

Debating Democracy

This special symposium examines themes and questions raised in Paul Saunders's essay, "Learning to Appreciate France", which appeared in the March/April 2007 issue of The National Interest.

The Democracy Crusade Myth

Thomas Carothers

AS ATTENTION in Washington begins to turn to the likely or desired shape of a post-Bush foreign policy, calls for a return to realism are increasingly heard. A common theme is that the United States should back away from what is often characterized as a reckless Bush crusade to promote democracy around the world. Although it is certainly true that U.S. foreign policy is due for a serious recalibration, the notion that democracy promotion plays a dominant role in Bush policy is a myth. Certainly, President Bush has built a gleaming rhetorical edifice around democracy promotion through invocations of a universalist freedom agenda. And many people within the administration have given serious attention to how the United States can do more to advance democracy in the world. Overall, however, the traditional imperatives of U.S. economic and security interests that have long constrained U.S. pro-democratic impulses have persisted. The main lines of Bush policy, with the singular exception of the Iraq intervention, have turned out to be largely realist in practice, with democracy and human rights generally relegated to minor corners.

Consider the Middle East, the epicenter of the putative Bush democracy drive. Given its extraordinary transformative ambitions, the Iraq intervention can scarcely be called realist. Yet neither, however, is the president's continual characterization of it as a democratizing mission very persuasive. The administration's democratic *bona fides* in Iraq were undercut from the start by the fact that the U.S. decision to intervene was primarily driven by a jumble of security motives, including the desire to strike another (after Afghanistan) post-September 11 blow to impress the world with America's determination, as well as genuine concern about Saddam Hussein's presumed quest for Weapons of Mass Destruction. The democracy rationale took on paramount importance only in the months after the invasion, as the other rationales dropped away. The presence of other potential U.S. interests—such as access to Iraqi oil and the chance to establish long-term military bases in Iraq—has further vitiated the credibility of the ad-

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ministration's professions of democratic intention. So too has the administration's persistent unwillingness to commit the resources necessary to stabilize post-Saddam Iraq.

The Bush push for democracy in the rest of the Arab world is halfhearted at best and already receding. In the wake of September 11, the idea of a sweeping democratic transformation of the Middle East appealed strongly to Washington as a means of eliminating the root causes of Islamic radicalism. In a sharp break from the past, President Bush began speaking out forcefully about both the possibility and importance of Arab democracy. The administration did take some modest measures to back up this ringing rhetoric—jawboning Arab autocrats about political reform, establishing a regional pro-reform aid initiative (the Middle East Partnership Initiative, MEPI) and rewarding reformers with economic carrots, such as the free-trade agreement with Morocco.

Even at its peak in 2004–2005, this push for change among America's autocratic friends in the region was nonetheless relatively weak. The jawboning had no real teeth, the aid initiatives were lightly funded and unassertive (MEPI's annual funding has never exceeded \$100 million; the administration's current request to Congress for MEPI is \$40 million) and the economic incentives modest. Although the idea of a democratic transformation of the Middle East did engage President Bush and some of his team, the stubborn fact remained that the United States continued to need close ties with its autocratic Arab allies for a host of reasons. Furthermore, these reasons were only intensifying—the stepped-up anti-terrorism campaign necessitated even closer cooperation with Arab security and intelligence services, the rising price of oil impelled even greater deference to energy-rich regimes and so forth. In addition, the newfound U.S. interest in Arab democracy sat uneasily next to the concern among many U.S. policymakers and political observers that rapid democratic change in the region would bring to power Islamist forces hostile to the United States.

From the start, therefore, the highly public Bush embrace of Arab democracy camouflaged a deeply conflicted policy soul, torn between a continuing need for stability and the newly felt imperative for fundamental change. In the past two years, the desire for stability has fully eclipsed the impulse for change. A series of regional developments—electoral gains by Islamists in Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon, the new U.S. effort to mobilize an Arab alliance to help oppose Iran's growing influence and the deterioration of the political and security situation in Iraq—have combined to cause the administration largely to abandon its pro-democracy push. Whereas in June 2005 when Condoleezza Rice was in Cairo she forthrightly spoke about the United States's interest in Egypt's democratic progress, she never even mentioned democracy or human rights during her trip there in January, despite Egypt's ongoing political crackdown.

If the Bush democracy drive has been only partial even at its epicenter, it has been almost absent from the main pillars of Bush policy toward the rest of the world. To start with, the administration has followed a firmly realist line toward Russia and China, America's two main (at least potential) geo-strategic challengers or partners. It has emphasized cooperation with both countries on the many major economic and security areas of common interest while downplaying democracy concerns, despite the fact that both those countries have been in a phase of political de-liberalization.

Although the Bush team insists that democracy promotion is an intrinsic element

of the War on Terror, the day-to-day imperative of anti-terrorism efforts drives the United States into closer relations with helpful non-democratic governments not just in the Middle East but other places as well, especially in Asia and Africa. The Bush bear hug of Pakistan's dictatorial president Pervez Musharraf, which is a (shaky) fulcrum of the overall War on Terror, is the ultimate realist bargain. Moreover, the War on Terror has entailed a dispiriting and often shocking array of U.S. abuses of the rule of law and human rights of detainees and prisoners abroad, as well as residents and citizens at home. Given these realities, how the Bush team expects the world to see the War on Terror as the pursuit of a "freedom agenda" is mysterious.

The War on Terror also, of course, includes the intervention in Afghanistan, which produced a significant democratic opening there. As with Iraq, however, many observers at home and abroad tend to be cautious about the Bush team's claim of democratic purpose in Afghanistan. They are aware that the intervention was driven by security concerns rather than a sudden burning U.S. desire for Afghan democracy, and that the administration is falling short on the necessary commitment to consolidate Afghanistan's new political order due to other preoccupations, Iraq above all.

The administration's international energy policy—centered around the search for dependable access to oil and gas in a context of dramatically raised prices—is also eminently realist. Again as with the War on Terror, it is not just in the Middle East, but in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Africa, that the administration has cozied up to useful (i.e. energy-rich) strongmen leaders, giving them a pass on their political shortcomings. Vice President Cheney's unalloyed praise for Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in his 2006 visit to Almaty was a vivid example of this approach.

In short, the components of Bush foreign policy beyond Iraq—its great-power relations, the War on Terror and international energy policy—are all substantially realist endeavors in which democracy and human-rights concerns are minimized for the sake of traditional "hard" economic and security interests. The notion that the universal pursuit of freedom constitutes George Bush's global compass is an enormous illusion.

Of course there is some pro-democracy substance in Bush's foreign policy beyond the partial push for democracy in the Middle East. The administration has exerted pressure for democratic change on several authoritarian regimes, using the bully pulpit, economic sanctions and democracy aid. Such pressure has been directed at various governments—including those of Belarus, Burma and Cuba—where the United States has no countervailing economic or security fish to fry. In several other cases the administration has exerted pressure on governments it views as security threats, such as those of Iran, North Korea and Syria. In such cases, however, whatever pro-democracy interest lies behind such pressures is derivative of a security-driven, regime-change instinct. And over time, need for accommodation with those regimes, again for security reasons, appears to be winning out.

Much more broadly, the administration has sought to support democratization in many countries that over the last few decades have experienced political openings and are now either wavering in their paths or moving shakily ahead. These include Ukraine, Georgia, El Salvador, Peru, Guatemala, Nepal, Mozambique, Ghana, Macedonia and others, especially in Latin America, the western side of the former Soviet Union, the

Balkans, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. Such support usually consists of a mix of diplomatic advice and nudging, democracy-assistance programs and some pro-reform economic incentives. It draws on and furthers the institutionalization of a democracy-building capacity within and around the U.S. foreign-policy bureaucracy that has taken place since the early 1980s. Such efforts, though numerous and valuable, are generally very modest in scale and at best a helping hand, not a guiding force, in the political life of the countries they reach.

One noteworthy new arrow in the U.S. democracy-promotion quiver is the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). By giving out substantial dollops of dollars to poor countries on the basis of their performance on a set of social, economic and political indicators, the MCC seeks to be a strong positive incentive for good policy performance. The pro-democratic content of the indicator set is limited, and some non-democracies have managed to become eligible for MCC aid, such as Morocco and Jordan. Nevertheless, the political indicators are part of the mix and do carry some weight.

The pro-democracy components of Bush's foreign policy are thus multiple and real. Yet they are subordinate parts of a broader policy largely structured along realist lines, giving the overall whole what could be called a semi-realist character. With a few exceptions, the pro-democracy components concern countries of lesser importance to the United States and basically entail a continuation of programs and policies put into motion by previous administrations.

Given the circumscribed role that democracy promotion plays in President Bush's foreign policy, why is the perception common in the United States that his policy represents democracy promotion on steroids? Of course the soaring rhetoric distracts some, who assume that if the president says something often enough it must be at least somewhat true. The main reason, however, is Iraq. For many people debating foreign policy in the United States, looking at Iraq is akin to looking at the sun—nothing else is visible. Although the administration's original motives for going into Iraq are still debated, the intervention as a whole is often discussed in the terms of the democracy-promotion framework in which the administration has wrapped it.

The rest of the world, in contrast, does not generally view Bush's policy as a democracy-promotion binge. Profound skepticism about America's stated pro-democratic intentions reigns widely. The many cases of the United States's embracing friendly autocrats—the fulsome praise for President Musharraf, the hand-holding with Saudi leaders, the toasts for President Nazarbayev—starkly undercut a U.S. rhetorical line that in other societies sounds transparently self-serving and profoundly hypocritical. America's own recent violations of the rule of law and human rights only complete this picture.

The sad, mildly ironic reality of the Bush approach to democracy promotion is that it may represent the worst of both worlds: It has soured people all around the globe, and many in the United States as well, on the very legitimacy and value of U.S. democracy promotion, despite having involved only a limited engagement in actual democracy promotion. The growing calls for a realist corrective, involving a backing away from democracy promotion, are misguided. Needed instead is a searching debate about how the United States can get back on track with what—until this administration—was the gradual development over twenty years of a U.S. approach to supporting democracy

abroad, that while far from perfect and flecked with inconsistencies, nevertheless commanded bipartisan support at home and growing legitimacy around the world.

No Disrespect to Canada. . . .

Andrew J. Bacevich

THE OCCASION of his second inaugural address inspired the 43rd president of the United States to new heights of eloquence. “We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion”, he announced:

The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. . . . America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. . . .

How are we to interpret these words? For some of those listening, the sentiments expressed by the president represented an authentic rendering of America’s history and an accurate statement of America’s purpose. For others, the president’s words reeked with hypocrisy, the references to liberty and claims of a divine mandate camouflaging far more sinister aims.

So is George W. Bush an idealist or a cynic? Should we take his words at face value or dismiss them as sanctimonious cant? Is the essence of Bush’s America contained in his promise to advance the cause of freedom around the globe? Or has that essence already revealed itself in hellholes like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo?

A third possibility exists, with the truth altogether more ambiguous and elusive. Perhaps President Bush’s post-9/11 conversion—the advocate of a “humble” foreign policy transformed into an impassioned crusader—was both heartfelt and calculated. It just might be that the president genuinely believes what it has become expedient for him to believe. After all, a grand restatement of America’s liberating mission issued in the midst of efforts to expand the American empire offers a way to reconcile—or at least to conceal—the tensions between American ideals and American interests.

Bush is by no means the first president to identify the elimination of tyranny as a vital U.S. interest. More than a few of his predecessors have seen the promotion of freedom as the best way to expand the roster of nations “friendly” to the United States. Yet friendship in this context connotes something more than cordiality. It implies subordination, other governments acceding to Washington’s rules (especially with regards to political economy) and according to Washington’s unique prerogatives (especially in relation to the use of force). For the United States, Canada epitomizes friendliness—not because Canadians themselves are friendly (although they are) but because Ottawa poses no hint of a threat and entertains no illusions about who wields the upper hand when it comes to Canadian-American relations. The United States will never feel fully secure until the

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