

Beyond Bombs and Ballots

Dispelling Myths about Democracy Assistance

Lincoln A. Mitchell

A CENTRAL component of American foreign policy since the First World War is now under attack. In popular American perception, democracy promotion has become linked to the aggressive foreign policy of the Bush Administration, most notably the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These wars are now frequently cited to caricature all democracy assistance as “bombs and ballots” initiatives that depend excessively on military action and elections.

Critics of democracy promotion have emerged primarily from the left wing of the Democratic Party and the centrist or realist wing of the Republican Party. Even some neoconservatives and moderate Democrats have joined the chorus, calling for a reduced emphasis on democracy promotion and a return to a more realist, if not isolationist, foreign policy.

Critics seizing on the “ballots” half of the argument highlight the inadequacies of elections in ensuring democracy and their propensity to cause explosive consequences if elections are introduced at the wrong place or time—arguments offered

in various ways by Ian Bremmer in “In the Right Direction”, from the January/February 2007 issue, and Jack Snyder and Edward D. Mansfield in “Prone to Violence”, from the Winter 2005/06 issue. Many critics point particularly to the possible perils of conducting early elections in countries that are ethnically divided or emerging from conflict.

Fair enough—but democracy assistance entails more than just elections. Scholars and practitioners have long been aware of the dangers of relying too heavily on elections as the midwives of peaceful democratization. What’s more, academic debates over the ideal sequencing of institution-building and elections are of little value to practitioners and activists within democratizing countries, who understand that strengthening institutions, supporting civil society and conducting elections generally have to be done at the same time.

We would all prefer democratizing countries to conduct elections in contexts where cohesive and accountable political parties elect people to strong legislatures in a climate where the laws are understood and enforced. There’s a name for such countries: democracies. Democratizing countries do not meet this panoply of criteria.

Elections in transitional countries are often scheduled by the authoritarian ruler and rigged to ensure reelection of the ruling party. These types of elections raise a different set of challenges. Democrats

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facing the prospect of a stolen election turn to the United States and Europe for help in somehow making the election fair. In these cases, the West is faced with the choice of working to make the election fairer or ignoring the direct pleas of activists that labor, often at great personal risk, for democratic change. Often it is not feasible to make the elections fair, but supporting these activists in their work and struggle is a different, and more common, aspect of democracy assistance.

And while it is important to recognize that early elections have been perilous for many democratizing countries—particularly in post-conflict settings—elections can also create or accelerate democratic breakthroughs. It is impossible to imagine the color revolutions in the former Soviet Union occurring had there not been elections around which democrats were able to organize. Elections also played key roles in democratic breakthroughs in South American countries, such as Chile and Brazil, where democratic institutions are now relatively strong.

Countries where democracy assistance has helped facilitate democratic development might be considered the quieter success stories of democracy assistance. Examples of countries where this has occurred over the last ten to 15 years include many of the countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, such as Poland, Lithuania and Hungary, as well as other post-authoritarian countries, such as South Africa and, again, Chile.

A policy of supporting elections *and* developing other democratic institutions is essential to the success of democracy assistance. It is important to distinguish this from the approach of supporting elections *but* only after other conditions have been met. By connecting support for elections to meeting pre-conditions involving the development of other democratic institutions, supporters of the latter approach generally put themselves in the *de facto* position of simply opposing elections.

THE OUTSIZED role Iraq has played in the recent understanding of democracy assistance has contributed to the “bombs” argument’s claims that such a policy is driven largely by invasions and wars. A foreign policy that seeks to violently overthrow dictators and thereby spread democracy makes for an easy rhetorical target. But in reality, the overwhelming majority of countries where the United States has assisted democratic development were never invaded by the United States.

Further, it somewhat strains credulity and serious political analysis, when one takes even a cursory look at Iraq’s history over the last century, to claim that the current problems in Iraq of instability, violence, ethnic and religious divisions, and the possibility of civil war are occurring because it held elections. What about the consequences of its creation by the British, which put three different ethnic groups in one country; the violent Ba’athi takeover and brutal regime of Saddam Hussein; Hussein’s genocidal policies towards the Kurds and brutality towards the Shi’a, which exacerbated ethnic tensions; a bloody war against Iran, which cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives; defeat at the hands of the United States and its allies in the Persian Gulf War; the crippling sanctions following that war; and, finally, an even more devastating defeat at the hands of the United States and Britain in the Iraq War?

Related to the “bombs” myth is the idea that U.S. election assistance is akin to that old wine of foreign policy, involving the anointing of U.S. proxies by force, re-bottled today as “democratization.” There is a small kernel of truth in this assertion with regard to those relatively few democracy-assistance programs in which armed intervention is a component. Democracy-assistance efforts in countries such as Panama, Iraq and Serbia certainly did depose leaders who were unfriendly to Washington. But in all three cases

there is more to the story.

In Iraq and Panama, for example, the military interventions that led to depositions of Saddam Hussein and Manuel Noriega were not followed by installations of U.S.-picked leaders, but rather by U.S. support of institution-building, including elections. Some U.S. officials initially supported various Iraqi figures, such as Ahmad Chalabi, as the appropriate successor to Hussein, but Washington shelved such proposals, as it more clearly understood the situation in Iraq.

And in Serbia, Milosevic was forced to leave office after he lost an election that he had called for ahead of schedule to demonstrate his political strength. The United States and some European countries played a key role in training and supporting the opposition coalition and civic groups, which made the election of Vojislav Kostunica possible there. But Kostunica and the new Serbian leadership have proven to be far from unwavering supporters of American interests.

In many cases, particularly in the Middle East, democracy assistance programs have sought to help develop democratic institutions, which might lead to changes in leadership that would not be in the immediate interest of the United States. Clearly, recent efforts to increase election fairness in Egypt, expand suffrage in Kuwait or hold legislative elections in the Palestinian Authority have very little to do with putting pro-American governments in place.

It is unavoidable that assisting democracy also means assisting democrats at times, but most of the real work of democracy assistance is focused on building institutions, not supporting individuals. Helping states develop functioning, transparent and accountable institutions is arduous work that can take years. There are much easier and quicker ways for the U.S. government to get pro-American people in positions of power than by supporting democratization.

The United States also hardly has a monopoly on democracy assistance. The European Union works, often in cooperation with the United States, to consolidate breakthroughs and encourage nascent democratic movements, particularly in post-communist countries and in North Africa. And while elections are central to the democracy promotion debate, election observation has been dominated in recent years by non-American organizations, for example, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democracy and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and even the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

ANOTHER CRITICISM—expressed with a tone of exasperation that is usually reserved for stating the obvious—is that democracy simply can't be exported. Those on both the left and right voice this view, as Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) summed up succinctly: "You cannot in my opinion just impose a democratic form of government on a country with no history and no culture and no tradition of democracy."

Decades of empirical evidence, however, contradict this view. Democracy is now strong in countries such as Costa Rica, India, South Africa and Taiwan, which are not exactly Western in their cultural orientation. Moreover, the rapid expansion of democracy over the last 35 years has constantly pushed the boundaries of the community of democratic countries farther away from Europe and North America.

Two of the most important success stories in this area are Japan and Germany. At the end of World War II, it was far from obvious that Japan and Germany would evolve in this direction, and European and American resources and expertise were invaluable in this regard. Many critics allude to Germany's democratic traditions or Japan's own steps towards

parliamentary governance, but very few people in the United States or Europe in 1943, or even 1946, thought that Germany's pre-war democratic institutions were strong or would serve as precedents for the people's democratic aspirations—and there were certainly no such expectations for Japan.

WHILE THE potential costs of continuing an aggressive policy of democracy promotion are clear, the question of the cost of discontinuing our policy of democracy promotion has not been sufficiently explored. U.S. support of democracy and democratic activists over the last 15 years has not only helped strengthen democratic institutions and consolidate democracies, it has also changed expectations and perceptions of the United States and altered the global strategic context for America.

It is broadly understood that the Iraq War, for example, has made the United States less popular in many countries. But support for democracy in Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union has bolstered U.S. popularity. Still, evolving views of the United States are more nuanced than this simple analysis.

There is now an expectation among many reformers in the former Soviet Union, Asia, Africa and, yes, even occasionally the Middle East, that the United States will support their democratic efforts. This expectation coexists uneasily within the same societies—and, in some cases, the same individuals—that have an increased hostility towards the United States. It is not uncommon to witness in countries ranging from the Middle East to the former Soviet Union widespread opposition to the Iraq War, coupled with the hope that the United States will pressure the native government to allow more freedoms or to make the elections fairer.

In the former Soviet Union this is largely due to the preponderant role the

United States is perceived to have played in the color revolutions. Democratic breakthroughs in Georgia and Ukraine have raised the hopes of democratic activists in countries such as Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus. The United States did not create these breakthroughs, as both supporters and opponents believe, but financial and technical support and guidance from the United States and Europe was an integral component.

In the Middle East, the perception of the United States with regards to democracy is far more ambiguous, where continued support for the Saudi regime, Israel and the ongoing military presence in Iraq has weakened the American image dramatically. However, support for more inclusive elections in Egypt—and the democratic movement in Lebanon—has indicated to some that U.S. policy in the region is evolving.

Many observers in the United States have pointed to Hamas's January 2006 victory in the Palestinian elections as proof that the Middle East is not ready for democracy. But Hamas won a very narrow election victory. There is now a real danger that Hamas will use this victory not to further democracy—the critics are right about that—but to consolidate an authoritarian, Islamist regime. Reducing democracy assistance to Palestine at this time will likely only accelerate Hamas's movement in this direction. This would be the worst outcome for the United States, Israel and Palestine. For the Palestinians, a free media, rule of law, separation of powers, vibrant NGO sector and evolving political parties are the best defenses against the consolidation of power and undermining of existing democratic institutions by Hamas, a party for which less than half of them voted. To maintain those defenses, they need foreign support and assistance.

In general, opponents of authoritarian regimes in the region are largely drawn to Islamist political models and rhetoric. Support for nascent democratic move-

ments in these countries can offer a competing model and possibly bring Islamists into politics in a non-violent way.

And withdrawing support for democratic movements would undermine whatever support the United States has earned among democrats in places as disparate as the former Soviet Union, southern Africa and Asia, and make anti-democratic ideologies, some of which are unambiguously dangerous to the United States and its interests, more appealing. Reducing support for democracy in countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, would help only in the short-term to counter Russia's influence in the region and provide alternative energy sources for the United States. It would also risk pushing the opponents of these undemocratic regimes away from the United States, expanding Russia's power in the region and making other models of political change more appealing. In the case of Azerbaijan this may mean a strengthening of its relationship with its neighbor to the south: Iran.

Iraq is an unusual case because unlike in most countries, U.S. democracy assistance followed a military invasion. The struggles and setbacks are clear to almost all observers, and the chances of Iraq emerging as a viable democracy seem quite small now. This is at least partially due to the insufficient emphasis on democracy assistance in the period immediately following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. Clearly, there are no easy solutions in Iraq. Continuing to seek to develop democracy there will be difficult and frustrating, and it may not prevent the civil war that so many observers believe is inevitable in Iraq. But the alternative may be worse. Abandoning efforts to assist those Iraqis interested in moving their country toward democracy would very likely speed the country's descent into civil war. Iraqis need institutions—however limited and flawed—that allow for deliberation on how to divide powers

and resolve conflicts non-violently. Now is not the time to move away from these goals.

IF DEMOCRACY assistance continues to become a retrofitted rationale for misguided military adventures like the one in Iraq, it will become an increasingly difficult policy to defend. The president to assume office in 2009 will have to forge a post-Bush democracy-assistance strategy and should recalibrate democracy assistance to recognize the changed political environment, both domestically and internationally. In order to change the perception of democracy assistance as just another tool of an unpopular foreign policy, the next president must stress the joint endeavors with Europe and keep democracy promotion distinct from other aspects of foreign policy, most notably the War on Terror.

The challenges today are quite different than they were even five years ago. There are far fewer governments that are essentially democratically-oriented but merely need help in implementing reforms than there were during the initial post-Cold War period. Democracy assistance will therefore need to have a greater focus on consolidating democratic gains in semi-democratic countries. These countries, which have some of the structures of democracy, can be helped to move further and more meaningfully down the path towards democracy, but this requires a shift in policy and emphasis. Additionally, U.S. officials must develop better strategies for advancing democracy in semi-authoritarian countries, when the leaders do not want further democratization.

During the last sixty years, U.S. support for democratization has helped key allies mature into democracies and helped cement those alliances. The next administration can play a critical role in getting this policy back on track as an important but discreet and strategic element of U.S. foreign policy. □