

A New Authoritarian Moment?**Emerging Alternatives to Liberal Democracy**

Carnegie Junior Fellows Conference, April 29, 2008

**Foreign Policy Debate:
Authoritarianism and the American Interest**

Debaters: Ken Wollack, President, National Democratic Institute

Dimitri Simes, President, Nixon Center

Moderator: Thomas Carothers, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment

Thomas Carothers opened the session by observing that the debate about the role of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy has been longstanding and is clearly not going away. These are hard questions that do not neatly divide along ideological or partisan lines. Carothers' first question for the debaters touched on relations with non-democratic governments on which the U.S. depends for economic and security interests. How much should the U.S. push a country such as Russia on democracy?

Dimitri Simes argued that we should be paying close attention to Russia as a resurgent power, but it does not necessarily follow that we should promote democracy in Russia. Russians, including those who are critical of the government, strongly reject foreign interference.

In response, Ken Wollack said democracy promoters assume that there exists a common humanity, that sovereignty derives from the people, and that we have a responsibility for one another in an interdependent world. Furthermore, in this day and age, people and institutions are constantly 'intervening' in other governments' affairs. The National Democratic Institute's (NDI) work with civil society is a part of normal people-to-people relations around the world. With regard to Russia, Russia has joined certain international clubs, and should be bound by the rules of those clubs.

Carothers asked whether democracy promotion can be considered as interference if the host nation considers it as interference. Wollack pointed out that NDI, through the Copenhagen Declaration, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has codified the right of citizens to monitor their own elections and form links with international groups. Simes questioned the legitimacy of the Copenhagen Declaration, which was a bargain struck to mutually assuage Soviet concerns for the preservation of borders and Western concerns for human rights. As the West no longer takes borders seriously, as it demonstrated by recognizing the independence of Kosovo, the Declaration's other provisions are null and void. Western clubs assume they know what is best for everyone, but it is only poor countries that join these clubs for aid. The problem is not private democracy promotion, such as NDI's engagement, but public democracy promotion, which makes use of state funds and American political muscle and offends the dignity of other countries.

The conversation broadened toward a debate around the legitimacy of intervention. Wollack asked when outsiders have a right to intervene on the behalf of human rights and democracy. Simes responded that the right to intervene with force in situations of genocide is recognized by international law, but short of this, it depends on the case. As a general rule, we should not be using American taxpayer money to undermine governments around the world. In turn, Wollack asked about the cases of South Africa under apartheid and Burma today, where Mandela and Ang Suu Kyi have called for international intervention. Simes agreed that peaceful intervention is warranted in these cases, but underlined that these are cases where we do not expect anything important in return from these governments, and we are ready and willing to treat them as pariahs. In the case of more significant countries, you cannot expect cooperation from governments you are trying to undermine.

Carothers directed a second question to Wollack: why can we be so confident about the universality of democracy? Wollack pointed to the demand for democracy, backed up by polling data showing support for democratic processes in every country. Simes agreed that people want democratic choices, but argued that people do not want “big brother” in Washington telling them how to vote. In the Palestinian Territories in 2006, the Ukraine in 2004, and Russia in 1996, the U.S. government made its preferences for Fatah, the Orange coalition, and Yeltsin clear. Wollack replied that it is both natural that states have preferences, and that states intervene. Nonetheless, these elections were not hatched in Washington. Democracy promotion is not conspiratorial and mercurial, but more directed toward process-driven programs enhancing transparency. Simes retorted that the United States does pick sides in foreign elections, and that its preferences are influential. In the Ukraine, the U.S. supported the Orange coalition though the two major parties were nearly equal in popularity. In Georgia, the U.S. applauded the fraudulent victory of Saakashvili by a margin of 96 percent.

During the question and answer session, Wollack acknowledged that the U.S. cannot set the pace of reform in different countries. In addition, the importance of democracy in the United State’s bilateral relationships varies by country. But the United States should be prepared to support democratic breakthroughs when they happen.

Simes mounted a defense of sovereignty in distinguishing between two definitions of international community: one that is expedient, based on whoever happens to agree with the U.S.; and one that is grounded in the United Nations, emphasizing sovereignty. The 30 Years War that led to the peace of Westphalia revealed that there is nothing harder to stop than war between people with fundamentally different beliefs. Recognizing that we there are limits to our resources and wisdom, we should understand that other stands desire their own dignity and shift from a framework of democracy promotion to freedom protection—protecting peoples’ freedom to make their own choices. Wollack replied that our history is replete with examples when the United States did not fight foreign demons and has regretted it. The question is not whether or not the U.S. will intervene, but rather on whose behalf it will do so.

In response to a question on NDI’s sources of funding, Wollack conceded that there is an inevitable conflict of interest in receiving government funding. Still, NDI has refused to implement U.S. government contracts, which would make it an extension of the government, and has instead has sought funding under grant mechanisms. When NDI decided to work in Iraq, it was under the two conditions that it would not operate in the Green Zone and would not accept government contracts.

A question about the U.S. role in the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine was the subject of significant controversy. Simes stated that Ukrainian opposition funds originated in the U.S. and that this aid was instrumental in ending the Kuchma regime. The funding served to train and equip the opposition in anticipation of street demonstrations. Simes was agnostic on the legitimacy of the 2004 elections since there was considerable pressure on the courts and massive fraud and interference from both sides. Wollack disputed Simes' account of the events, particularly his claim that the U.S. funded opposition activists.

To conclude Carothers asked the two debaters for advice for the next administration on democracy promotion. Wollack answered first and discussed the need to reset democracy promotion following the setbacks associated with the Iraq War. Democracy promotion still enjoys bipartisan support and all of the presidential candidates are committed internationalists. The current situation in Pakistan reminds us that trying to achieve stability at the expense of democracy achieves neither. In his concluding remarks, Simes called again for recognition of our counterparts' perceptions of our interventions. Our current approach is much less grounded than that of Nixon and Reagan. We should judge policies by the morality of results. Pragmatic and responsible foreign policy will boost the American image, which ultimately will greatly benefit democracy around the world.