



New York Democracy Forum



“How can America Advance Democracy in the World?”

Remarks by Richard Holbrooke

Former U.S. Ambassador to the
United Nations

March 8, 2006

Carl, thank you very much. It's great to speak to you all from this stage on behalf of this three organizations you see behind you. As Carl mentioned, we've never collaborated in this way before and when I say we, I'm privileged to be able to say I have an association with two of the three on a permanent basis, a member of Carl's board and chairman of this institution, and I've also had the privilege of talking often to Noel Lateef and the FPA. I want to say a word about the Asia Society, I want to talk about NED, and then I want to get back to the point that Carl raised.

Asia Society—I want to ask an experiment because we've never done this before. Three different groups invited you so I'd like to ask you one by one, how many of you came because you heard about it from each of the three? Just a show of hands so we understand it. No, don't put up your hands yet, I haven't asked the question. [laughter] How many of you are here because of Asia Society. All right, that's pretty good. How many are here because of NED? And how many for the Foreign Policy Association?

[laughter]

Fantastic. Noel? Where's Noel? [laughter] Noel wins the hands down. That's very exciting to me because we at Asia Society—I'm now wearing the Asia Society chairmanship hat—really want to bring more people here. We had our 50th Anniversary year begin two weeks ago with a speech by President Bush in Washington about India and Pakistan, and about democracy, the notion. And we continued it the next night with a spectacular dinner at the Waldorf here in New York, honoring the legacy of our founder, John D. Rockefeller, and his family, and honoring his son, Senator Jay Rockefeller and David Rockefeller, which was a tremendous

success, both financially and launching our 50th year. And we're going to increase policy programs and that's very much why we're all together on this stage.

So to the FPA people, in particular, and that was an amazing show of hands just now, I'm so glad you're here, and I hope, on the way out—this is a naked pitch—I hope on the way out, pick up our membership, particularly pick up our calendars you're going to find. And over the next year, two years, I promise you, you're going to find more and more things that are relevant to those of you who are members of this terrific and historically important organization, the Foreign Policy Association, which I'm so privileged to have given lectures at, a canon lecture and other things. Whenever Noel calls I'm always there for him.

Asia Society is going to put more and more emphasis on these policy programs. Arthur Ross has just given us a very large grant to start a China center, and you can't talk about democracy in the world without talking about China, and two thirds of the world is covered by this organization. It starts in Iran, of some interest to the United States and policymakers now and goes eastward all the way into the Pacific, including Australia and New Zealand. And we're also a culture institution and this make us unique among policy institutions. We have a great museum upstairs and right now we have the most extraordinary collection of Rockefeller family art. Most of you know that the John D. Rockefeller, III gave us his art collection. But we have also brought in David Rockefeller's, some of his works. We've brought in some things owned by Nelson Rockefeller, and I'm so happy that Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller, Happy Rockefeller, is here with us today. Happy, where are you? Oh, there you are. Here you are. So glad to see you. And I think somebody wants to applaud you so—

[applause]

And so many of the Rockefellers, it's a fantastic show. It just opened. So we have not only policy but culture and we believe deeply that culture is related to policy and that gets back to the reason that we're here today. And I also want to introduce to you our relatively new president, who is doing such a brilliant job, and has been with the Asia Society for 20 years because she was the museum director before that, Vishakha Desai. Do you want to stand, Vishakha?

[applause]

If you saw the picture in the New York Times of the two of us, I'm the vaguely out of focus guy in the dull suit behind this person these dazzling Indian colors. That's Vishakha.

National Endowment for Democracy—I am honored that when I left the government four and a half, five years ago, Carl and his colleagues asked me to join the board of the NED. The NED is an extraordinary experiment in American foreign policy. It's now 25 years old, is that correct? Twenty-one years old. President Bush made the 20th anniversary speech last year. It was genuinely controversial when it was founded 21 years ago, and many people, particular people of the realpolitik school of American foreign policy, I think we all know who realpolitik school is led by, thought that this was profoundly wrong, for two reasons. One, you shouldn't outsource American foreign policy to people outside the direct control of the executive branch. And the concept was that although the money was taxpayer money, the NED and its four organizations underneath it, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republic Institute, the labor organization whose initials I vaguely remember, and the business one I never remember. Carl will tell you. Those four would be doing their own thing and that profoundly upset a lot of traditionalists from George Kennon, to Henry Kissinger. It just sounded wrong to them.

The second reason people were opposed to it in those days, some people, was because its core mission, as it says here, was to support freedom around the world. Freedom and democracy not being identical, of course, but being closely related. Those were controversial concepts in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when, as you recall, or if you don't recall I want to remind you, Jimmy Carter was the man bringing human rights into foreign policy in the Nixon / Ford / Kissinger era, was very strongly opposed to that issue. When the Congress demanded that State Department have an assistant secretary for human rights, in the late Ford administration, the Ford administration did not want to do it but it was part of the appropriations bill so they did it. But then they appointed a very minor career diplomat to the job and made sure it was a non-job.

So when Jimmy Carter pushed human rights and democracy into the agenda before the NED was formed, it was a classic battle between the realists, realpolitik, *raison d'état* people—notice two of those three words are French and German. That's not an accident because Europeans have that attitude. Not just Europeans. George Kennon objected, Henry Kissinger objected, Al Haig objected, that whole group of people who had dominated foreign policy under the republicans for decades were not in favor of it, and the liberal democrats supported it. But then things got complicated. William

F. Buckley supported it, I remember, and Ronald Reagan thought it was a great idea. And Carl's former boss, Jean Kirkpatrick, thought it was a great idea. Hence, the rise of a group known as the neo-cons. Neo-cons then were not what they are now. Iraq has transformed their image. And neo-cons had some things in common with liberal democrats and some things that were different.

I give you all this history because I want to segue from the NED to the present by demonstrating how we got to where we are, and then I want to talk in a rather conversational style with you about some emerging ideas I have concerning where we are today. But to understand where we are today you've got to understand how we got there, and very little has been written about this—how the original ideas behind things like the NED are clearly Wilsonian, and they were clearly overwhelmingly Democratic Party ideas on foreign policy for most of the period from 1919 on, whether you agree with them or not. And they were criticized usually by the conservatives.

And then the neo-cons came in with a picture, and whatever you think of them because of their now-controversial role in regard to Iraq, they, Reagan adopted their ideas and I would say, as much as anything in his seminal speech at Westminster Hall in 1982, June of 1982, Reagan essentially adopted the Jean Kirkpatrick view, which had a lot of overlap with liberal democrats, but was a conservative idea. And that created a split in the Republican Party—actually the split existed since 1975 when Reagan had attacked the Ford / Kissinger administration directly on the issue of détente, saying that there was no moral content to the republican foreign policy. He came within an inch of wresting the nomination away from an incumbent republican, Gerald Ford, and then four years later, we all know what happened. So that's how this thing began.

And the NED then got past this terrible battle of realpolitik people who didn't think they ought to exist and liberal democrats who liked the issues but were ambivalent about the organization, and it became now an overwhelmingly respected international organization. I never go to a country with a democracy problem without first calling Carl and saying, Carl, who do you have there, I'll be in Afghanistan in ten days. Carl's people will be on the ground there as they have been for me in Ukraine during the crisis, a year and a half ago in Georgia, in Kazakhstan, and they're doing incredible work. And if you want to learn about a country now, where NED people, under their various hats—NED itself doesn't have people on the ground, it would be one of these four institutes or maybe all four—you'll learn a lot more by sitting down with the NED reps than with the embassy, to be quite frank. And I say that

with regret because I'm a career foreign service officer by background and I wish it weren't so.

But these people are really knowledgeable, and they get dictators pretty damned angry. [laughs] Kuchma, in Ukraine, told me that they were undermining his regime. He wasn't wrong. [laughter] Putin—Putin tried to bar them from the country a few weeks ago, and a massive intervention has slowed him down, but he doesn't like them. Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, in a conference we sponsored, Asia Society sponsored, which was attempting to bring more democracy into the country, in Nazarbayev's otherwise completely commendable opening speech about getting rid of nuclear weapons, and good relations with the West, and so on, he even talked about how important democracy was, but he attacked Carl's representatives on the ground almost by name. That's a measurement of success in my view. And the U.S. government, by the way, always goes to bat for these people, and they work very closely with George Soros and his organizations, which do a lot of things in the [unintelligible]. So to be here for FPA, Asia Society, and NED, is terrific.

Now, Carl began by quoting the Washington Post editorial on democracy, and you already know from his introduction, my comments were I stand on the issue of promoting democracy. I spent much of my career trying to do this, most of it, all of it. But I rarely use the word democracy myself. I use the word human rights, individual rights, and I think it's very important and very smart that although the word democracy is in the title of the endowment, The National Endowment for Democracy, the mission as defined here is to support freedom, not to support democracy. I think that was very, very well chosen use of language, Carl, when you did that, which preceded my coming onto your board.

We face a tremendous conundrum here and I do not wish to side with the people who criticize the promotion of democracy by the Bush Administration. That would be a switch in position for me and it would align me with people I disagree with and values I disagree with, but I must also issue a very clear note of concern about the way the rhetoric is being implemented now. This is an off the record session and, as I said earlier, this is more of a conversation and I want to hear what you all think, but we face a kind of a dilemma, and the dilemma is this. We all support democracy. Even the realpolitik people supported democracy. Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon were not opposed to democracy, they just didn't think we ought to promote it as a core foreign policy issue. And in those days, in the Cold War, they violently opposed attempts by liberals and human rights groups to

promote democracy in places like Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Chile, and Zaire, now Congo. And I remember vividly, arguing with my friend Henry Kissinger about this and him predicting that if we put pressure on Marcos for democracy we'd bring communism into play, and I profoundly disagreed. We now face a very different situation. They were wrong, of course. Every country that went democratic was a net plus for long-term for stability in the world. Even when you have a country like the Philippines, where there are coup attempts and instability, as there have been in the last month, because it's a democracy it's a stronger country than under Marcos, who was wrecking the economy and breeding long-term social and economic instability.

So there's no question that a democratic country is preferable to an undemocratic country, from global interests, the interests of the people, and the interests of the United States. No question. And that's why the NED is so important. However, I must express a gnawing concern about the way it is currently being implemented. I have the feeling that a lot of the time it is rhetoric without a clear, coherent policy. And I have a feeling that the differences between individual human rights, basic human rights, and democracy, are sometimes confused in the public eye—excuse me, in the eye of policy makers.

Everyone in this room who has the slightest knowledge of history knows that democracy is more than free elections, free and fair elections. It is a whole way of governance, with rule of law, and transparency, and due process, and tolerance for minority rights at the core of it. It's much more than a single vote. History's data on this is unimpeachable. Starting in 1932 in Germany, and as we all know, Hitler's—if the international observers had been in Germany they wouldn't have objected to the election or to its outcome because it was free, it was fair, and then the guy who won abolished democracy, and we all know what happened next.

But you don't have to go back 74 years for historical example. In recent times, Iran has elected, democratically, a man who is clearly quite popular and is clearly a kind of an Iranian version of Hitler. I'm not saying he's as dangerous yet as Hitler but the combination of things he said about Israel and the Holocaust, the Iranian acceleration of their effort to create a bomb, and their support of terrorism in the region, plus the highly questionable issue of what their long-term goals are in neighboring Iraq, now that they've got, after 400 years of Sunni rule, they have a Shiite government, finally, in Baghdad. That combination makes one pause as to whether they're in the global interests or in America's interests. On the other hand, we can't quarrel with that election result. This guy's

a popular guy. And when he said what he said about Israel, no matter how much it may have upset people in the United States, it's probably believed by a lot of other Iranians and a lot of other Moslems.

Hamas won that election fair and square. And by the way, the only thing that surprised me about Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice's statement that she was surprised at the outcome is that that's the surprise—that she was surprised. Why was anyone surprised? It was the first election the Palestinians had ever had and their charismatic, thuggish but effective street fighter, Arafat, was dead. His successor was a guy who didn't have a five day beard and wore traditional clothes. He looked like he was straight out of the World Economic Forum meetings at Davos, and he spoke in moderate terms, and meanwhile, the system was corrupt, and the garbage wasn't collected, and the Palestinians were fed up. They didn't vote for Hamas because they were anti-Israel because from an average Palestinian's point of view, Hamas and al-Fatah both conducted terrorism, they're both anti-Israel. They voted for Hamas because they wanted domestic reform. And so an election promoted by the United States produced a terrible outcome, at least I think it's pretty terrible, and it's going to create an absolute stalemate in the Mideast peace process for the foreseeable future—not forever but we're not going to see much movement for the next few years. And as you all know, Hamas and Iran are very closely allied. There are plenty of other examples in the world.

Democracy, therefore, and I stress this, means a lot more than just a vote. And I need to stress here because I'm not switching sides, I believe in human rights, I spent most of my career as Carl so generously said, working on these issues, that these are major and irreducible American objectives. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the UN Charter, drafted as an addendum to it, like the U.S. Bill of Rights, as an addendum to the U.S. Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Right, drafted under the leadership and inspiration of Eleanor Roosevelt, enshrined some undeniable rights. Every member state signs it, and a good chunk of them ignore it. And equality of opportunity for women, health access, dignity, no torture, freedom of expression, these are all things which the U.S. should unrelentingly fight for, but that's more than democracy and it's less than democracy. You can have a regime with only one party where all the basic human rights are respected to the level where it's an acceptable level. You might point to Mexico, for 70 years, until the PRI died, as a possible example of a country that met acceptable standards for democracy even though it was a one party state. And you can point to multi-party states

which really aren't multi-party states. There are many critical issues here.

When you get to China, the level of complexity reaches a whole new level because the Chinese are clearly not a democratic state, they clearly just repress political dissent, they're clearly not a democracy, and we clearly must stand up for our values when we talk to Beijing. On the other hand, if you compare China today to where it was exactly 26 years ago on this day, you will see that they gave their population, 24 percent of the world's population, extraordinary improvement in their personal living conditions—freedom to move from their villages to other cities or town, to look for work, tremendous economic growth. Those were basic human rights. Would you rather be a Chinese today or a Chinese in 1980 or 1970 at the height of the craziness of the Cultural Revolution? Easy decision. China's in better shape today than, arguably, it's been in its history, for many Chinese. On the other hand there are people in jail for expressing their views and democracy is a dim light, way in the future, with some limited movement towards village democracy. So the issues of China are, in and of themselves, even more complex.

So where do we come out in this? Well it's a work in progress. As I said, I support the rhetoric of President Bush I'm puzzled by its implementation, and I'm additionally puzzled by the fact that it's unevenly applied. We have done nothing in Zimbabwe, nothing, and when the president went to Africa he stood next to Thabo Mbeki in Pretoria and said this is my man to carry out the situation to deal with Mugabe. Mbeki was profoundly embarrassed. He does not to wish to do this for his own personal reasons, which I am very upset about because I think Mbeki should do more, and to publicly announce it like that had a kind of a post-neocolonial style which was troubling to everyone. And that's all we did. And Mugabe has gotten much worse since then and I might add in passing, he's now making deals with, guess who? China, and the Chinese want his resources in return for which he builds them villas and begins to protect them in international fora like the United Nations.

Darfur—the secretary of state, in 2005, early '04, no correction, in '03, proclaimed Darfur genocide. Under U.S. law that required us to take actions. We never took any of the actions and now are slowly, reluctantly, moving to some kind of action, which will require NATO logistical support, not American troops on the ground in that vast trackless desert. I visited it with Senator John Corzine and Tim Collins, and we went through the area, and it's very difficult to operate in. But the U.S. has done nothing while proclaiming it's very dangerous, very difficult. That kind of double standard

undermines the value of our rhetoric. For generations people all over the world look to the U.S. for inspirations, ideas, but our actions have to be consistent with our ideas. And I haven't even mentioned Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo, and issues which profoundly undermine the credibility of the core message. You can't proclaim our support for democracy and human rights and at the same time oppose legislation put in I might add by Senator McCain, opposing torture, and yet that's what's happened.

So the rhetoric reality gap is widened. American has lost credibility in advancing its own ideas, and yet, and I must stress this, the ideals are one that I profoundly believe in and I'm sure all of you believe in. The only question is whether we're right to promote them outside our own borders, which I believe, but we have to do it well, or wrong, as many people from John Quincy Adams in 1826, in his famous speech, on through more recent critics have said.

These are tough issues and I didn't come here tonight to give you a final answer to them because I don't have that, and if I did I'd write a book [laughter] and try to promote them. I'm just trying to work it out with you and I ask you all to join me in thinking whether you're for George Bush or the democrats—whether you think peaceful regime change in Washington is overdue or not [laughter]. That I leave to you, but either way we need to have a serious dialog in as bipartisan, non-partisan a way as possible about what it means, what the values part of American foreign policy means, recognizing that we are where we are. We have suffered the most massive decline in American international standing prestige in the last five years in modern American history, without any question at all. From close NATO allies like Turkey to countries all over the world. Not everywhere. We're quite popular in India and ironically and importantly we're popular in Iran. But by and large, we have suffered a massive decline and we must deal with that and figure out how to restore it, and how to get the balance right on this critical set of issues.

Thank you very much.