this oldest democracy, for their entire lives. It was this simple belief that led Newt Gingrich and I to travel to Russia four times in the 90’s to

seen what we could do to help the Russians in their drive toward democracy. We concluded that the best way to help was to get as many individual Americans as we could to go to Russia or bring Russians to them to teach them what they have lived their entire lives. We increased exchange programs ten fold and we instituted a micro-loan program to help individual Russians establish very small businesses. Both programs had great results and although Russia is still, obviously, struggling with democracy – I firmly believe these programs had an enormous positive effect. I have talked to a lot of the participants in the programs on both sides and they testify about the ability to get to know individual Americans or Russians had an enormous impact on their lives.

A third story comes from Morocco. A few years ago I visited the best micro loan program we have in the world in Morocco. The program was being run by a retired banker from Chicago who had led the plan to make 50,000 loans over 3 years with a default rate near zero. The average loan was about \$100 (American) and the loans were paid back with interest. We met some of the successful people who had paid back multiple loans and they told their stories. One man had purchased a bicycle and started a taxi service – first time he had made money – first time he had supported his family. Another woman had used the loan to make art objects that she was selling across the world over Ebay. She was also making money for the first time. After hearing many such stories – I asked the Chicago banker-volunteer what he was doing in Morocco. He said: “I retired – got bored – my wife threatened me with divorce if I didn’t find something to do – I heard about this program and we volunteered”. He said: “We’ve been here three years – and we recently decided to go to another country in Africa and do this again”. He added: “This is the best thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

These three stories are just a small indication of how Americans have been active in the effort to spread democracy across the

globe. Through the Senior Peace Corps, the Senior Executive Corps, started by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Legal Educational Programs started by the American Bar Association, and others, American citizens have been doing this work for a number of years.

What I am suggesting now is that with the coming retirement of America's baby boomers, we have the prospect of thousands of Retired American volunteers being available to go across the globe teaching democracy and the rule of law to thousands of individuals in scores of countries striving to democratize.

To just give you the scope of the opportunity coming from baby boomers: Live births climbed from under 3 million in 1946 to the 4 million mark (never before achieved) in 1954, then stayed above 4 million for 11 straight years. After 1964 the U.S never saw 4 million births in a single year until 1989 – when many boomers were having children. Incidentally, the baby boom started right after the soldiers came back from WWII and ended with the introduction of the birth control pill in 1964.

So this group represents 75 million Americans or 30% of our population. They also are about to retire with more financial resources and life expectancy than any generation in our history.

Additional studies of baby boomers indicate the great resource for volunteering that this group represents. A recent AARP study of Boomers indicates that 55% of Boomers plan on continuing to work after retirement age – but their motivation for working is not the pay, but rather the interest and enjoyment that work provides. My experience is that many in this group are especially looking for activities that matter, not something that is strictly for the money. Like the banker I met in Morocco – they are looking for something bigger than themselves – where they feel they are really improving the world and doing something of great importance. A spokesman

for the Peace Corps recently said: “It’s the right time in their lives – they’ve fulfilled their obligations to their families and their careers and they want to do something idealistic”. In a recent article entitled: “Prime Time: How Baby Boomers will revolutionize retirement and transform America”, the author – in commenting on former President Jimmy Carter – said: “Here’s a guy who won the ambition game in life, absolutely, by ascending to president of the United States – But he discovered that it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be and it turned out his presidency was a prelude to the really important work that he felt was closest to his heart”.

The challenge right now is to figure out how to motivate some of these retiring boomers to volunteer – which I frankly think is the easy part of this equation. The greater challenge is to effectively plug in people that are so motivated to existing and future programs and entities that will allow the volunteers to successfully perform their service. Not enough organizations and activities now exist to accommodate the desire and capacity that is now out there.

I am concerned that our government, in present budgets, seems to be reducing funding for some government programs that could accommodate some of this capacity. Last week’s Washington Post pointed out that the administration’s latest budget contains some modest funding increases for NED but present budget levels combined with specific restrictions that focus much of the funding on the middle east means reductions in programs in other parts of the world.

I am also concerned that the needed funds for Iraq combined with large budget deficits will cause the Congress and the Administration to cut back on the parts of the budget that could fund organizations that can accommodate the coming boomer-volunteers. I do not believe that our government must be the only funder of these efforts – but President Bush has rightly recognized

the role of American citizen-volunteers in the effort to prevent terrorism. We must properly fund these efforts in addition to the military efforts – if we are to ultimately defeat and prevent terrorism. We used to have debates about whether we had an “interest” in some country or another. Now, after 9/11, we know we have an “interest” in any country where terrorists are being produced that can make their way to America to harm our people and our country.

But in addition to needed government efforts, we must call on our private sector to step up to this challenge as we are asking our citizens to do so as well. We need foundations and other entities to examine what they can do to create real opportunities for Americans to promote democracy abroad. This is not unlike what our country did during WWII.

One small effort I can report on is a Public Service Institute I am in the process of establishing at Washington University in my hometown, St. Louis. I hope to use this vehicle to motivate retirees to consider opportunities for promoting democracy abroad as well as giving service to people in need in our country. As part of this effort I will be seeking out existing and future programs and entities that can successfully plug in the volunteers I hope to produce. I am also contemplating trying to pull together other public service institutes such as The Carter Center, The Robert Dole Institute, The Leon Panetta Institute, The Hubert Humphrey Institute, The Bill Clinton Library, the George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan Libraries and others to engage in this work across the country.

In conclusion, I am constantly reminded of the Chinese Proverb: “May you live in interesting times”. After the Berlin Wall came down I think many of us thought this was one of those big, historic moments that was a major turning point in the course of human events. Obviously it was, but such big events sometime make us

forget that big watershed events come as the result of tiny actions by individuals educating and affecting others over a long period of time.

Last week David Ignatius, on the op-ed page of the Washington Post commented on the huge events happening in Lebanon in recent days. He wrote:

“The brazen murder of Hariri finally broke the curtain of fear and silence. Lebanese braved Syrian troops and marched in the streets by the thousands, in effect reclaiming their capital. Their message was simple: We aren’t afraid of you anymore. We would rather die than keep living like this.”

“That was the moment the Syrian chokehold was broken. The retreat of the intelligence men from the Beau Rivage this week was inevitable - - once the Lebanese people had decided they wouldn’t take it any longer. That’s the astonishing fact about history. It seems to advance in big, inevitable movements, but it’s actually made - - one person at a time”.

If terrorism is to be defeated before the nuclear device goes off in New York or Washington D.C. or some other American city we have no time to waste to bring all of the human talent and capacity we can to the task of creating citizens across the globe – one human being at a time. Even where democracy has broken out – there are many obstacles and challenges before it really takes hold and fends off the many forces aligned against that are devoted to push back to oppression and authoritarianism. If there was ever a time for the beneficiaries of individual and human rights in the birthplace of the oldest democracy to invade the world to offer the magnificent gift of human rights to others - this is it! We must seize the moment.

