

**Towards Freedom and Democracy.  
Is Democracy Promotion a Viable Grand Strategy?**

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The second term of the Bush administration seems marked by an apparent emphasis on the spread of democracy around the world. George W. Bush made this point clear during the November 2004 presidential speech. What looks striking is how a concept almost irrelevant during the 2000 campaign gained more and more weight during the war against terror, and now serves as a founding element in the purported American grand strategy for the next four years.

Unsurprisingly, the prospect of an America fighting throughout the world to topple regimes and promote human freedom sparked a wave of critiques even among friends and allies. Thus, investigating the rationale for this kind of policy seems both relevant and theoretically correct.

Contrary to what many think, this shift in the U.S. strategic vision is not completely new. Indeed, 'to make the world safe for democracy' is an imperative shared in the past by many Presidents – Wilson first of all. What makes Bush's statement somehow original is not just his emphasis on the final goal, rather his belief in a proactive action as the best means to achieve it

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(Daalder and Lindsay 2003). Take Clinton's agenda: his economic policy towards China and Russia, though bargaining firmly, has been replete with incentives to make America's partner embrace a more democratic stance. At that time, Clinton has been sharply criticised for being too idealistic - in other words, to postpone material interests to democratic ideals. Similarly, under the democratic rule, America engaged in several hot spots (like Somalia, East Timor, Kosovo) often devoid of a clear strategy - let alone a clear rationale. As a result, while some American interventions proved quite successful, others resulted in a remarkable misstep.

Many of the Vulcans - the group of intellectuals mostly responsible for Bush's foreign policy agenda - overtly condemned Clinton's priorities. They rather founded the 2000 campaign on a simple rule: the US should intervene only to defend basic national interests (mainly defined in strategic and economic terms). Clearly, this idea is perfectly consistent with the unilateral approach displayed since the inception of the new Bush administration. Yet, it does not fit with what turned out to be the 'Bush doctrine'. So, as some theorists argue, one could even say that in less than four years Bush ran a revolution in American foreign policy. For my purpose, what is important here is not just to explain how, or why, did it happen. Rather, in the next pages I will investigate the rationale for imposing democracy throughout the world.

#### **A VIABLE END?**

If you want to inform your grand strategy according to the logic of democracy promotion, then you must match ends and means (Gaddis 1982) in order to

achieve the goal of spreading the democratic rule throughout the world. Accordingly, any attempt to assess the purported new strategy of the United States must take into account its ends as much as its means. Let us discuss the ends first.

Who really cares if the world is safe for democracy? Is the relationship among democracies different from the other forms of government? Who is going to take advantage of a democratic community? Admittedly, the answer to these questions varies according to the theoretical (let alone ideological) approach of who intends to respond. In fact, there is no single answer universally shared or, in other words, it seems evident that there is no cumulative knowledge in International Relations on this. Nevertheless, the point for democracy promotion can be made along at least three lines.

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*A viable grand strategy must match ends and means coherently*

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First, one could draw from the vast literature on democratic peace (see, among others, Lipson 2003). Democracies, according to this theory, do not fight each other. It is not clear why this is the case, but so far the event of democratic states engaged in a war one against the other is remarkably rare. As a matter of fact, the democratic community arisen at the end of Second World War turned into a security community – i.e. a group of states that implicitly or explicitly rejects the use of violence to settle their own disputes. If the argument holds, one should expect that the hidden rule of democratic peace might work out even when the community encompasses more than a fistful of western states. As a result, if on the one hand this rationale suggests

the most valuable benefit – international peace – on the other hand, this line of argument is quite weak and likely to be disconfirmed by facts.

A second justification for promoting democracy is particularly relevant in the wake of the war on terror. As many acknowledge, the best strategy to chase terrorist groups is not fighting them on the ground – an almost impossible task, given the elusive nature of the enemy. Rather, a better way is destroying the principal conditions that make it possible for them to prosper. As far as we know, the authoritarian rule is the main catalyst for the rise of extremist factions and bin terrorist cells. Even more than deprivation and ideology, it is the lack of freedom within a state that provides the highest incentive to back terrorism. At least indirectly, therefore, toppling authoritarian dictators promises to remove Al Qaeda’s catch basin.

This argument too is open to critique. In fact, it is based on a set of assumptions – that the rise of terrorists depends on the lack of freedom, that removing dictatorships in the Middle East will not be as difficult a task as fighting in Iraq, and, finally, that the rising democracy in Baghdad gave a positive signal to the surrounding countries. Whether these assumptions are right or wrong is not debatable here. Once again, what is important is to stress how the likelihood that this justification might keep its promise is bound to several unlikely conditions.

The third, usually hidden, line of argument in favour of democracy promotion can be traced back to a realist approach. Following the ground breaking work of Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990), democracy promotion can work as an instrument of socialization. In other words, when the United States

engage in the process of shaping other states' institutions, they explicitly export their own ideals and norms and, more or less explicitly, their preferences. As a result, the local elites are exposed to a strong incentive – either accept or refuse them. Arguably, the second option is quite unlikely. In fact, as the experience in Iraq shows, the newly installed leadership is the one previously repressed or in exile. For sake of clarity, here we are not referring to puppet governments, but legitimate and effective regimes established after the toppling of an authoritarian rule. In other words, promoting democracy for the US implies strengthening her own hegemonic influence through a 'positive', concealed, form of power – the power to shape new statesmen at her own image.

Here lays the main plus of the recent turn in the Bush administration. Rather than intending power as sheer military capabilities, American strategists seem to have embraced a more sophisticated vision of the tools of power. Therefore, democracy promotion is in itself a soft instrument to exert influence on the most reluctant followers of Washington's lead. Will it work out? Probably, the answer to this question depends on which means will be used to achieve it.

#### **MATCHING ENDS WITH MEANS**

As we have seen, there are acceptable motives to invoke democracy promotion as a national goal. But indeed, this is not new in American foreign policy. Clinton's agenda included this point – and for this reason he has been criticized by the conservative camp. Thus, should we claim that the Bush

revolution is in fact a return to his predecessor's policy? Actually, it is too early to rule out this possibility, but the administration's approach to foreign affairs seems to point to a radical difference vis-à-vis the previous one.

Such a difference lies in the way democracy should be promoted. While Clinton tried to induce other countries to follow the American example, carefully avoiding to interfere with the domestic life of non democratic states, Bush proved ready to fight in order to create democracy whereas he found it appropriate. Even the war in Kosovo, that eventually led to the toppling of Slobodan Milosevic, was not intended to end the authoritarian rule in Serbia. Had Milosevic proven more flexible and ready to accept the American requests, the US would have been satisfied.

On the other hand, the Iraqi war shows how the Bush administration is concerned by tyrants. Apart from the WMD issue, it was clear from the outset of the war that military operation would continue until Saddam Hussein was removed from power. But this is exactly the mismatch between ends and means that might flaw the strategy. Military action is the worst prelude to democracy. Put it differently, the most a war can do is to remove an authoritarian elite. But this is only the first step towards democracy.

The tough task is what is usually labelled as state-building. As the classic literature on democracy acknowledges (Dahl 2000, Sartori 1987), we can not just be content with a formal definition of democracy, one based on elections and the existence of governmental bodies. Real democracies work only if they are supported by an efficient set of institutions, an effective market and, most of all, by a burgeoning civil society. This leads us to the conclusion that the

best way to promote democracy is through positive incentives. On the contrary, military intervention is hardly useful, because in order to destroy the structure of the previous regime it also wipes out the underlying infrastructure on which the next government should be based.

In sum, the latest turn of the Bush administration in favor of democracy promotion might have the potential to give the United States a legitimate and useful objective – one that is either in her own and the other states' advantage. Alas, this argument creates trouble when it comes to specify how to promote democracy. On the one hand, the soft approach shown by former president Clinton did not prove very effective. On the other hand, a tougher stance may spark a blowback effect, creating areas of instability instead of lasting democracies.

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