portion of all the efforts and talents in the world are employed in merely neutralizing one another. It is the proper end of government to reduce this wretched waste to the smallest possible amount, by taking such measures as shall cause the energies now spent by mankind in injuring one another...to be turned to the legitimate employment of human faculties, that of compelling the powers of nature to be more and more subservient to physical and moral good.

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Notes

Thomas Carothers

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY
IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

I was in Kazakhstan not long ago, on a project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to assist the Kazakh Parliament with its drafting of an electoral law. The trip was going smoothly until a critical moment occurred. I was working closely with a senior member of the Parliament, a wise and patient man who approached his work with great seriousness. I had just reviewed a number of provisions of the draft law and highlighted some choices open to his drafting committee. He looked at me gravely, pushing slowly aside with one hand the raft of possibilities I had been outlining, and stated with quiet firmness, "We want our Parliament to be just like your Congress." Our eyes met for a meaningful moment as I tried to think of something to say other than the three words that had immediately come screaming into my mind: "No, you don't!" I mumbled something to the effect that our Congress was in fact not perfect, that there was much value in exploring a range of ways to organize legislatures and draft laws. My host's eyes narrowed as he listened to my words, words that I knew sounded like evasion. The American expert has come all this way to say he has no model?

Among those Americans involved in the business of promoting democracy abroad—a minor growth industry populated by people from non-governmental organizations, consulting firms, think tanks, universities, and the U.S. government itself, who careen around the world helping to draft constitutions, observe elections, reform judiciaries, strengthen parliaments, build civil societies, empower local governments, and train journalists—the relation between the professed ideal and the actual state of democracy at home is rarely much discussed. As a result, little attention has been given to the surprising and in some ways paradoxical fact that the United States, and to a lesser extent Western Europe, have moved into a particularly active phase of promoting democracy in other countries precisely at a time when the health of their own democratic systems is clouded with doubt.

It would be too much to say that democracy is in a state of crisis in the United States or Western Europe. But it is unquestionably troubled. Leaving aside the many serious social problems in the United States and the continuing inability of Western European economies to create jobs, one can point to a set of interrelated political problems in many well-established democracies. Political parties command increasingly feeble loyalty from citizens. The ruling politicians seem in most Western democracies either to be a stagnant gang of old faces or a series of one-term leaders who go rapidly from incoming boom to outgoing bust. Political participation has weakened and taken on superficial, commercialized forms. In general, the political sphere is often no longer much respected or valued. Antipolitical personalities and ideas have growing appeal, with the underside of antipolitics often not far from antidemocracy.

Very little of this vague but troubling situation appears in the world of U.S. democracy promotion programs abroad. What gets presented in such programs is generally a high school civics version of democracy. Democracy is portrayed as a gleaming edifice made up of larger-than-life institutions and structures. It is also characterized as a self-evident truth, with the resulting assumption that democratic values,
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once properly introduced, will take hold naturally and cement into perpetuity the proper institutional system. This view admits that a few problems may be found in the practice of democracy in the United States, but such problems are only wrinkles around the edges that do not raise questions about the core.

But the main cause of the persistent disjunction between realities at home and ideals abroad is something else. To the extent that democracy promoters concern themselves with the fact that all is not well with democracy in America and Western Europe, they assume that such problems are the symptoms of "mature democracies" and that prior to the current malaise in Western politics there was a long, golden period in which democracy enjoyed its fruition. Their related assumption is that the many newly democratizing countries around the world will experience a similar pattern of development. First these countries will build the basic institutions of democracy; then they will live out their own golden periods, and only after they are far down the democratic road will the various elements of the democratic malaise affect the West be relevant to them. Stated in more conceptual terms, the view is that Western political life is in a transition to some ill-defined postmodern state and that its strains are characteristic features of this emergent postmodernism. The newly democratizing countries, in contrast, are at a pre-stage — they are striving to become modern. They must grapple with modernism before they need worry about postmodernism. They must learn to walk, in other words, before they need worry about stumbling.

One obvious criticism of this outlook is that there never was a golden period of democracy in the United States or in other Western countries; all periods of Western democracy have been fraught with problems. Yet although it is true that democracy has always been highly imperfect, the problems outlined above do appear to reflect a distinct syndrome of postmodern fatigue with democracy — and perhaps with politics itself. The deeper flaw of this outlook lies with the notion that the postmodern fatigue is a narrow political phenomenon based on the experience of life in developed Western democracies. In fact, the symptoms of postmodern fatigue are just one part of a much broader social, intellectual, and political trend that has penetrated societies in different stages of political development in many parts of the world, particularly Latin America and the formerly communist world. The core psychological components of the shift from modernism to postmodernism — the movement from alienation to detachment, from ideology to cynicism, and from the loss of meaning to the loss of interest in meaning — are hardly limited to Western democracies. Nor are the basic sociopolitical elements: the technologically fueled evolution of individualism, the growing fascination with putatively apolitical solutions to political problems, and the tendency to view political choices as a derivative of economic frameworks rather than the reverse.

Thus the many democratic transitions of recent years in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, and possibly even Africa and Asia, may seem at first glance like efforts by other societies to achieve the plateau of Western political modernism. In fact, however, they are much more complex transitions in which societies already suffused with many of the attitudes and ideas of postmodernism are attempting to develop the structures and processes of liberal democracy. They are, in short, learning to walk while they already know intellectually all about stumbling. The idea that in promoting democracy abroad we should put aside for some much later date consideration of the characteristic problems of "mature democracies" is wrong.

Ideological Certainties

In parallel to their tendency to hold out an idealized version of U.S. democracy to foreigners, Americans abroad tend to read into the many democratic transitions of recent years far too much ideological certainty. They often view such transitions as society-wide epiphanies, large-scale conversions to liberal democratic values. This view is tied to the deeper, seductive idea that late-twentieth-century history is defined by the triumph of liberal democracy. Yet the democratic trend in the world, significant as it is, should be understood as much in terms of failure as of triumph.
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hoping for the establishment of a new, participatory, civic-oriented relationship between citizens and the state as for what might be called the professionalization of the state. They do not dream of humanizing politics so much as of obviating the need for politics itself.

The American tendency to read into recent political transitions around the world too much ideological certainty is reflected in, and causes problems for, U.S. assistance programs aimed at democracy promotion. The problems often begin at the early stage of political transitions, when opposition individuals or groups are challenging existing nondemocratic regimes. In such situations, Americans are quick to assume that anyone challenging a dictatorship is a democrat. They project the simple framework of democracy versus dictatorship upon local power struggles, which, though often concerned with political liberalization, are also closely linked with historical conflicts between different regional, ethnic, or religious factions. They are then surprised when the people they support turn out to be primarily interested in gaining and consolidating power rather than building democracy. And they fail to realize how much the United States is perceived in the countries in which it is engaged as taking sides in historical power struggles rather than advancing the abstract principles of democracy.

These problems continue as democratic transitions proceed. Once the old regime is out and a new government comes to power through elections or general affirmation, U.S. assistance organizations undertake civic education throughout the country. Such programs rest on the idea that the common person in a transitional society yearns for democracy but just doesn’t know much about what democracy is. Civic educators funded by the United States fan out through the countryside armed with brochures, pamphlets, charts, and books translated into the local language, which explain what political rights are, what voting is, what parliaments do in democracies, what the separation of powers means, and so on.

But much of this heartfelt educational work assumes away the essential task. It assumes that the people in a transitional society want to become democratic and just need to know more about how to do so. In fact, however, in societies currently in the midst of democratic transitions, many citizens feel a strong skepticism about the utility of politics itself and a disinclination to be stirred by any ideological education, particularly one in which political values are presented as self-evident truths rather than correlated with clear individual interests. Civic education is more effective when political parties are being blocked from power and the people are not seeking answers to the immediate problems they are facing.

A Place in the World

In a broad, metaphorical sense, the manifold efforts by Americans to promote democracy abroad express a basic perception about America’s place in the world. And the disjunctions that mark these assistance efforts reflect a deep division built into the common perception. On the one hand, many Americans believe that the world is becoming more like America, and that it is their job to go out in the world to push that process along. Yet at the same time many Americans believe that there is a tremendous gulf between themselves and the world. They believe that America is fundamentally different from other countries; the mere fact of foreignness seems utterly strange, almost unnatural to them.

This division in our idea of our place in the world is rooted in our own national self-conception. We believe that America is a unique country but, at the same time, a universal model. It is unique as the oldest democracy. The idea of America as the “city on the hill” remains surprisingly strong despite the uncertainties that many Americans have about the country’s future and the widespread critical view of the actual functioning of its political system. Americans view their country as the self-made miracle that any person or society can emulate with hard work and the right intentions. That there may well be an inherent contradiction between being simultaneously unique and universal seems to escape our notice. Our self-appointed place in the world rests uneasily on the conscious or unconscious denial of that contradiction. But although it is denied, the contradiction has haunted our entire experience of international engagement. It lies behind the disconcerting condition that we know so well of having been highly engaged politically, economically, militarily, and culturally in the world for generations, yet having remained so much an island nation despite it all.

The current historical juncture affords us an opportunity to change our basic psychological relationship to the world. By “juncture” I am referring not only to the end of the cold war but to the full set of transitional features of the international sphere, including the trend toward democracy in many countries, the increasing internationalization of economic systems, and the overly hyped but nonetheless significant “information revolution.” We have engaged in much talk about the implications of the end of the cold war and of the other distinctive features of this new period. But the changes we have made in our international outlook have been surprisingly few and generally limited to the level of formal policy modifications. It is the psychological underpinnings of our relationship to the world that must change. Democracy promotion, as a defining metaphor for that relationship, is one place to start.

Within American political culture, pride in the unique stability of America’s democratic system has hardened over the generations into a tendency to equate the particular forms of our political institutions with democracy itself. Missing from our political life is much real debate about how our crucial political values, such as representation and pluralism, might be better served by different institutional forms or configurations. In fact, we maintain a remarkable attachment to the particular institutional forms of our democracy, such as our highly flawed Congress, even as the underlying principles upon which they were built areistry from ill service.

We have been carrying this over-attachment to forms and under-attachment to principles with us when we go abroad promoting...
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democracy. We need to concentrate less on helping to reproduce certain institutional forms in other countries and more on fostering the underlying values and principles of democracy. For example, when faced with a dysfunctional parliament in a transitional society we should not immediately think in terms of a checklist of institutional modifications needed to make that parliament resemble our Congress—such as increasing the number of staff, expanding the library, changing the rules of procedure, or strengthening the committee system. Instead, we need to help empower those people and organizations who wish to fight to change the patterns of representation, and let them work out their precise institutional objectives. Or, if we are trying to assist the development of political parties in another country, we should refrain from our habitual tendency to send American political consultants to teach those parties to be U.S.-style political machines replete with media expertise, a penchant for polls, and a winning-is-all approach. Instead, we should try to help stimulate debate and inquiry into the full range of possible types of political association, on the assumption that we do not have the final answer with respect to the forms and functions of political parties.

In short, the challenge of promoting democracy abroad turns out to bear important similarities to the challenge of reinvigorating democracy at home. If we have been falling short in our approaches abroad it is perhaps because we have not been seriously engaged in the task at home. Reconfiguring our relationship to the world in this new international era can only follow from a reconfiguring of our own relationship to the democratic principles and values we espouse.

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