

World Movement for Democracy— Made in the USA

By Tom Barry | July 29, 2005

The “world’s democratic movement” is not another one of the transnational citizens’ movements, like the anti-globalization or anti-war movements, that prides itself on having no central structure, no dogma, or even an office.

This movement is highly organized, better funded, and even has its own “secretariat.” Unlike other leaderless but world-shaking transnational citizens’ networks that emerged after the end of the Cold War, the “world’s democratic movement” is not a product of global civil society but a quasi-governmental initiative based in Washington, DC.

Carl Gershman, the longtime president of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) where the movement is headquartered, says that the U.S.-government-backed World Movement for Democracy is “an imaginative new mechanism that can facilitate networking, sharing, and solidarity among democrats around the world.”

The leading voice of this “movement” is President George W. Bush. Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the neoconservative-led National Endowment for Democracy on November 6, 2003, President Bush said, “We’ve reached another great turning point [in history], and the resolve we will show will shape the next stage of the world democratic movement.”

Whereas the democratization strategy that President Ronald Reagan launched in 1982-83 targeted the Soviet Union and its “evil empire,” Bush has said that his administration’s democratization initiative would focus first on the Middle East, and that the “establishment of a free Iraq will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution.”

In the first State of the Union address of his second term, Bush took America’s self-imposed mission to spread democracy and freedom to new heights of idealism, committing the United States to the tasks of spreading democracy around the globe and “ending tyranny in our world.”

In keeping with the radical thrust of Bush’s foreign policy, the president often refers to this movement in military terms—“forward strategy of freedom” and “global democratic revolution.” Calling for a doubling of NED’s

budget for its democratization work in the Middle East, the president declared, “The advance of freedom is the calling of our time. It is the calling of our country.”

NED and USAID Provide Political Aid

Together with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy has functioned as an instrument of the U.S. government’s democratization strategy over the past two decades. Whereas USAID is an agency of the State Department, quasi-governmental NED is organized as a nonprofit but funded almost entirely by the U.S. government.

Since 1982, when President Reagan launched what he called a “crusade” to foster “free market democracies” and spread the a neoliberal version of the “magic of the marketplace,” both USAID and NED have channeled U.S. government development and public diplomacy funding into the democratization programs of the international institutes of the Republican and Democratic Parties, the AFL-CIO, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, as well as a wide range of institutes, political parties, and non-governmental organizations abroad.

As part of the Cold War, the U.S. government in 1947 began channeling political aid through the CIA to political parties, publications, policy institutes, academic institutions, and other nongovernmental actors. After Congress prohibited such covert funding in the 1970s, a U.S. government-funded task force called the Democracy Program, which was directed largely by neoconservatives, proposed a new political aid program that would overtly support the type of nongovernmental entities that previously received CIA funding.¹

Soon after Ronald Reagan took office, the new administration put this proposal into action, assigning the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and USAID as the chief



sources of political funding. But rather than channeling the aid directly to foreign actors, the Reagan administration decided, in line with the Democracy Program proposal, that the “democracy-building” aid would flow through U.S. private organizations, mainly the newly created National Endowment for Democracy and its affiliates in the two political parties, labor, and business.

NED and other components of the Reagan administration’s democratization strategy were an attempt to revive the post-WWII international networks of congresses, publications, and intellectuals funded by the CIA, such as the Congress on Cultural Freedom, in which many neoconservative forerunners like Irving Kristol and Melvin Lasky were leading figures.

Since its first years NED’s “democracy-building” initiatives have had two main thrusts—one to promote U.S.-allied political actors against political parties and governments not closely aligned with the United States (such as Nicaragua, Haiti, Cuba, and Venezuela), and another to promote “free market democracy” in countries regarded as having an overly large government presence in the economy, notably in the “transitional” states of the former Soviet Union. As in the 1980s, when the U.S. government deployed NED to support surrogate “freedom fighters” in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, NED today is a central player in the new U.S.-led “global democratic revolution.”

The U.S. government’s funding for “democracy building” is closely tied to U.S. foreign policy priorities and generally goes to groups who fall in line with or at least do not oppose U.S. economic, diplomatic, and military initiatives.

“Network of Networks”

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. government and NED concluded that the democracy-building strategy needed an overhaul. Taking its cue from the anti-globalization and other transborder citizens’ movements, NED began to establish networks of center-right foundations, research institutes, youth groups, parliamentarians, and non-governmental organizations. In 1999 NED, with U.S. government and U.S. foundation support, organized the founding assembly of the World Movement for Democracy in New Delhi.

In the age of globalized communication and transnational cyber-networking, as exemplified by the anti-free

trade movement, NED decided to start its own global citizens’ movement. Rather than just channeling U.S.-government funds to disparate groups, NED’s president Carl Gershman in 1999 established his office as the “secretariat” for a World Movement for Democracy.²

The movement’s objective is to “offer new ways to give practical help to democrats who are struggling to liberalize authoritarian systems and to consolidate emerging democracies.”³

According to NED, “The World Movement helps to fulfill one of the objectives of NED’s most recent strategic plan, namely ‘to create a community of democrats, drawn from the most developed democracies and the most repressive autocracies as well as everything in between, and united by the belief that the common interest is served by the gradual expansion of systems based on freedom, self-government, and the rule of law.’”

Just as the citizens’ global anti-globalization movement often described itself as a “movement of movements,” NED describes the World Movement for Democracy as a “network of networks,” that functions as an umbrella organization for an array of affiliated international networks of citizens’ groups, parliamentarians, research institutions, business groups, and foundations. What distinguishes this movement from citizens’ networks is that it was created as a U.S. government-supported initiative.

U.S. taxpayer revenues cover the cost of having NED function as the logistical and infrastructural secretariat for this multifaceted democracy movement. Annual State Department allocations cover the four NED staff members who oversee the network from their positions in the office of NED’s president. Most of the project funding for NED’s WMD, however, comes from right-wing foundations in the United States, led by the Bradley Foundation, which has provided the start-up and general support funding for an array of other neoconservative foreign policy projects, including the Project for the New American Century.

Although the World Movement for Democracy states that it “does not advocate positions on particular political issues,” the network’s website and publications, such as its ezine *DemocracyNews*, largely reflect the U.S. government’s foreign policy positions with respect to countries such as Venezuela and Cuba.

NED has created regional portals for participants in the network. For example, for Latin America and the

Caribbean there is the “Portal de la democracia de las Américas,” which opens to the webpage of the Red Ciudadana por la Democracia en las Américas (Citizens’ Network for Democracy in the Americas).⁴

In addition to its regional portals to “citizens’ networks,” NED through the World Movement for Democracy has established regional forums with more restricted participation, such as the Democracy Forum in East Asia and the Africa Democracy Forum.

Also under the umbrella of the World Movement for Democracy are several other global “pro-democracy” networks that NED has been developing over the past decade, including International Movement of Parliamentarians for Democracy, Network of Young Democracy Activists, Democracy Information and Communications Technology Group, and the Network of Democracy Research Institutes. The latter, which includes as members think tanks and policy institutes throughout the world, receives research and technical assistance from NED’s Democracy Resource Center.

As part of its effort to function as a nexus for a “network of networks,” NED in 1995 convened a meeting in Taipei, Taiwan in conjunction with Taiwan’s Institute for National Policy Research that aimed to spark the creation of “democracy foundations” around the world. In 2003, Taiwan, “following a period of consultation with NED,” created the Taiwan Democracy Foundation.⁵

The Institute for National Policy Research is a think tank that is closely associated not only with NED but with the American Enterprise Institute, the premier neo-conservative think tank. Today, there are three dozen foundations that participate in the NED-initiated World Conference of Democracy-Support Foundations.

One of the most recent movement-building exercises of NED is the Movement of Parliamentarians for Democracy, founded in Washington in February 2003. Among the main congressional supporters of this NED networking were Christopher Cox (R-CA) and Eliot Engel (D-NY), both closely associated with numerous neo-conservative organizations.

A Neocon Product

Neoconservatives inside and outside the Bush administration have been central players in an array of government-backed initiatives such as the World Movement for Democracy and the Community of Democracies, as well

as in such strictly private democratization programs as that of the neocon American Enterprise Institute.

In early 2005 President Bush tapped neoconservative ideologue Elliott Abrams—infamous for his key role during the Reagan administration in the NED-funded efforts to support the Nicaraguan Contras—to direct his Global Democracy Initiative.

Penn Kemble, a longtime associate of Carl Gershman and Elliott Abrams and who, like Gershman, has his political roots in the Trotskyist Social Democrats/USA, served as deputy director of the now-defunct U.S. Information Agency, a stronghold of neoconservatives since the early 1980s. In 1999 President Clinton named Kemble the State Department’s special representative for the U.S.-led Community of Democracies Initiative, which established the Community of Democracies at a June 2000 meeting in Warsaw.

NED and the World Movement for Democracy are also promoters of the Community of Democracies—which has been greeted with widespread skepticism by many European nations who regard it as a U.S. strategy to skirt UN authority. Addressing the meeting of the Community of Democracies last April, Condoleezza Rice said that this forum with its commitment to “principled multilateralism” was creating a “balance of power that favors freedom.”

NED’s new democracy initiatives aim to foster a transnational citizens’ network funded and guided by the U.S. government and right-wing foundations that will counter the anti-free trade and anti-imperialist citizens’ networks that have emerged in this age of globalized communications.

The close identification of the U.S.-sponsored democracy movement with U.S. foreign and military policy has made great strides forward in incorporating hundreds of citizens’ groups around the world.

Already there signs that the movement may prove counterproductive in the region that is the main target of NED’s democratization agenda. Throughout the Middle East, as in Cuba and Venezuela, democracy-building is getting a bad name since it is so closely associated with U.S. “regime-change” efforts by undemocratic means.

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ALSO SEE:

Right Web Profiles:

Elliott Abrams

Penn Kemble

International Republican Institute

National Endowment for Democracy

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END NOTES

- ¹ The Democracy Program, an extension of a USAID-funded organization called the American Political Foundation included business and USIA officials, but its key movers were the neoconservatives: Eugenia Kemble (sister of Penn Kemble), George Weigel (later with the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a signatory of the founding statement of the Project for the New American Century), Raymond Gastil of Freedom House, and Allen Weinstein (member of neocon-led Coalition for Democratic Majority and later president of the NED-funded Center for Democracy).
- ² “Building a Community of Democracies,” NED
<http://www.ned.org/about/building.html>
- ³ World Movement for Democracy
<http://wmd.org>
- ⁴ World Movement for Democracy, Portal de la democracia en las Américas
<http://www.wmd.org/lan/participants/country.html>
- ⁵ David Lowe, “Idea to Reality: NED at 20,” NED, 2003. Lowe is a NED vice president, specializing in government and external relations.

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