

Whither the “Global Democratic Revolution”?

By Tom Barry | July 31, 2007

One of the neoconservatives’ lasting achievements was the construction of a new pillar of foreign policy—namely, democracy promotion. Today, the neoconservative camp is associated primarily with the Iraq War and the Bush administration’s over-reliance on hard military power. But the neoconservatives have, since the Reagan administration, played a central role in elevating “democracy-building” as a core goal of U.S. foreign policy.

Twenty-five years ago, in June 1982, President Ronald Reagan announced in London the U.S. government’s new commitment to the “global campaign for freedom.” The following year, the Reagan administration established the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as the primary instrument of the U.S. government’s new democratization policy.

Democratization policy, with its emphasis on spreading “free market economics” and U.S.-style democracies (“free market democracies”), was a Cold War instrument. Reagan, paraphrasing Marx, predicted the U.S. democratization programs would “leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history.”

Among the principal proponents of this new foreign policy thrust were the neoconservatives who had left the Democratic Party and in 1981 joined the Reagan administration, mostly in foreign policy positions, including such figures as Elliott Abrams, Carl Gershman, Paula Dobriansky, Ben Wattenberg, and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Having arisen out of the Democratic Party’s hardline anticommunist wing, the neocons were uniquely positioned to pull business and labor together with the two

political parties into a new bipartisan foreign policy coalition represented by NED.

The mission of NED was to channel funds to business, labor, political, and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that opposed governments and political movements considered threatening to U.S. interests and the “free world.” Rather than provide clandestine aid through the CIA to such groups, the U.S. government channeled its first phase of democratization aid mainly through NED.

The end of the Cold War did not diminish the bipartisan enthusiasm for “democracy building.” NED continued to receive its annual appropriations through the State Department budget, and in 1990 the George H.W. Bush administration made democracy promotion a core program of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). A new focus of both NED and USAID was building “free market democracies” in the transitional states of the former Soviet Union.

By the mid-1990s, congressional and public support for “democracy promotion” was languishing. For many, the “constructive engagement” approach of the Clinton administration,

which praised the political and economic benefits of globalization, seemed a better instrument of U.S. foreign policy than political aid programs. There was also rising concern that the democracy aid in the transitional states was doing more to rationalize the ravages of the new capitalists than to foster freedom and democracy.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, there was a new burst of enthusiasm for democratization programming. At NED's 20th anniversary celebration in 2003, President George W. Bush, recalling Reagan's Westminster speech, said: "Once again, we're responding to a global campaign of fear with a global campaign of freedom." He went so far as to say that "the establishment of a free Iraq in the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution."

After dropping the "mission accomplished" rhetoric to describe the conflict-ridden occupation of Iraq, the president increasingly framed his Middle East policy as a campaign to spread democracy—rather than one to rid the region of weapons of mass destruction or to eliminate al-Qaida. In his 2005 inaugural address, Bush sounded more like a liberal crusader than a raging militarist, using the word "freedom" 25 times. He also called for doubling NED's budget as part of his Middle East democratization campaign.

The revived prominence of democratization policy is evident in the 2006 National Security Strategy, whose opening sentence declares that U.S. foreign policy is "to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

As the security situation in Iraq deteriorated and the newly elected Iraqi government became rife with sectarian strife, Bush and foreign policy officials have been toning down the idealistic rhetoric about the administration's commitment to spreading democracy in the Middle East and have instead focused on the need for an extended deployment of U.S. troops in Iraq.

While criticism of the Bush administration's military policies has become part of the Democratic Party's talking points and extends into the Republican ranks, bipartisan support for democracy-building has eroded only slightly. The Democrats have been largely silent about the failings of democratization policy.

This bipartisan support for democratization policy was evident in early June at NED's celebration of Reagan's launching of U.S. democracy-building policy. Carl Gershman, who has led NED since 1983, welcomed to the celebration such Democratic leaders as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, Rep. Steny Hoyer of Massachusetts, and former Sen. Tom Daschle.

Gershman introduced Pelosi, calling her "a dear, dear friend of the NED for a very long time." And Pelosi, in turn, described Gershman as a "master at work" and stressed that NED was "very important to us in Congress."

Another speaker at the celebration of the launch of the "global campaign for freedom" was Elliott Abrams, who is the deputy national security adviser for "global democracy strategy." Abrams, who was convicted in the 1980s for misrepresenting to Congress the depth of the Reagan administration's clandestine support for the Nicaraguan contras, has since the

late 1970s been one of the most influential neoconservatives shaping U.S. foreign policy.

When introducing him, Gershman noted that Abrams was “there at the beginning of NED” and is “well respected by the entire NED family, Democrats and Republicans alike.” Abrams said that the Reagan administration with its democratization policy put the country “on the side of freedom fighters” while noting that the “fight is not over” and that the administration he represented is committed to the proposition that the “expansion of democracy” is central to U.S. national security policy.

Another sign of the new surge of support for democracy-building was the publication of a policy report commissioned by the Stanley Foundation that makes a case for a major expansion of NED. Written by Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul, the report, titled “Should Democracy Be Promoted or Demoted?” argues that the U.S. government should vastly expand aid to NGOs as part of a revamped democratization policy.

Fukuyama, an erstwhile neoconservative who is most famous for his “end of history” theory of capitalist democracies, serves on NED’s board of directors, while McFaul directs the Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution. They contend that a “vastly expanded NED” should be considered as part of a reconfigured foreign policy apparatus. Under this scenario, “NED would have to provide direct grants to all American providers of technical and financial assistance for the nongovernmental sector.”

Under this new model, the U.S. government would grant aid only to governmental institutions, while the focus of an expanded

democratization initiative would be on national movements and NGOs. There would be “more involvement with for-profit contractors,” and to expand its reach, “NED would also need to open offices around the world.” Congress would directly and independently of the State Department fund all democratization aid to NED, while the foreign policy agencies of the executive branch would channel their aid to foreign governmental entities. An alternative, they wrote, “would be the creation of a new foundation, modeled after NED, but with a wider mandate.”

The authors commend Bush for “highlighting the moral and strategic imperatives for promoting democracy abroad,” noting that he “has continued a longstanding tradition in U.S. foreign policy that has deep roots in both the Democratic and Republican parties.” However, they fault the Bush administration for not instituting “a realistic and comprehensive strategy for achieving” its democratization goals.

“The next American president must do better,” say Fukuyama and McFaul. They argue that “a more effective strategy for promoting democracy and human rights is both needed and available.”

From Reagan to Bush, the U.S. government has a long history of using democratization aid as an instrument of political intervention. And there is no argument that the U.S. government and public should stand unequivocally behind democracy and human rights.

But given the U.S. human rights and democracy shortcomings and its lamentable history of dressing up imperial intervention in idealistic rhetoric and aid programs, Congress and the

next administration would do better by terminating all unilateral U.S. political aid programs. There is patent danger, however, that in the shaping of a post-Bush foreign policy both Democrats and Republicans will exempt this key part of the neoconservative foreign policy agenda from critical review.

Clearly, there is a need for international support for election monitoring and technical assistance. But such aid should be channeled

through credible multilateral organizations, especially regionally-based ones, rather than through private foundations, NGOs, and for-profit organizations funded by a single nation with its set of national interests and national security strategies.

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