

Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy: Looking Back, Looking Forward

By

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References to setting up a state where justice, governance, political interest, true religiosity obtain go back in history. For example, a Commission of Thirty set up a new constitution after the fall of Athens in 404 B.C. Socrates, deemed by the oracle at Delphi to be ‘the wisest man in Greece’, would ask his interlocutors what they meant when they used ethical terms such as justice or fairness. Plato in his criticism of Democracy noted that the common man is devoid of knowledge and experience which can lead him to making bad decisions based on impulse, sentiment, or prejudice. While such a disadvantage may be overcome through good leadership, the likelihood of bad leadership is more likely in democracy.²

Fast forwarding to our own time, the American search for recreating the world in its own image got a practical start after the end of WW II. The total defeat of Germany and Japan and their occupation by the victorious allies offered a unique opportunity for radical transformation of these societies. The state would be governed by a constitution where the destructive impulses of an elite or a philosophy could be tempered with a built-in checks and balances system. Re-education of the young through examination of the past regime’s excesses would inculcate a new generation that would be unlikely to repeat the mistakes of the previous one. Delivery of U.S. assistance through the Marshall Plan, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1948 and signed by President Truman provided the greatest transfer of resources and galvanized the recovery of war-torn Western Europe and created extensive links between European and American governments, civil servants, and trade unionists. The U.S. paid \$17.6 billion in 1948 dollars (approximately \$ 187.6 billion today) for the Marshall plan and other assistance.³

Contrast this to today’s expenditures by the United States in Afghanistan alone since 2001, noted to be upwards of \$2.35 Trillion. Of course, this sum includes the heavy cost of military engagement, approximately \$87 billion spent on standing up an Afghan security force plus the follow-on nation building effort and Democracy Promotion. More than \$ 25 billion were spent on economic development alongside \$30 billion for reconstruction programs including for education, health, and refugee assistance.⁴

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² **Plato: The Republic**, Translated by H.D.P. Lee, London, The Penguin Classics, 1956, pp 23-25.

³ Peter Duigan and L.H. Gann, **The Rebirth of the West: The Americanization of the Democratic World, 1945 – 1958**, Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.

⁴ **The New York Times**, Sarah AlMukhtar and Rod Nordland, What Did the U.S. Get for \$ 2 Trillion in Afghanistan”” December 9, 2019.

We need to begin by examining the nature of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy before we can draw conclusions as to what worked and what did not and why.

The end of WW II was accompanied by Soviet hostility and communist challenges. The end of the Soviet empire came at the hands of the U.S. supported Afghan Mujahidin who mounted a challenge to Russian occupation of their country. As Soviet armies drew back across the so-called Friendship bridge on the Amu Darya on February 15, 1989, I recall the excitement in the White House earlier under President Ronald Reagan who championed the end of Soviet occupation through military supplies and training to Afghan fighters. Even as presidential rhetoric soared, there were no real plans for a follow-on presence.

President Reagan challenged the Soviet Union closer to home. On June 12, 1987, standing before the twelve-foot-high wall that symbolized totalitarian control on a visit to Berlin, he exhorted a weakened Soviet leadership with his famous call: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Reagan believed that: "This wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom."

When the wall did crumble in November 1989, James Baker who was a key figure in the Reagan and H. W. Bush presidencies was moved to note: "I would find it hard to hold back tears of joy as the trickle of people seeking freedom in the West turned into a torrent."⁵ Here then was confirmation of Freedom's pull and the fact that given a chance, democracy was the force that drew people toward freedom. The fall of the Berlin wall and the success of European reconstruction and integration after WW II seemed to prove conclusively that U.S. foreign policy would benefit from pursuit of worldwide trends in the unipolar world of the new century by supporting democracy building.

As the U.S. led war in Afghanistan aimed to destroy al – Qaeda and Osama bin Laden continued, the invasion of Iraq came to be the place where the U.S. would rebuild a better world of participatory democracy. As the rationale of finding and destroying Iraq's weapons of mass destruction fizzled, Democracy promotion became the *raison d'être* of the costly engagement in Iraq. Since democracy would give a participatory role to the fifty percent of the Iraqi population, its Women, U.S focus on helping women, resonated. The right to choose would in a new Iraq and Afghanistan supplant Saddam Hussein or the Taliban's fiat and restore human dignity. American leaders understood the difficulties but felt it important to point out that the global trend was in favor of democracy's expansion. For example, celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), President George W. Bush noted that in the 1970s there were 40 democracies in the world. At the end of the twentieth century, there were 120 democracies in the world and more likely to come as the world witnessed "the swiftest advance of freedom in the 2,500-year story of democracy."⁶

⁵ James A. Baker, III, **The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War & Peace, 1989 – 1992** (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 163.

⁶ November 6, 2003, presidential speech to the NED.

Credit for the expansion of the democratic wave was supported by the fact that the “world’s most influential nation was itself a democracy Liberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity and the best hope for progress here on Earth.” There was a firm assumption that “the advance of freedom leads to peace.” As the effort for democracy building became an integral part of U.S. foreign policy, allies wondered if Washington’s assumptions were unrealistic given the uneven state of institutional structure for promoting democracy in new places. The President rejoindered that Freedom was not a prize to be awarded to those who met western standards but instead offered a path of progress. Progress based on cooperation, free exchange of ideas, and the peaceful resolution all enabling a nation to move toward democracy.

The Muslim world with its muddled history of autocratic leaders made the choice of the region as a focus of democracy promotion obvious. U.S. foreign policy focused interest and resources with a genuine belief that the outcome warranted the commitment and that given the region’s war-torn history, “the advance of freedom leads to peace.”⁷

Evaluating the Record

The backdrop of success in post war Germany and Japan promoting a democratic order did not translate into similar change in Afghanistan and Iraq. The reasons are obvious. First, the former were homogeneous societies with their own history but remain countries that took the U.S. into a world war. New constitutions were written after the total defeat of each. American occupation lasted a long time and to this day, a U.S. military presence exists in Germany and Japan respectively.

The definition of victory each in Afghanistan and Iraq was different from the outset. The objectives were limited to the destruction of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and prevention of any future terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland. Terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, against New York, Washington and Pennsylvania made as incredible a lasting impact in terms of the destruction wrought and the unexpected nature of the attack as had the surprise military attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

In Iraq, U.S. foreign policy emphasized the removal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Democracy promotion was the fallback position when no WMD were found. There was the expectation that Saddam Hussein’s fall would bring out great political engagement. American occupation need not be a long one and a free and democratic Iraq would pull together to rule under a system of compromise.

Yet, that did not happen in either country despite expenditure of U.S. blood or treasure. In Afghanistan, tribal, ethnic, and sectarian allegiances far outweighed any desire for a centralized authority imposed from outside. King Zahir Shah ruled Afghanistan with a loose central structure leaving the provinces basically as ethnic governates. The long-held tradition of finding common

⁷ “Democracies do not start wars” was a firmly held view.

ground when absolutely needed was handled through periodic 'Jirgas' where tribal leaders came together.

Unlike Europe and Japan, U.S. policy makers acknowledged early in the occupation that U.S. presence would not be permanent in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Residual forces would be withdrawn based on ground reality. These were seen as "Bush's wars", not the response of an existentially threatened U.S. Second, there was the problem of time. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates notes in the case of Iraq, "there was a Washington 'clock' and a Baghdad 'clock' and the two moved at very different speeds. Our forces needed time to make the surge and our broader plan work, and the Iraqis needed time for political reconciliation, but much of Congress, most of the media, and a growing number of Americans had lost patience with the war in Iraq."⁸

U.S. foreign policy must be conducted within cycles of presidential elections. I saw this personally from my White House perch for the 1984, 1988 and 2004 elections. Basically, a major foreign policy decision must be well along the path of implementation in the first two years of either term as competition for presidential time truly escalates thereafter. Staying power gets sacrificed as events turn bitter as is likely in war. Despite the efforts to offer incentives such as development, especially for women's empowerment in Afghanistan and in Iraq, America was an occupying force. Lack of familiarity with the religion, culture, and even the history of the occupied countries, made for mistakes that could have been avoided and gave the U.S. a reputation of an occupying force lacking finesse toward the local population. For example, as Bob Gates writes regarding the complexities of operation in Afghanistan as serious vulnerabilities: "one was civilian casualties; every incident was a strategic defeat, often caused and always manipulated by the Taliban and then magnified by Karzai. Another was our thoughtless treatment of the Afghans in routine encounters, including U.S. and coalition military vehicles barreling down the roads scattering animals and scaring people."⁹

Gates goes on to note that the U.S. occupation often disrespected Afghan culture or Islam and failed to cultivate elders who were leaders in their respective tribes. U.S. worked with Afghan officials who were known as corrupt. Further, that development work occurred without routine collaboration with appropriate Afghans. Non-governmental organizations that grew in partnership with the U.S. often lacked the expertise needed. They created a cadre of decision makers who along with an army of outside contractors oversaw the work Afghans should have been trained for.

As we reflect in 2021 in financial accounting of the war in Afghanistan, over \$ 2.35 Trillion, it boggles the mind. Beyond strictly military expenditures, unthinkable amounts of cash in the form of U.S. dollars flowed in the pipeline. This in a poor country where it was all too clear from the outset based on past record of U.S. engagement with Afghanistan, the term in Afghanistan would end with American withdrawal. Those who had access to the funds seem to have availed

⁸ Robert M. Gates, **Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War**, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 49.

⁹ Ibid., 359.

themselves of more than their share. U.S. corporations based along the Washington Beltway also prospered with lucrative contracts for services rendered in Afghanistan and Iraq. This was not the Marshall Plan model of post war Europe! Afghanistan and Iraq were deemed to be the 'war of necessity and the war of choice' respectively by the foreign policy establishment.

Afghanistan did not have the capacity to absorb the annual inflow spent in country from the estimated \$2.35 trillion¹⁰. The Afghan GDP was \$ 4 billion in 2001. Given the limited institutional base in Afghanistan, the rush to development and democracy created cadre of suppliers, contractors, support through warlords, even the Taliban for allowing work to proceed. Expenditures by the U.S. in Afghanistan over 20 years amounted to approximately \$290 million every day.

Presidential credibility suffered in management of the wars. Afghanistan, after twenty years of war, led to chaotic withdrawal. Iraq, which did not possess the WMD cache which led to U.S. invasion became an unpredictable battleground with regional and sectarian tensions overwhelming U.S. knowledge and experience on the ground. An occupation with a huge "Green Zone" headquarters was both intrusive in its goals and remote in its capacity to govern.

Afghanistan demonstrated too that changing ground realities, even as in U.S. desire of building a more just society were hampered by ignorance of Afghanistan's complexity, of its "tribes, traditions, ethnic groups, power brokers, village and provincial rivalries."¹¹ As a former secretary of defense and former deputy CIA chief lamented in reference to U.S occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq: "Our knowledge and our intelligence were woefully inadequate. We entered both countries oblivious to how little we knew."¹² We mistook technological superiority for knowledge.

Looking Forward

Regardless of a polarized America, complicated international relationships post Trump and the Covid 19 pandemic, the U.S. will remain the world's most powerful country. That status will not preclude challenges from other countries or non-state actors. How will the U.S. react?

The urge for the U.S. to exert "hegemonic power to achieve global order and security"¹³ may strike again. Can the possibility of American leadership in fostering a more secure world through a change in ground realities in unfriendly countries work? Could future administrations succeed in building international multilateral coalitions to achieve the goal? Frank Fukuyama points out that in the future, "Before other countries accepted U.S. leadership, they would have to be

¹⁰ "Costs of War Project", Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University.

¹¹ Ibid., 589.

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," **Foreign Affairs** (Winter 1990 – 1991).

convinced not just that America was good but that it was also wise in its application of power, and, through that wisdom, successful in achieving the ends it sets for itself.”¹⁴

International skepticism and domestic fatigue with America’s “endless” wars in Iraq and Afghanistan restrict future application of the doctrine of pre-emptive war. Even in its heyday, senior most leaders cautioned that preemptive action “does not come at the beginning of a long chain of effort” and must be very limited in its exercise.¹⁵ Will U.S. foreign policy with its current focus on limiting China’s power projection and its economic inroads into nations that once were legitimate competition arenas in the Cold War era be able to resist the “do over” model opening?

Democracy Promotion and nation building in the costly open way of the last two decades are likely a thing of the past, given the lack of demonstrable long-term gains. Throwing hundreds of millions of dollars, a day into a country lacking basic institutional capacity does not buy security and stability. Building institutions takes time but that will be a better use of resources.

In my many forays over decades to many countries of the Muslim World, I have informally in my interactions sought out views from people in all walks of life about the key components they desire from their government. Almost universally, two appear to be paramount: Justice and Good Governance. Even the uneducated in the populace understand these concepts because they feel their absence. Both these attributes cannot be imposed via an invasion or an occupation. And because the length of U.S. physical presence today in failed regimes which harbor terrorists is likely to be limited to expulsion of same, promotion of democratic norms will require a different track to inculcate institutions that focus on these two key issues. American funding would be better spent working with local individuals and leaders on how to move ahead. U.S. will have to be a partner not an overlord.

Recent U.S. takeover involved physical military occupation which then led to a search for local favorites to take over governing given U.S. departure. One lesson from Iraq and Afghanistan is that occupation is not possible or productive. WWII is long behind us, and Germany and Japan were very different and treated so, as continued American military presence in both these sovereign nations demonstrates.

The U.S. cannot impose Democracy even when likely half the population, the Women, support us. As the return of the Taliban and immediate effect on women indicates, institutional support with the traditional arbiters of the power system is needed. We need to be doing this as a routine part of our diplomatic in-country engagement. This can be done. I recall requesting U.S. embassies around the globe to help us identify ten key women leaders at their respective post for the Secretary of State’s Women Leaders Working Group. They did that in a remarkable short time. They complained that asking for ten was hard as there were so many worthwhile

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, **America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy**, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p – 103.

¹⁵ Condoleezza Rice, “A Balance of Power That Favors Freedom,” 2002 Wriston Lecture at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, New York, October 1, 2002.

candidates! We could put multiyear resources behind this outreach. And train an in-country cadre of experts rather than exporting large contingents of beltway consultants. Support for projects in the existing economic multilateral institutions that further capacity building on a permanent basis would also be important. Because in the end, these efforts supplement U.S. needs and obviate future need for a physical presence.

U.S. is fortunate in that there are many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which have geographical expertise and often a ground presence in countries of interest. Many of these organizations have worked in the field for a long time and understand that Democracy in many countries, especially in the Muslim world cannot replicate the American model of separation of powers. This may not be Democracy as we understand it but if progress on building the institutions which underpin democracy, such as participatory elections, free media, equal access for women, transparency to curtail corruption are possible, that is a good start.

An important point in this context is that “the United States has an abiding belief in constitutional democracy as the source of all legitimacy, and an equal faith in the legitimacy of its own democratic institutions.”¹⁶ Just as Americans value sovereignty, others distrust it as a source of conflict. Multilateral institutions offer an alternate model for civil society development, and these need not be a tool of last resort as happened in Iraq when the U.S. had no long-term follow-on action plan after the invasion. The UN already has a Democracy Fund, supervised by donor member states. Better use of its capacity offers an alternative to U.S. ownership of democracy promotion elsewhere. Such an approach would complement the Biden administration’s stated future approach of helping capacity building in Afghanistan from “over the horizon.”

Democracy Promotion as a movement cannot be central to U.S. foreign policy without some buy-in from existing varied power centers based on ethnicity and sectarian divides that may exist in any given country. The experience of the last quarter century ought to have taught us that.

¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, op. cit., p – 159.