

Democracy and Discontent

With democracy on the run and American power in question, what's the future of democracy promotion?

THE FREEDOM AGENDA: WHY AMERICA MUST SPREAD DEMOCRACY (JUST NOT THE WAY GEORGE BUSH DID) BY JAMES TRAUB • FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX • 2008 • 244 PAGES • \$25

U.S. presidential campaigns have the potential to clarify fundamental choices facing the United States about its role in the world. Inevitably, some noise blurs the process—the pandering and posturing to entice special interest groups and favored constituencies, for example, not to mention the drastic oversimplifications of complex situations and dilemmas. Nevertheless, several presidential face-offs—one thinks immediately of Richard Nixon versus George McGovern or Ronald Reagan versus Jimmy Carter—have framed a decisive foreign policy fork in the road and set the policy course for years to come.

As of this writing, the current race has not yet crystallized to that extent, but it could. John McCain and Barack Obama have presented contrasting visions of how to proceed in Iraq. They have disagreed over the idea of direct talks with

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Iran. And they clearly hold fundamentally different views about the basic value and wisdom of President George W. Bush's foreign policy. Yet most Americans would struggle to articulate the overall choice this election presents. Is it whether the war on terrorism should be continued in its current form or significantly altered? Is it about competing conceptions of the state of the world? Should the next Administration heed the advice Robert Kagan gives in his new book, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, and hunker down for a protracted, ideologically based geo-strategic struggle with Russia and China? Or should it instead follow Fareed Zakaria and make the United States a subtle, almost post-modern superpower, navigating a nimble path of persuasion and partnership in a "post-American world"?

Central to these overarching questions is what role democracy promotion should play in U.S. policy. Although at various times in recent decades one could plausibly argue that democracy promotion was just a side issue, Bush has moved it to the core of U.S. foreign policy concerns and attracted enormous attention to the topic at home and abroad. He did so first by wrapping the most significant action of his presidency—the invasion of Iraq—in the cloak of democracy promotion, and he took it further by arguing that democracy is key to undercutting the roots of anti-Western political extremism wherever it appears, as well as by rhetorically recasting the war on terrorism as the pursuit of a "global freedom agenda." Yet even as he elevated it, Bush also did enormous damage to U.S. democracy promotion by closely associating it with a vastly unpopular and problematic war, controversial regime change policies, and a war on terrorism that has involved shocking abuses of human rights and the rule of law.

It is this juxtaposition of the new centrality of democracy promotion and the seriously troubled state of the endeavor that prompted James Traub to write his new book, *The Freedom Agenda*. A polymathic journalist with a record of serious thinking and writing about both domestic and international affairs, Traub appears to have been bitten by the democracy promotion bug (along with writing, he is now policy director for the Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, a new human rights group). He writes not just with facility but undisguised enthusiasm for the idea, even as he tempers his analysis with references to limits and mistakes. Traub offers a wide-ranging, consistently incisive account that usefully bridges the gap between specialized works on the topic and more general writings about U.S. foreign policy. His book admirably chronicles the modern history of U.S. democracy promotion—even though depth suffers a bit for the sake of breadth—and acutely diagnoses the ills of the Bush era.

Traub's prescriptions for the next Administration are a useful start, but the problems ahead are even deeper than he acknowledges. A course correction

away from Bush's errors will not be enough. The world is a much different place than it was in 2000—most notably, democracy is no longer on the march—and predominant American power is no longer a foregone conclusion. This doesn't mean the United States should shrink from promoting democracy abroad. But it does mean that the next president will need to rethink fundamentally the strategies and policies the United States pursues in this domain.

Traub begins with the U.S. occupation of the Philippines in 1898, the first large-scale U.S. effort to project its political ideals overseas. He plumbs that disappointing U.S. experience, concluding that “we learned that the world is recalcitrant but it didn't stop us from trying.” After a nod to Woodrow Wilson, he jumps to the post-World War II occupations of West Germany and Japan. He asserts that credit for these success stories—stories endlessly invoked by Bush officials in the run-up to the Iraq intervention—lies primarily with the target countries themselves having been relatively conducive settings for post-conflict democratization.

Democracy promotion isn't the only story in U.S. foreign policy history, of course, and Traub picks up the cold wind of realism that blew through the U.S. foreign-policy establishment for several decades starting in the early 1950s. American realism found a natural partner in modernization theory, which many political scientists and policy makers interpreted as an injunction to concentrate on helping Third World countries develop economically and to accept undemocratic strongmen rulers as necessary drivers of such change.

Traub then gives sustained attention to the last quarter of the twentieth century, the defining years of contemporary democracy policies and programs. He shows how successive U.S. presidents advanced very different ideas about promoting democracy and human rights—as an attempt by Jimmy Carter to recover morality in U.S. foreign policy, as part of a rekindled war of ideas with the Soviet Union during Ronald Reagan's tenure, and as part of the effort by Bill Clinton to define a post-Cold War framework of positive U.S. global engagement. Different though these conceptions were, they built on one another, resulting in a swelling array of democracy policies and programs, along with a socialization of the U.S. public into believing that the United States has a crucial role to play in making the world more democratic.

Varied though these approaches were, they all confronted a common set of difficulties in going from grand word to practical deed. These included the problem of inconsistency (the stubborn fact that certain economic and security interests persistently impel close U.S. cooperation with various autocratic regimes), the tendency to blur the line between promoting democracy and promoting foreign

electoral outcomes favorable to U.S. interests, and the limits on the ability of the United States to affect the political evolution of other countries.

Traub is clearly sympathetic to the various efforts to emphasize democracy (or in the case of Carter, primarily human rights), but he finds ground for criticizing all of them. Carter was naïve about the limits of a morality-based foreign policy, finding himself still supporting anti-communist autocratic friends in Iran, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Reagan entangled democracy promotion with anti-communist policies that entailed support for dubious groups and governments. George H.W. Bush was more concerned about a soft landing for the Cold War order than with accelerating the birth of a new one. And Clinton failed to deliver effectively on democracy promotion promises, both in large places, like Russia, and small ones, like Haiti.

With the twentieth century more or less under his belt, Traub turns to the Bush years. He shows how democracy promotion under Bush has been much more uneven and convoluted in practice than the soaring rhetoric would suggest. An uncomfortable bundle of unresolved questions, for example, still surround the role of democracy promotion in the Bush effort on Iraq. Observers continue to debate whether the Administration was serious about the stated democracy rationale, either going into the country or once there. The gap between the fervency of Bush's repeated declarations and the fecklessness of the U.S. effort after the initial intervention is astonishing, and it has been terribly damaging to American global credibility. And, of course, the Administration's close, even relentless association of U.S. democracy promotion with a military intervention widely viewed as illegal and illegitimate did staggering harm to the very idea of democracy promotion in the eyes of the rest of the world.

The push for democracy in the Middle East beyond Iraq only further muddied the policy waters. Bush's bold assertion that the United States should replace its traditional support for Arab autocrats with a pro-democratic line initially commanded some genuine interest both in the region and in the United States. But the patchy, conflicted implementation of that line over time achieved little real change in Arab politics and besmirched the democracy promotion idea still more.

The Administration never reconciled its newfound interest in Arab democracy with its continuing need for close economic and security ties with many of the region's autocrats, producing only halfhearted, inconsistent efforts at change. Despite initially downplaying concerns that Arab democratic openings might empower Islamists, the Administration abruptly rediscovered those fears after the Muslim Brotherhood's relative success in Egypt's 2005 legislative elections and Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections. This sudden lurch into

fearfulness about the possible contours of Arab democratic change provoked widespread cynicism in the Arab world. And the Administration's use of the language and mechanisms (such as democracy aid) of democracy promotion to characterize regime change policies against Iran and Syria yet again tarnished U.S. democracy promotion in the eyes of many people.

The application of the "global freedom agenda" in the rest of the world has only made things worse. The Administration, like its predecessors, has pushed on a few autocrats, in countries where the United States has no countervailing economic or security fish to fry, such as Burma, Belarus, and Zimbabwe. It has largely continued the quieter democracy aid programs that were developed in the 1980s and 1990s in many parts of the world. Yet these efforts have been only a small part of an otherwise predominantly realist foreign policy that has been marked by accommodations to many other needs—for cooperative relations with Russia and China, for securing oil supplies from the largely authoritarian oil-rich states, and for counterterrorism cooperation with a wide range of notably undemocratic governments and their intelligence services.

What then of Traub's advice for the new president? Despite his searing criticisms of the Bush approach to democracy promotion, Traub holds fast to one of its core elements: that the United States must make democracy promotion a priority because "liberty at home now depends on liberty abroad." In other words, he accepts the post-9/11 notion that the sources of Islamic radicalism are closely related to the lack of democracy in some countries and that, therefore, promoting democracy in those countries is a crucial way to undercut the roots of anti-Western terrorism. He rejects a retreat to realist non-interventionism, disparaging it as "willed indifference to the fate of others." He similarly shakes his head at those who say that instead of focusing on democracy, the United States should emphasize less openly ideological alternatives, like the rule of law and human rights. These alternatives, he argues, simply do not get at the broader democratic aspirations of people around the world.

But in his zeal, Traub slips a bit too easily past a central problem with the idea that more democracy abroad will ensure security at home. As Professor Gregory Gause and others have argued in recent years, the notion that democratization around the world will dry up the sources of radical Islamist terrorism rests on substantial doses of wishful thinking. Many autocracies have been more effective in preventing terrorism than many democracies—just compare China and India. The emergence of democracy in the Philippines has done little to weaken homegrown Muslim extremists, whereas various Arab autocracies, such as Tunisia, have held radical Islamic violence in check. And in some countries,

like Saudi Arabia, it is at best unclear that a serious political opening would in fact undercut rather than fuel Islamic radicals.

Traub wants to see the next Administration do several things. The United States should clean up its own act on the rule of law and democracy, be less strident and more modest about its goals, acknowledge the frequent conflicts of interest it faces, and avoid instrumentalizing democracy promotion methods and goals. Moreover, Washington should differentiate democracy policy more clearly between different kinds of cases by accepting the limits of its ability to do much about authoritarianism and Russia, China, and other “self-confidently authoritarian regimes,” committing to a generation-long effort to help impoverished democracies in Africa and elsewhere through increased economic assistance, and working the angles of aid conditionality, support for reformers, and a nuanced approach to the inclusion of moderate Islamists in the Middle East.

These suggestions are a useful starting point. It would be no small thing indeed if within some reasonable amount of time after taking office, the next president were able to put the United States firmly back on the side of law and rights in the war on terrorism, project a realistic and honest rhetorical line about democracy, re-establish the credibility of U.S. pro-democratic intent in sensitive foreign elections, and follow a well-differentiated framework of democracy promotion strategies in the daunting array of hard cases at hand.

Yet it is hard to escape the feeling that Traub has only reached the first level of problems, and that another, much deeper and more daunting level remains insufficiently identified. The entire modern history of U.S. democracy promotion has been built on two implicit but fundamental ideas: that democracy is spreading in the world and that U.S. power is rising. What is so striking, and also so troubling, about this decade is not just the many ways that the current Administration has discredited U.S. democracy promotion, but that both of these ideas no longer appear to hold true. For the first time in many years there are almost no more democracies in the world at the end of a decade as there were at the beginning of it. And after more than a century of growing U.S. power, the relative weight of the United States in international affairs has clearly plateaued, or even started to decline.

These profound changes in context mean that much deeper questions have to be asked about how U.S. democracy promotion should be reformulated post-

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Bush. To start with, we have to reaffirm that democracy is a better system of governance than the rivals that are commanding growing interest, including China's developmental authoritarianism. This will require much more serious attention to improving U.S. democracy, as well as using the experiences learned from working with democracy abroad to inform the task of democratic improvement at home. What the United States is showing to the world today is not just a country that abuses law and rights in the name of fighting terrorism, but a country still struggling to build a credible election system, imprisoning its own citizens at a higher rate than almost any other country in the world, failing to bring the role of money in electoral politics under reasonable control, lacking the fiscal discipline it constantly recommends to others, and much else. It is no longer good enough for Americans going abroad to say "of course we don't have all the answers ourselves" and then to pretend that we do. We have to get serious about showing that our own democracy can meet the major challenges staring it in the face and that we are willing to learn from others in equal measure that we seek to teach.

This new context also means that we must up our game when it comes to crafting programs and policies to support democracy abroad. When democracy was clearly spreading in the world, such efforts were often treated in Washington as a matter of rolling boulders downhill. Despite 25 years of growth in democracy assistance, for example, and many fine efforts by dedicated activists, such programs have never been coherently and solidly institutionalized in the U.S. foreign policy institutional landscape. Moreover, democracy work has never been well-integrated into the larger enterprise of supporting development abroad, an enterprise whose institutional core—the U.S. Agency for International Development—has gone from crisis to crisis rather than strength to strength. In many parts of the world, we are now trying to push heavy boulders up steep hills when it comes to promoting democracy. A much more serious approach to creating the necessary institutional structures is now imperative.

It may be expecting too much of a presidential campaign to make us face these new realities regarding democracy promotion. The complexities before us defy the easy slogans, partisan posturing, and gotcha games that characterize so much of the campaign scene. The next Administration, however, will have no choice. It will have to go beyond simply righting the wrongs of its immediate predecessor to reformulate the very ways we think about the relationship between our own democracy and the struggling democratic systems abroad that we seek to help. ■