

The Democratic Project: Ensuring Rights



AP Photo/Lionel Cironneau

Berliners celebrate on top of the wall as East Germans (backs to camera) flood through the dismantled Berlin Wall into West Berlin at Potsdamer Platz, November 12, 1989.

Proponents of a second approach start with a fundamentally different way of thinking about how we, as Americans, might achieve security and respect in the world. They say a basic reason for trying to expand democracy is that we would be safer in a world where democratic values like ours are widespread. If someone asked us what kind of neighborhood we want to live in, most of us would probably agree that we want to live in a neighborhood where we can count on everyone to live by the same rules. We would feel a lot

safer if others lived in social and political systems that reflect respect for the basic human, civil, and political rights that we hold dear, and had a voice in selecting their leaders and shaping their own futures.

Advocates of this approach say that the challenges of our troubled world require political, not just military, economic, or technical solutions. Our goal as Americans for the twenty-first century should be to help citizens in countries throughout the world develop a culture of democracy that both builds on local traditions and protects basic human rights. After all, advocates of this approach say, democracy and human rights are our core values as a nation and have made us what we are. We must do all we can through actions by our government and ourselves to help build democracies elsewhere.

At its core, democracy expresses a simple conviction that government must be answerable to the people it serves. Democracy is not a specific blueprint about political institutions or a guarantee that this system will invariably produce the right answers. It is a principle about how differences and conflicting goals should be reconciled. It comes down to an agreement to trust the judgment of the majority, an agreement not to use violence or force as means to power. Its deep appeal lies in the fact that it recognizes a universal longing on the part of individuals to be treated with dignity and not to be subject to arbitrary rule.

In the name of protecting this ideal, the Americans fought in two world wars. We helped create the United Nations with its founding goal of promoting “universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, prepared by a group led by Eleanor Roosevelt, made democratic principles the standard by which governments of U.N. member states would be judged. It is our task, from the point of view of this approach, to advance this purpose everywhere

through our government and as citizens who can and do have a role to play in shaping our world.

Global Report Card

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many nations made dramatic progress in opening up their political systems, expanding freedoms, and recognizing human rights. Over the course of those 2 decades, 81 countries took significant steps toward democracy, in many cases overthrowing authoritarian, one-party regimes. Today, 140 of the world's nearly 200 nations hold multiparty elections.

Yet a glance at what is happening in various regions of the world shows that there is no reason to think that democracy is established as a global norm. Even in countries where democratic traditions are firmly in place, many citizens feel powerless to affect national policies, and in some countries, basic human rights are in jeopardy. In many parts of the world, democratic aspirations are still just that - a hope and not a reality.

What is needed today, say advocates of this approach, is a renewed commitment to promote democracy and protect human rights as a priority concern. This is also the most practical and promising way to promote peace and global stability.

Why should our role in the world be to expand democracy? Initially, say advocates of this approach, because it is the right thing to do. It is our core value as a nation and our basic truth. But there are practical and self-interested reasons, too, for putting the democratic project at the top of America's international agenda. We know from experience that what is good for democracy is good for America. Democracy embodies the most promising long-term formula for achieving stability and generally peaceful relations among nations. The practical case for democracy is well documented.

First, it is a striking generalization that democratic regimes do not attack each other. Not all democratic nations have cordial relations with the United States. But none are our enemies. As a general rule, as the world becomes more democratic, it also becomes more peaceful and friendly to America.

A second practical argument is that democracies are more stable. They permit political opposition and have a process for the orderly hand over of power from one regime to another. Riots and unruly demonstrations are more common in

What Needs to Be Done ?

Government Actions

- Increase foreign economic assistance and use it as a carrot to encourage democracy building, or as a stick by ending aid to non-democratic regimes.
- Greatly increase spending for cultural and educational exchanges even if this means reducing military spending.
- Cut ties to foreign dictators who refuse to honor human rights or democratic values even if this reduces our oil supply or affects other national interests.
- Use American military force to intervene when democratic regimes anywhere in the world are threatened.

Citizen Actions

- Be an example of democracy at work by volunteering to serve in other countries through organizations that provide their skills and knowledge to help others.
- Lobby Congress to greatly increase economic aid for countries with democratic governments even if this means cuts in domestic spending, or higher taxes.
- Push for a greatly expanded program of educational and cultural exchanges and seek to take part in them.
- Support American military action when people in other countries are threatened with losing their democratic form of government.

democratic than in nondemocratic nations but they do not lead to violent overthrowing of the governments.

In both of these respects, democratic regimes deliver the goods. They contribute to a more peaceful and stable world, and one that is generally responsive to human needs.



Inmates packed into overcrowded jail cell in Sao Paulo, Brazil. To protest what authorities admit are sub-human conditions, prisoners staged 68 rebellions during the first 6 months of the year.

AP Photo/Inacio Teixeira

Promoting Democracy

A big problem, say advocates of this approach, is that while the United States says it is about promoting democracy and supporting human rights, it is not doing either consistently. This nation has repeatedly shown that it is willing to defer or compromise these goals in the name of more pressing concerns.



John Flor, holding a sign that reads, "Make Democracy Work, Re-Vote," of St. Augustine, Fla., marches with other demonstrators Friday Nov. 10, 2001 in front of the Governmental Center in downtown West Palm Beach, FL...

As part of its antiterrorism effort, the United States has worked closely with several nations, including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which have little patience for human rights or democratic values. There is nothing new in this. The United States has long relied on reactionary and nondemocratic governments in the cause of protecting the nation's interests, such as its oil supply. But advocates of this approach insist that the promotion of democracy is itself our principal interest. Over the long run, we will discover that these governments are obstacles to the kind of world the United States is trying to achieve.

The freedom of expression that is characteristic of a democracy has an impact on the way the people of a country view the United States. India has the second largest Muslim population of any country. Yet, because it is an open society that allows the expression of dissent, America is not the scapegoat. Nor is that nation a breeding ground for terrorists. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman reported that India is a "noisy, messy democracy, where opportunities and a political voice are open to [Muslims] and that makes a huge difference." But on the other side of India's northwest border, Pakistan's military dictatorship stifles dissent. That, in combination with poverty and antimodernist Islamic schools, produces a cauldron of anti-American hostility and a culture broadly sympathetic to terrorist groups like al Qaeda.

What, exactly, should the United States do to encourage the seeds of democracy and keep promising seedlings from being trampled? Advancing the democratic agenda, say advocates, requires commitment from the government and citizens as individuals and members of groups.

The United States government influences democratic regimes abroad in various ways. One of the most effective ways has been the practice of making U.S. economic and humanitarian aid dependent on good governance in nations that receive such assistance. For example, Congress approved expanded aid for Colombia's military

after making the judgment that Colombian government is doing enough to protect human rights.

That is one way to use our influence, say advocates of this approach, and it can be quite effective. But the problem is that U.S. humanitarian and economic aid programs are so small now that they don't provide much leverage. The foreign aid budget is dramatically smaller than the amount the United States devotes to military spending. For the 2003 budget, the administration proposed almost \$400 billion for defense, but only \$15 billion in foreign assistance. The United States ranks last among the industrialized countries of the world in foreign aid spending as a percent of its gross domestic product — about one-tenth of 1 percent. "There's a total disparity," says financier George Soros, "between what we are willing to do militarily and what we are willing to do in a constructive way."

A poll in mid-2002 showed that the average American would like to spend \$1 on foreign aid for every \$3 spent on defense. In reality, the 2003 budget called for \$1 in aid for about \$25 spent on defense. If promoting democracy is really our priority, conclude advocates of this approach, we need to put our money where our mouth is.

Citizen Influence

What we need to realize, say proponents of this choice, is that government is by no means the only important factor in making a success of the democratic project. Citizens, not governments, build the culture of democracy. Making progress will require our individual commitment and collective action through a wide variety of activities and organizations.

We are already doing it, advocates of this approach say, but we need to do much more. We have always been generous with helping victims of famine, flood, and earthquakes. And by working in various ways to make the world a better place, we provide evidence of the values of democracy. Many of us offer our talents and know-how to people in other countries through government programs such as the Peace Corps and through private groups such as Project HOPE and Habitat for Humanity. All these people-to-people contacts can change minds and hearts. They show that we want to share what we have and, at the same time, help refute the perception that Americans are self-indulgent and indifferent to the plight of others. Individual instances of such contact may not seem very impressive or even particularly important. But collectively and over time, this is how democ-

matic cultures are built.

Another avenue for the spread of democracies is American educational institutions, which for years have attracted a growing number of students from other countries. In the time foreign students spend on campuses throughout the United States they learn a lot about American ways, including how democracy works.

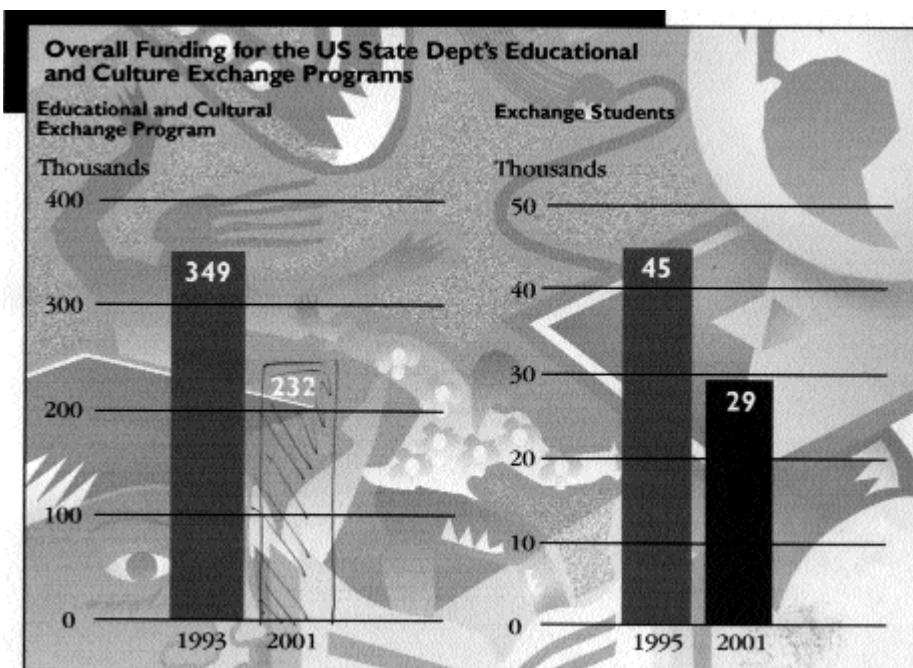
Most Americans take it for granted that campus life includes student councils, free speech, outspoken student newspapers, faculty tenure, and campus codes that guarantee student rights and grievance procedures. To many foreign students, this is eye-opening and one of the most impressive things about American culture. This knowledge does not always produce converts to democracy, but it often has had a far-reaching impact as students return to their homelands.

Moving toward democracy is not an overnight process nor an automatic one. It involves the experience over time of millions of Americans and their counterparts abroad who engage in exchange programs of different kinds. If we are serious about nurturing democratic regimes, we need to expand such activities, not reduce them as has been happening for some years.

Tradeoffs

There is a strong need, then, for making the expansion of democracy the centerpiece of our global role, say advocates of this approach. And democracy cannot effectively be spread by force. Democracy is America's most valuable export. It is also the best hope for moving toward a world in which dissent and disappointment are expressed usefully within each nation's political system, not repressed and funneled into rabid anti-Americanism. In many cases, however, we may have to restore or enable democratic regimes not just by the force of example, but by examples of force.

Grenada, the Dominican Republic, and Panama, to mention three examples in the Western Hemisphere, today have democratic regimes that were imposed in part by the use of American force. After American troops departed, democracy was sustained by popular support. Military intervention was necessary to defend the right of people to make their own decisions. Indeed, this has been an integral part of U.S. foreign policy under recent presidents, including Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton.



Proponents of this approach insist that our long-term commitment as a government and as citizens must be helping people in various parts of the world establish a democratic way of life. After World War II, both defeated nations, Germany and Japan, were occupied for years by U.S. and other allied troops while vast sums from the U.S. through programs like the Marshall Plan, helped the devastated countries recover. We must be prepared to do the same in this century in countries such as Afghanistan, say advocates of this approach, if we are to achieve our true goal of a democratic world.

And consistently, we will need to sell democracy by example. For this approach to work, Americans as individuals and groups will have to be more generous in giving their time and talents in other countries. And we will have to accept that spending more money on economic assistance and cultural and educational exchanges will take away from spending on defense or domestic needs.

Opposing Voices

Few question the central role democratic ideals have played in the American experience, or the significance of our acting as champion and cheerleader for democratic practices abroad. There is widespread agreement that the United States should continue doing such things as monitoring elections to ensure that they are fair, and using U.S. aid programs as both a carrot and a stick to encourage democratic practices and prevent abuses of human rights.

Corbis/Paul A. Saunders



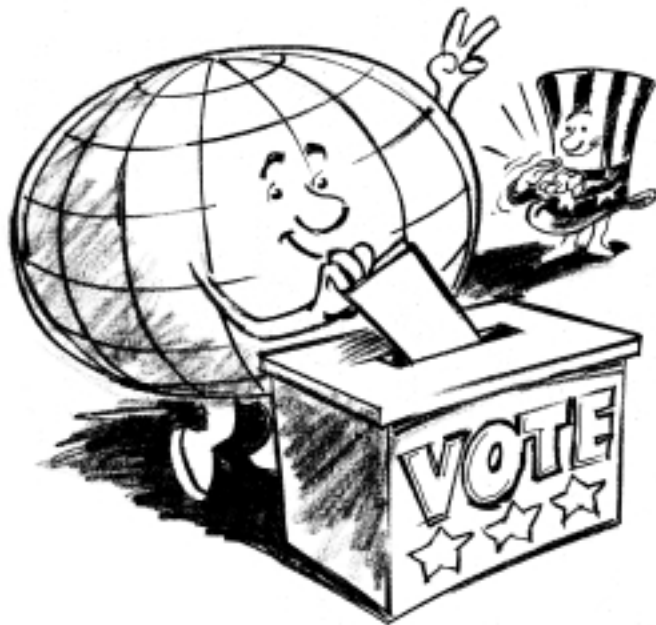
A Haitian young man hangs up a string of broadside sheets for his candidate for president.

The ideal of democracy — that government must be answerable to the people it serves — has a universal appeal. But as noted in the UNDP Human Development Report 2002, democracy has delivered less than people expected. In the words of that report: “Many fought for — and won — democracy in the hope of greater social justice, broader

political participation, and peaceful resolution of violent conflicts.”

Yet that is not, the report notes, what democratic regimes have delivered in most places. “Now, 10 to 20 years later, democracy has not produced dividends in the lives of ordinary people in too many countries.... Many newly democratic regimes... seem no better equipped to tackle ... high poverty and inequality than their authoritarian predecessors... people around the world... seem to be losing faith in democracy.”

Democracy is a disappointment, in other words, not because it is the wrong ideal, but because democracy by itself does not change very much. If Americans focus on ushering in democratic regimes — and then do little more to assist development in those nations — they are likely to be blamed when democratic regimes are unable to make real changes in people’s lives.



Democracy Isn’t Enough

The lesson, say those who have reservations about this approach, is that we need to understand what democracy can realistically accomplish. Promoting democracy is not likely to succeed as long as developing nations have to deal with a heavy burden of debt to foreign creditors, which drains the local economy and prevents political leaders from delivering what they promise.

Many people have serious reservations about whether this approach is an appropriate guide to what this country should do - and should not do - internationally. Some wonder whether we have made unrealistic claims about democracy, based on our unique historical experience. And as a prescription for America’s direct involvement in every corner of the globe, critics say, this approach is grossly unrealistic in its assessment of what the United States is able to do.

Moreover, say critics, committing U.S. intervention whenever tyrants threaten human rights or democratic regimes is overly ambitious. It would justify American involvement in every region of the world and involve us in internal disputes. After all, many people in developing nations and in the former Soviet bloc disagree with our definition of democracy and human rights. In Islamic countries, many people cling to a traditional way of life and do not seek the kinds of individual freedom that we value. Pushing our values and political system amounts to cultural imperialism.

Opponents of this approach say the primary criteria for global engagement should be to protect U.S. interests and serve our own purposes economically. It is unwise and unnecessary to sacrifice trade ties in the name of political ideals. If we refuse to trade with undemocratic countries, it will hurt the U.S. economy, deprive us of vital resources, and undermine America’s standard of living.