



New York Democracy Forum



Do we really know how to promote democracy?

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Thank you very much. I am really delighted to be here in New York. I grew up in New York City, so it's great to be back, and I'd like to thank the Foreign Policy Association and Hunter College for the opportunity to speak on this subject tonight.

I am also quite grateful to the National Endowment for Democracy. As Marc Plattner indicated, I've been involved with the Journal of Democracy right from the beginning, which is a really terrific and intellectual source of knowledge about contemporary democracy. But also being a board member of the NED, Washington is full of top-heavy, inefficient bureaucracies, if you haven't noticed, and the NED is just an amazing organization, because it is small and lean. It doesn't spend all its money on contractors and Beltway bandits, it actually gets funds out to people who are struggling for democracy all over the world, and does a remarkable job at it. So I have been very honored to be associated with both the intellectual side of the operation, the Journal, and the grant making side in the endowment.

Which brings me to the topic, and I think the title got a little bit garbled when I was negotiating this a few months ago. I actually thought that the title was “What do we know about democracy promotion?” So the answer to your immediate question is yes, we know some things and no we don’t know everything, so your journal can continue to publish every couple of months.

But I did want to lay out the question, you know, we’ve been doing democracy promotion quite seriously in an organized way for a couple of decades, and it is worth standing back and reviewing this. It is very important to American foreign policy. President Bush gave a remarkable second inaugural address in which he put democracy promotion front and center in American foreign policy in a way that has not quite been so stark in quite a while, although I would say that every American president has made democracy promotion a component of American foreign policy.

This is one of the few issues -- and you can tell as Representative Gephardt was one of the last speakers in the series -- that has really received bi-partisan support over the decades and one thing that Americans can actually agree on in Washington. There are not many these days, and that is one of them. It’s been long associated with a tradition that in a certain sense starts with Woodrow Wilson. We’ve done a lot of democracy promotion in earlier generations. Japan and Germany emerged from World War II as well-functioning democracies in large measure because of American intervention. We played a large role in promoting the so-called “third wave” democracies in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s.

And so President Bush is really not taking any departures in what he said. What I think is interesting is that it is a conservative Republican saying that, and a conservative Republican that actually campaigned in 2000 against nation-building and against extensive American involvement in this sort of thing, which to me

indicates that the imperative for democracy promotion is actually fairly deeply rooted in the basic needs of American foreign policy.

Now, I am going to skip to the end of the talk in a way, and I am going to assert the single most fundamental lesson that we have learned about democracy promotion, and I want to begin with that. I will have to just assert it without being able to prove it at first. That lesson is the following: The United States is never the prime mover in promoting democracy in any country around the world. Or, to put it slightly differently, democracy cannot come about in any society unless there is a strong domestic demand by local actors -- elites, the masses or civil society -- that want it.

This is almost by definition. You cannot impose democracy on a country that does not want to be democratic. That's in the definition of democracy. We're sometimes accused of doing that in Iraq. If the Iraqis don't want democracy, believe me, there is nothing we are going to be able to do in the long run that is going to force them to have that form of government.

The United States, I think, can be very helpful in promoting democratic transitions, and we can be very unhelpful when we support non-democracies or we support authoritarian allies that are trying to hold back that tide. But you cannot understand the prospects for democracy promotion by an outside country like the United States unless you understand the underlying mechanism that brings countries to democracy and the conditions that make democracy more or less likely.

So the first way to approach this problem is not to talk about the United States, but to talk about democracy itself and the conditions that facilitate democratic transition. I think that there are basically four of them that I will discuss. The first has to do with the level of development. Rich countries have an easier time sustaining democracy than poor ones. Second is culture. The third has to do

with the neighborhood you live in. And the fourth has to do with ideas. So let me go over all of those as conditions or hindrances to democratic transition.

Let's begin with the level of development. I am a political scientist, and we have a lot of envy of natural scientists, because we don't have many real scientific laws in politics that we can point to that receive any consensus. One of the few that is more or less accepted by many is the fact that there is a correlation between the level of development as measured by per capita GDP and democracy. So, if you look around the world, virtually all of the industrialized countries are functioning democracies, and relatively few poor countries are democratic.

There are, of course, big exceptions. India and Costa Rica are developing countries that have had robust democracies, while Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are relatively rich countries that are not democratic. So there are exceptions, but the correlation actually stands up pretty well. The reverse causality -- does democracy promote development -- is a much more complicated one, because we see that there are successful democracies like Japan after 1945 that did grow very fast, and there are authoritarian countries that have also managed to do quite well, like Singapore, and again, poor democracies and poor authoritarian rulers.

But there is clearly a relationship between economic development and the ability -- and in fact I think the social scientists who have looked at this question say that of course a democratic transition can happen if you are poor or if you are rich, it doesn't really matter, but the ability to sustain a stable democracy does correlate very strongly with the overall level of income in the whole society. In fact, once you get past a level of about \$6,000 in per capita GDP, and when you get to that level you are basically no longer an agricultural society, you are an industrialized society. There is

actually not a single case of a country that becomes a democracy reverting back to an authoritarian government.

Now the reasons for this are complex and not, I think, completely understood. It has something to do with the growth of the middle class -- people that own private property have something to lose and therefore want to participate in the political system.

Obviously, education has something to do with it. If you live in a subsistence economy you worry about feeding your family and not whether you can vote, and all of those things begin changing as you become richer.

So one thing that you want to do if you want to promote democracy, this is not either a necessary or sufficient condition, but it is very helpful, is to promote economic development. In fact, we've seen a number of countries that have industrialized, like South Korea and Taiwan, and right on schedule, when they hit around that \$6,000 income level they develop democratic movements. One of the big hopes for China is that when they get up to that level of development, similar processes will take place there.

It also means, I think, that when we look at democratic transitions in very poor and economically troubled parts of the world like sub-Saharan Africa that there is greater skepticism that even if you have an election or have a democratic transition, whether that will be sustainable in a society that is that close to subsistence, that does not have a state, that does not have any kind of resources, where you have very low levels of education, very severe ethnic and other kinds of cleavages.

It doesn't mean it can't happen in those kinds of poor countries, but if you can do anything to promote economic development, it is going to help your ability to sustain democracy. So you have to worry both about politics and political development, and you have

to worry about economic development as well. In other words, you need the National Endowment for Democracy, but you also need the World Bank and other organizations that promote development.

The second condition for democracy is culture. This has been in people's heads a lot. Because of September 11, there is a common assertion, and actually an unfortunately politicized debate over whether Islam is compatible either with modern economic development or with political democracy and people will make these broad cultural assertions that Islam does not separate the mosque and the state, and therefore cannot sustain a true liberal democracy.

I would say that in general, when you approach these cultural questions you have to avoid two opposite conclusions. One is that culture doesn't matter at all, that it is just a matter of economics or self-interest, because clearly it does. The other is that culture is all-determinative, and that a particular country can't develop because it has a particular cultural background, or it can't develop a democracy because there are these insuperable cultural obstacles. I don't think that either of these positions is sustainable.

For example, I think that there is no question that there is a cultural underpinning to successful democracy. Successful democracy is not just a constitution and a certain set of formal institutions. In fact, Samuel Huntington, in his latest book on American national identity, has a phrase in one of the early chapters that I think is correct that may make people uncomfortable, but he says the same institutions – and he talks about the Anglo-Protestant culture that existed in North America at the time of the American founding, which he said was important to the success of American democracy – he says if you take the same formal institutions, the constitution, the presidency and so-forth, and combine it with a Hispanic culture you get Mexico, if you combine it with a

Portuguese culture you get Brazil, and you get very different outcomes in terms of the character of the democracy that emerges.

I think that the question is, who is an Anglo-Protestant in the world these days? I think it is probably Korean grocery store owners and Russian cab drivers in terms of work ethic and drive to succeed and so forth, but there is no question that unless you have those kinds of unwritten norms and cultural values, the ability to compromise, the willingness to abide for certain types of rule, respect for rule of law, that it is hard to make democracy work.

On the other hand, history is full of people that abused the concept of culture to say that it is too determinative. Actually, the most famous was a person who in a way should not have made this mistake, the German sociologist Max Weber, who is famous for his book “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” in which he argued that Protestant countries developed sooner than Catholic ones because of the work ethic and savings that were fostered by a certain set of religious beliefs.

He also wrote a book on Asia and the effect of Confucianism on economic development that is probably one of the wrongest books ever written by a major sociologist. He’s got this remarkable assertion, in which he says there are all kinds of reasons why China could not develop a modern capitalist economy, and he’s got one line where he says if there is any country less likely to develop modern capitalism than China, it is Japan. This is a book that was written in 1915, so even a great thinker like Weber can get confused about attributing to culture things that really ought to be contributed to things like weak institutions, the fact that you are occupied by a colonial power as China was, or that you’ve got a communist regime or a lot of other things that explain Asia’s failure to develop up to the last couple of generations.

I would say that we really have to be careful about this when we think about the question of Islam and democracy today. There is no question that the existence of radical Islamist parties that are really not at their core at all democratic, but can contest democratic elections makes it much harder to hold elections in Muslim countries, because the fear is that one of these parties will come to power, you know, one man, one vote, one time, and will use that as a route to establishing a theocracy of the sort that exists in Iran today, and that is a real danger.

On the other hand, does that mean that you could not get a reconciliation of Islam and democracy? I think it is very doubtful. In fact, we have an Islamist party ruling Turkey today that is a moderate Islamist party that wants to get into the European Union and has been changing Turkish laws left and right in order to comply with the European accession criteria. There are many ways in which you can combine, and actually we've got two presidents, we've got Karzai of Afghanistan and Yudhoyono of Indonesia both of whom are presidents of countries that are pretty credible democracies, Afghanistan not for that long. But they have both done well, they are both non-Western, both are Muslim and both are democratic, so it's not an insuperable obstacle but it matters.

The third issue is neighbors. Societies are obviously influenced by what goes on around them, and I think this is particularly true in today's globalized world where you get images of the Orange Revolution that are broadcast not just in Ukraine but on every screen around the world, and it is inevitable that people begin copying practices or accepting norms and political movements that occur in other parts of the world.

The fall of the Berlin Wall had echoes all over the world, in Asia, in Latin America, and there was a wave of democratic transitions in sub-Saharan Africa in countries that didn't meet any of the

political scientists' criteria for candidates for democratic transition and I think the reason that happened was really people watching the behavior of other political actors on the global stage.

Therefore, there is a great deal of competition and pressure from the international community concerning democratic norms.

Now the nature of the neighborhood matters very much, so that Ukraine and Georgia and Serbia, in a certain sense, believe that they all filled a certain ex-communist space and it is not the same space that most Arab countries live in. I think that a country like Ukraine, certainly Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, all believe that they should have been in Western Europe, that that was their real home and that communism actually kept them from being themselves, so when the wall came down it was simply a matter of returning to something that was quite natural to them.

That is not the case in the Arab world right now because democracy is a Western concept. It is something I think many people in the Arab world want, but it is not something they feel is a part of their tradition in the same way that people in the former communist world did. I actually had a student who was an Egyptian newscaster and he interviewed me once for an Egyptian news station and we were talking about this issue and he was saying, yes, Egyptians really do want democracy, but can we just come up with another word for it, because it just doesn't sound right, you know, we use this word when we talk about it in Arabic and it sounds like something foreign. We have something like it in our tradition but that's simply not it. So neighborhood is really important.

The final issue is ideas, that is, you cannot have a democracy unless you have people who believe in democracy. I think -- and in a way this was the core of my book "The End of History and the Last Man" -- the thing that was interesting about the world that emerged at the end of the 20th century was that liberal democracy

was virtually the only idea that had widespread legitimacy throughout the world as the basis for a political society, and particularly for a modern political society, so that even when you got these generals that took power in Argentina, or Brazil or Peru in the 1960s and '70s, they were embarrassed and said, well, we are just doing this temporarily, we understand that we have to be democratic, but democracy isn't working very well, it really helped push them out of the way, because at a certain point when they had sort of outlived the excuse they had made for intervening, nobody had any other grounds for justifying rule other than democratic elections.

Even in a Muslim country like Indonesia, I think there is a hope that the dictator Suharto had that by promoting rapid economic growth, people would legitimate his form of soft authoritarianism, and that worked pretty well up until they hit a bump in the road called the Asian crisis, a major economic setback, where they lost 30 percent of their national income and at that point Indonesians turned around and said, why do we need this corrupt dictator to preside over this kind of a setback? We might as well have a democracy and have something legitimate. So the idea of democracy was really key.

Now, there are other ideas out there in the world. I believe it was Zarqawi who put up on his Web site some phrase to the effect that democracy itself as we envisioned it in Iraq was actually sacrilegious, because it is not the people who are sovereign, it is God who is sovereign. So there is a strand of jihadist thinking that rejects root and branch Western ideas of democracy. My view is that they still represent a relatively small minority, even within the Muslim world, and that contest is still ongoing. But unless you've got the ideas, you are not going to have genuine democracy.

Now, the next question has to do with the actual, empirical American experience with democracy promotion, and this gets to

the question of what have we actually learned having done this for all these years. The United States did not get on this democracy promotion kick anytime recently, and in fact the United States played a very critical role, you know, we had Germany and Japan of course, but we oftentimes made compromises with our democratic principles because we were in a cold war and we supported a lot of non-democratic allies and in fact acted in ways that destabilized some democracies because they were sufficiently in our camp in the Cold War.

But that began to change very substantially, I think, really during the Reagan administration, and you had a number of important decisions in which the United States began to play a very critical role. In the Philippines, after the people power revolution following Benigno Aquino's assassination, the United States pulled the rug out from Ferdinand Marcos. In fact, Paul Wolfowitz, head of the World Bank and at that time assistant secretary of state for East Asia, played a key role in pushing Ronald Reagan, quite gently, to end support for this friendly dictator.

The following year in South Korea the United States sent a letter to Roh Tae Woo, the general ruling Korea saying that he really had to go for democratic institutions in the face of all the student and worker demonstrations, pro-democracy demonstrations, that were taking place there, and he saw the handwriting on the wall that the United States was not going to support a crackdown in Korea, and the rest is history. They had an election and Korea is now a fully democratic society.

The following year, the United States supported the 'no' referendum against Augusto Pinochet in 1988. There is still a controversy about what we did back in 1973 when Pinochet came to power, but I think that the realists that were in power in Washington at the time had a certain fondness for stability that was brought about by friendly dictators, but by 1988 we made a clear

break with that and said whatever the Chilean people say, if they want Pinochet to go, we are going to support that. Taiwan in 1988 also had a democratic election.

We also supported democracy in Eastern Europe very strongly, the solidarity labor movement got a lot of support, right from the beginning, from the AFL-CIO, through the National Endowment for Democracy, the German foundations, the Frederick Ebert and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung played a key role in promoting democracy in Latin Europe, in Portugal particularly and other places as well.

So there was a lot of activity in the entire third wave where the international community didn't just broadcast its way of life and ideas but actually gave key material support, training, party development, election monitoring to actors in countries undergoing democratic revolutions.

Now, we've also tried a more muscular approach to democracy promotion through invasion and military occupation, and that also has a long history. We've of course had Japan and Germany, and we have Afghanistan and Iraq today, and we've had a lot nation-building exercises that we've engaged in. But really the first important one was the reconstruction of the South. We don't think of this as nation-building, but it was actually a very important precedent because I think all of the important things we did wrong in reconstruction we are doing wrong today in Iraq, and we continue to make those kinds of mistakes.

We get very enthusiastic about these projects and do them for about five years until we get tired of them and move on, and the problem hasn't really been solved. And I think, quite frankly, although Germany and Japan were big successes in this regard, this kind of muscular nation-building is something that is fairly problematic, because it is very costly and very difficult.

Forcible regime change really creates as many problems as it solves because you are the primary agent that is pushing change, and it is not any longer driven by the society, so the ownership of the transformation society gets very clouded, and unless the local people think they own the democracy that they are creating, it creates a lot of problems, and it creates resistance unless there is a clear moral basis for the American role.

Now, just in the last five years we've had actually a kind of fourth wave, or a second phase of the third wave of democracy with the revolutions in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. I'm not going to count Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan yet because it is really not clear how those are going to come out, but certainly Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine were remarkable instances of societies really wanting democratic change and getting it, which I think, when the history of this is written, we will find outside democracy promotion actually played a key role.

All three of those democratic revolutions followed a similar pattern. The outside support was critical in several respects. It was critical first in providing election monitoring. We, meaning the United States and the international community, did not know how to help stage a free and fair election when we started doing this in the early '80s but the technology and the mechanism for doing this now is there, and when Ukraine had its run-off election in late December, the international community could mobilize thousands of poll-watchers that could really guarantee that the election was a fair one, which means that election fraud is pretty detectable now under that system.

We supported independent media that could get word out about fraudulent or stolen elections, and we supported civil society groups that could stand outside the government and could mobilize outside of the legislature in Kiev, all of those crowds standing out

there night after night demanding a second election. I think that most of the groups that did this, that broadcast news about the fraud, and that mobilized in that square really had received support from the outside, not just the United States but from Europe and Canada and other places, and it's very possible that that revolution may not have been as successful, or could have been quashed more easily, had it not been for that outside help. Something similar happened in Serbia and Georgia.

There are lessons from this. This kind of democracy promotion does not work everywhere. The United States, or the international community, or the Europeans do not have the ability to say, well, we want democracy in such and such a country and we are going to use these levers to get it. The movement really has to wait for a certain ripening, and furthermore, it really does not happen in any but a semi-authoritarian society. If a ruler is not willing to hold an election that can be falsified then this kind of sequence of events cannot happen.

So, when Robert Mugabe recently held what was probably a crooked election in Zimbabwe, there are no international observers there, wide suspicion among his opponents that this thing was rigged, but really no proof, and therefore no ability to mobilize people in opposition to it. It wouldn't have worked under Saddam Hussein or under Kim Jong Il or any number of totalitarian dictators. So this kind of democracy promotion has a certain window that it can operate in, and again it depends on the neighborhood very much and the willingness of people to receive support from the West, from the United States in particular, and it differs from country to country. The Russians today I think are much less happy about that kind of support than were the Ukrainians or the Georgians.

Let me just conclude by talking a little bit about democracy in the Middle East, because this really has become, in a way, the

centerpiece of the Bush administration's foreign policy. And I don't think we should approach this in a partisan way, because I guarantee you that if a Democratic president is elected in 2008, that administration is going to continue these types of programs because I think there is a consensus that many of the types of problems in the Middle East, including terrorism, stem ultimately from political systems that are absolutely stuck and not susceptible to change, so just in itself and for the sake of U.S. long-term interest, I think there is fairly broad consensus that this is something that we need to do if possible.

The real question is, realistically, what are the prospects for democratic transition in this region? There are a number of reasons for thinking that the region is ripe for change. If you just look at poll data done by any number of organizations, including the three UNDP Arab Human Development Reports, there is plenty of evidence that people, broadly speaking, across the Middle East would like to see democratic change occur in their countries. In fact, a large number of respondents in Arab countries actually want to move to a democratic country, because they have kind of given up on life in their own society.

And we've certainly seen big cracks in the façade of Arab authoritarianism after the Iraq election, in Lebanon, which is going to trigger things in Syria. In Egypt, Mubarak has shown he is not impervious to the demands from his biggest allies for some kind of democratic opening. I have no doubt whatsoever that the whole region has a great deal of pent up demand for democratic change.

On the negative side, however, I think we have to be a little bit realistic about both the region and also about the United States itself. I believe at this point in our history, the United States is unfortunately the wrong agent for promoting change in this region. We had a general idea that by toppling Saddam Hussein we would set off political reverberations and that might help, but we have to

confront the fact that American credibility in this part of the world is disastrously low.

By the time you got to the invasion of Iraq, even in nominally friendly countries like Turkey or Kuwait, which we saved in 1991, or in Indonesia, you were down to levels of popularity for the United States in the single digits, in contrast to majorities being favorably inclined towards the United States 10 years earlier. I think things like Abu Ghraib and Saddam Hussein in his underwear and all of the things that were unintended consequences of the invasion have only been salt in that particular wound.

I think that democracy, although it is not the case that democracy cannot flower and emerge in most Arab countries, I think there are reasons why it is going to have a different face in that part of the world. We've seen this already in Iraq and Afghanistan, where religion is simply written into their constitutions and will play a bigger part in their political society than it will in Europe or the United States. So even if there is democracy it is going to be something that will have a Muslim and an Arab character.

The final issue is that I really, honestly, don't think that people in Washington have made up their minds if they truly want democracy in the Middle East if it means destabilizing important allies and opening the door to Islamists coming to power. The president has said quite explicitly -- let the chips fall where they may, this is the course that we are on. I guess we have to take him at his word. It is a pretty big leap to make to say that in Egypt or Saudi Arabia you are willing to take the chances of a really free and open democratic process.

My personal belief is that we should do this. I believe that we made a big mistake back in the early 1990s when we and the French told the Algerian military that they should crack down on the FIS, the Islamic Salvation Front that had won the election at

that point. We were, I think, legitimately worried that this was a totalitarian party that would abolish democracy if it came to power, but I think it was a calculated risk that we should have been willing to take, and I think we should take it in other parts of the Middle East. But that is a political decision that is extremely hard for the United States to make, not because we like being hypocritical, but because it is a genuinely difficult set of decisions.

So, that's it. I will repeat the assertion with which I began. The United States does not actually promote democracy anywhere. Democracy is promoted by people who want to live in democratic societies. We can be helpful, and we can be helpful to the point where it makes a difference between success and failure, but I think we have to understand that democracy promotion is a kind of opportunistic activity that will remain an important component of American foreign policy, but will be a process that we are never able to really control or master, because the whole process of democracy itself is pretty messy.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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