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Democracy Promotion: Done Right, A Progressive Cause

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with NATO membership, but its supporters would at least in principle welcome institutions that might be able to pick up the slack as they orchestrate the retraction of America’s geopolitical commitments.

Nonetheless, the policies pursued by conservatives are likely to do more harm than good to the Atlantic partnership. Europeans have little stomach for the brash unilateralism favored by neoconservatives. Nor do they deem wise calls from the right for NATO to offer membership to Georgia and Ukraine, a move that would provoke Russia and saddle the alliance with new and onerous commitments. As for the Tea Party, mainstream conservatives in Europe do not relate to either the isolationism or the social and fiscal conservatism of America’s far right. Simply put, an America that plays by conservative rules abroad and at home is not an appealing partner for Europe. American progressives are the natural political allies of Europeans and would therefore provide the Atlantic community a much firmer foundation of affinity and interest.

Progressive leadership at home is essential to the nation’s political and economic renewal, which in turn is the foundation for progressive leadership abroad. Since World War II, the United States has been dramatically successful in making the globe more stable, prosperous, and liberal. The recipe for ongoing success in this mission is no different than in the past: a solvent and centrist America reliant on a progressive combination of power and partnership to safeguard the national interest while improving the world. 

Democracy Promotion: Done Right, A Progressive Cause
Rosa Brooks

By the beginning of the Obama Administration, democracy promotion had become a rather tarnished idea, and understandably so. Like Islam or Christianity, much blood has been shed beneath its banner. It may be true that democracies don’t go to war with one another, but they certainly go to war, and their wars kill people just as dead as the wars undertaken by illiberal regimes. Anyone on the political left can tell the story: During the Cold War, the United States fought endless proxy wars and engaged in a great deal of overt and covert mischief, all in the name of democracy. During the Bush Administr-
tion, the idea of democracy promotion became tightly and inexorably bound up with regime change and the carnage of the Iraq War. Because it came to us in a package that included bloodshed, occupation, torture, and indefinite detentions, Bush’s “Freedom Agenda” left a bitter taste in the mouth.

Little wonder, then, that by 2009 many progressives considered democracy promotion something most appropriately tossed into the dustbin of history. At best, it seemed like a decent concept that had become permanently tainted by the instrumentalism and abuses of the Bush era. At worst, it seemed inherently flawed, a neoconservative idea premised on the worst sort of American arrogance and hubris. Democracy promotion, in this view, was but a siren call to the naïve, one that would only lead the United States into bloody, destructive, and expensive foreign adventures.

The Obama Administration consequently viewed democracy promotion with caution and, in some quarters, with mild distaste. While the word “democracy” could hardly be banned in the world’s oldest and proudest democracy, key Administration spokespeople were careful to avoid placing any great weight on it. Was democracy a fine thing? To be sure. Was the U.S. government determined to promote it, foster it, build it, or demand it, in Afghanistan or elsewhere? Heavens, no.

I recall, for instance, a great to-do when a senior Defense Department official testified before Congress in 2010 that one of our goals in Afghanistan was to “foster transparent, effective and accountable democratic governance.” I was responsible, having fecklessly inserted the phrase into the draft testimony, where it remained unnoticed during subsequent reviews. When discovered after the testimony was delivered, it brought the wrath of the White House down on us all: We were not, under any circumstances, to suggest in any way that promoting democracy was a goal of the Obama Administration. In the new realism of 2009 and 2010, democracy promotion appeared (officially, at least) to be anathema.

But a funny thing happened on the way to history’s dustbin. The Arab world woke up. In Tunisia, then Egypt, then Bahrain, Libya, and Syria, crowds of protesters took to the streets to speak out against autocracy and repression—and amidst the cacophony, “Democracy!” became a powerful rallying cry.

Taken by surprise, the Obama Administration backpedaled rapidly, insisting that the United States’ support for democracy abroad had been unwavering. “It will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy,” declared President Obama on May 19.

But even with this new surge of rhetorical support for democracy, the Administration remained cautious. The White House response to events in the region seemed always a beat behind, and while we sent fighter jets to Libya, we
contented ourselves with handwringing over Bahrain and Syria. In the Middle East, much of the early euphoria turned to disappointment.

DEMOCRACY: A HUMAN FAIL-SAFE

The events of the last year make this as good a time as any to ask ourselves (again) what place democracy promotion should have in our foreign policy. Can democracy promotion be saved, in the face of all our mistakes, all our inconsistencies, all our false starts, hypocrisies, and hesitations?

I think the answer is yes. Democracy promotion should remain a vital part of our foreign policy—not despite our mistakes, inconsistencies, false starts, hypocrisies, and hesitations, but because of them. We should embrace and promote democracy not because it is perfect or because we are perfect, but because democracy remains the only political system yet devised that builds in a capacity for self-correction.

Start by going back to first principles. Democracy is premised on an idea that remains radical in many parts of the world: the idea that every human being counts, that we all have a right to participate in making the decisions that will affect us, that no person or group has a permanent monopoly on political wisdom. Political theorists can debate whether civil and human rights require democracy to protect them or whether democracies must protect civil and human rights in order to sustain themselves. For our purposes, it is probably enough to say that the idea of democracy carries with it at least some minimal assumptions about rights and the rule of law: Democracy cannot thrive without at least some degree of freedom of expression and assembly, and it requires at least some minimal institutional arrangements to sustain it (courts, legislatures, and so on). How much free expression (or judicial independence, or parliamentary power) is “enough” is hard to say; certainly, reasonably stable and contented democracies have answered this question in different ways.

But the basic contours of the idea remain both clear and sound. If everyone counts, then everyone must be allowed to speak and organize and assemble with others; everyone must have a shot at arguing with and persuading others. This is how ideas emerge, struggle for life, gain prominence, and are tested. Some survive; some vanish; some fade for a time and re-emerge again later on.

Democracy is a vision of governance that rests equally upon the conviction that worthy ideas can come from anyone, and upon the conviction that humans are inherently fallible. Pernicious ideas can also come from anyone, and there will be times when pernicious ideas will dominate our politics and our policies. We will get things wrong, repeatedly. And this is why we need democracy. Only if we build into our political systems a capacity for change and self-correction,
a capacity for new ideas to emerge and old ones to be rejected, can we hope to make it through the inevitably recurring dark periods.

This is why progressives should care about promoting democracy: not out of any triumphalist conviction that we (America, the West) are the best of the best, but rather out of humility. We—and our American democracy—are manifestly imperfect. We more or less wiped out our continent’s indigenous population and marginalized the survivors. We enslaved millions of our fellow human beings, denied women the right to hold property and vote, and withheld basic civil rights from African Americans.

We have made progress, but it has been slow and uneven, and as a nation we’re hardly out of the woods. We incarcerate a higher percentage of our population than any other country, and felony disenfranchisement laws continue to deny the vote to millions of mostly black men.

We have not yet found a way to solve the problem of money in politics; as wealth inequalities grow, we increasingly inhabit a democracy in which some are distinctly more equal than others. Here, ironically, our own free-expression doctrines have come back to bite us; in 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that limits on corporate campaign spending amount to infringements on the free-expression rights of corporations.

Our democracy remains deeply flawed, and continues to produce bad policies with impressive regularity. The Bush Administration’s pursuit of democracy through military force was one of those bad ideas our democracy managed to produce. Our (thankfully brief) official embrace of torture was another. Our democracy enabled all of it—but our democracy also ultimately enabled its repudiation.

Democracy, after all, has allowed us to change our Constitution repeatedly over time to create a more inclusive polity. Democracy has enabled and empowered political extremism, but it has also allowed us to protect moderates and minorities. Democracy let us start foolish wars, but it also let us elect leaders capable of stopping them.

In this sense, democracy is an inevitable concomitant to a belief in human fallibility. And it is on this basis that progressives should champion democracy: because democracy is the only form of governance to enshrine the capacity for self-correction, debate, and argument. Democracy is what lets us struggle through our mistakes and learn. Democracy is no guarantor of wise political decision-making, but lack of democracy correlates with stagnation and conflict.
There is ample empirical evidence for this claim: Democracies are far more likely than autocracies or failed states to be prosperous, stable, and safe. Democracies form the backbone of the international institutions that, while imperfect, have helped minimize and manage conflict since World War II. Democracies produce and export far fewer violent extremists than repressive societies.

This understanding of democracy suggests that promoting democracy abroad can be both principled and pragmatic. Democracy is a human fail-safe. Things can go badly wrong in democracies, but it is hard for them to go badly wrong forever.

**A HUMBLER, MORE PATIENT POWER**

This approach to democracy promotion is the polar opposite of Bush-era triumphalism, and it has certain practical corollaries. If we support democracy because we’re imperfect, it follows that the project of promoting democracy abroad needs to be undertaken with honesty, humility, patience, and realism.

Honesty involves acknowledging our own past mistakes and hypocrisies, and admitting that we will make new mistakes in the future. Humility is related—we still have not solved all our problems here at home, and it would indeed be hubristic to imagine that we can solve someone else’s problems with speed or ease.

This point has been made before by many thoughtful commentators, but it bears additional repetition. To put it bluntly, when it comes to fostering democracy abroad, we really don’t know what we’re doing much of the time. What sort of democracy is best? What sort of electoral and party system? What checks and balances? What rights, for whom, how understood? What role does support for civil society play, and how shall we identify and define “civil society”? What role do legal and judicial institutions play in buttressing nascent democracies? Can we create that most elusive thing of all, “political will”? How should these challenges be prioritized? We often offer an a-cultural, technocratic approach to these and a multitude of other issues, and yet we know remarkably little about what is useful and what is not.

There is no one more thoughtful on these issues than Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who concludes ruefully in his book, *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion*, that “we are still largely groping in the semi-darkness, bumping into a lot of things, gradually discerning the outlines of the major pieces of furniture in the room, and hoping to do more good than harm.” I would add that we usually do most harm when we are most convinced we are doing good. (Consider Latin America in the 1980s, or Iraq in 2003.)

Progressives’ approach to democracy promotion also needs to be more patient. Too often, we fall into one of two equal and opposite errors when contemplating undemocratic societies. Either we fool ourselves into thinking that a decade or
so of carefully tailored aid packages, diplomacy, and technical assistance will produce “democracy” in short order (which virtually never happens), or we become cynical and despondent when things fail to change on schedule, and conclude instead that the society at issue is somehow “not ready” for democracy (the powerful will resist it; the powerless don’t want it), so we might as well give up and simply accept the repressive status quo.

It’s worth recalling that our own democracy was hardly created overnight. American democracy didn’t come about in a decade or two thanks to generous aid from foreign benefactors. It didn’t develop as a result of ten years of technical assistance supplied by well-meaning international bureaucrats or nicely packaged loans from the World Bank.

On the contrary. It was a long hard slog from ancient Athens to the Magna Carta, from the English Bill of Rights to the Declaration of Independence, from abolitionism to the Nineteenth Amendment. It’s still a long hard slog today, full of backsliding. And if it took centuries of struggle to get to the messy and imperfect form of democracy we have now, why imagine that other societies can transition or transform into democracies overnight? Granted, modern communications and transportation technologies have accelerated the pace of cultural change, but enduring change is still harder and slower than we like to think.

The World Bank’s 2011 World Development Report offers some cautionary numbers: Looking at the time it took the twentieth century’s “fastest reformers” to achieve “basic governance transformations,” the report concludes that on average, it took the 20 fastest-performing states 27 years to begin to get a serious grip on corruption, 36 years to achieve basic government effectiveness, and 41 years to achieve a basic rule-of-law culture. If we care about promoting democracy, we need to accept that gradualism isn’t necessarily a cop-out (though it can be); much of the time, it’s a simple recognition that rushing democracy sometimes ends up undermining it.

Finally, our approach to democracy promotion abroad needs to be realistic with regard to domestic constraints as well. Our own democracy has produced, at most, a fickle consensus in favor of democracy promotion. Pragmatically speaking, this has meant that political will has been uneven, and funding inconsistent. We may recognize that promoting sustainable democratic societies abroad is a long-term and expensive project, but we must also recognize that our own democracy has shown little talent or appetite for long-term, expensive projects.

On one level, everyone knows this; but on another level, our democracy-promotion apparatus, and the people who work within it, consistently ignore it. We routinely plan programs that we know will require multiyear funding to be sustainable, even when we also know perfectly well that such funding is
unlikely to materialize. This is counterproductive, and has left many fledgling democratic societies strewn with the wreckage of abandoned projects: prisons dependent on electronic security measures that fall apart when foreign benefactors stop paying for a steady supply of power; legislative reform efforts that produce volumes of complex new commercial codes that no one has the money to print and distribute; and so on. These abandoned projects often end up wasting time and money, and they leave behind bitterness and cynicism, not hope or new capacities.

**PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE**

Truly accepting the low likelihood of sustained funding would lead to a very different approach to democracy-promotion projects. We would abandon resource-intensive projects and focus instead only on those about which we can affirmatively answer a very simple question: If this project runs for a year and is then abandoned, will it still have done more good than harm? Sometimes—such as when a project focuses on providing local personnel with key skills—the answer may be yes. Other times, it will be no, and we should cease and desist.

Being unable to do something ourselves doesn’t mean we can’t help others do something themselves, of course. Diplomacy, both private and public, remains a powerful and relatively low-cost tool for supporting democratic reforms. The American private sector can also play a useful role. But we do need a more thoughtful and principled approach for deciding when and how we should get directly involved in democracy promotion in a particular society, and when we should remain in the role of sympathetic bystander.

So how’s Obama doing? The Bush Administration largely made a hash of democracy promotion, despite recent revisionist attempts to claim credit for the Arab Spring. Has Obama done any better, so far?

On the whole, yes. It took a while—at first, the Administration’s approach to democracy promotion could be most generously characterized as mendacious avoidance—but by the late spring of 2011 Obama had found his way to a sober, principled stance:

It’s not America that put people into the streets of Tunis and Cairo—it was the people themselves who launched these movements, and it’s the people themselves that must ultimately determine their outcome. Not every country will follow our particular form of representative democracy, and there will be times when our short-term interests don’t align perfectly with our long-term vision for the region. But we can, and we will, speak out for a set of core principles… [We oppose] the use of violence and repression…[support] a set of universal rights…[and] support political and economic reform.
Obama’s May 2011 speech was a good one—an excellent one, in fact—though its subtler messages were almost entirely overshadowed by a brief reference to the appropriate borders for a Palestinian state.

Putting our principles into practice will be an enormous challenge—and so far, the jury is still out on whether the Obama Administration is truly serious about the project. It should be—it can be. But will it be? 

Global Outreach: Speaking to the Awakening World
Rachel Kleinfeld

While presidential candidates pick fights over polarity—which countries are gaining power and which are declining—they are missing the most dramatic shift in foreign policy in centuries: the rise of individuals within each country vis-à-vis their governments.

In previous centuries, kings made the foreign policy for their realm, without consulting powerless peasants. True, businesses such as the British East India Company conducted some policy, but only after being granted a direct charter by the monarchy to act on its behalf. The eighteenth century saw the rise of democracy. But citizens could only elect their leaders, not conduct foreign policy. Governments still dealt with other governments. For much of the twentieth century, an individual could affect foreign policy only by joining the government, or maybe by holding one of the very few positions of influence that then existed outside government.

But in the latter half of the century, this model began to break down. Multi-national businesses, wielding immense resources in otherwise weak countries, began to have policy influence. Financial flows resulting from thousands of traders’ individual decisions became big enough to influence other nations’ currencies and to create economic pressures that affected policy. Groups of citizens also started to make their voices heard internationally. Amnesty International became an influential global player; the International Campaign to Ban Landmines won a Nobel Prize as much for its organizational model as for its cause.

The rise of the Internet and social networking has accelerated this fracturing of foreign policy. Skype, satellite television, cell phones, and other technologies have made citizens of even remote, impoverished parts of the world aware of

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