

VALUE PROJECTION AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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The controversies over the Bush administration's "doctrine" of promoting democracy as a long-term goal of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) have raised once again that hardy perennial in the debate over American foreign policy: value projection. The debate juxtaposes two basic positions: the Jeffersonian idea that the United States should, when possible, serve as an active agent for the spread of democratic values in the world, and the Washingtonian idea that we should serve as a model for the rest of the world by developing democracy at home, not by taking actions to foster it abroad. Both groups of early Americans were children of the Enlightenment: they saw liberal, republican government as universally beneficial and desirable. The question was how best to support its development in the world.

Not surprisingly, there has been much controversy between the two schools over the periodic attempts to promote democracy actively, especially since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. Active attempts to promote democratic values often have taken place during or at the end of wars. It is during those periods that the structure of the international order is in flux, and opportunities appear to present themselves. Wilson's war to "make the world safe for democracy" by ending autarchy, Franklin Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms," and the value-laden rhetoric and policies of Cold War presidents such as Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, and now President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the GWOT, demonstrate that the desire for value projection has not gone away. Nor has it lost any of its controversy.

There is neither time nor space to settle the controversy here. In fact, the controversies probably are not definitively "solvable" at all, since they are steeped in varying views of America's role in the world. In the discussion of whether the United States can support democratic reforms successfully externally, however, both the Jeffersonians and Washingtonians have given in to an ethnocentric view of measurement of the success or failure of value projection. Specifically, the measurement of success or failure for both has concentrated too much on the concept of elections and political institution-building. Both are important, but not exclusively so. In short, Americans tend to measure success by comparing the target nations to themselves. Given cultural and historical differences between Americans and other countries, this practice defies rational explanation beyond an excessive belief in the universality of our own model of democracy.

Theorists of democratization sometimes make a distinction between the formal, institutional aspects of democracy (constitutions, elections, etc.), and substantive, existential aspects (the promotion of civic society, labor reform, land reform, etc.) But the best way to measure democratization is by conflating the two under the concept of general democratic reform. There are three general characteristics of democratic reform: 1) a change in governmental policy; 2) a change in the nature of the relationship between the governors and the governed; and, perhaps most importantly in those parts of the world still in transition from traditional agrarian societies, 3) a devolution of economic, military, political, and/or social power within the society. In this view, elections are democratic reforms because they devolve control of governance to a broader spectrum of people. But so is land reform, for the same reason in socio-economic form. This standard also introduces the concept of the relative degree of democratic progress that

provides a more realistic yardstick than comparison to societies that have been democratizing for centuries like our own (and which still have a way to go in many respects—a little humility would not hurt here.)

Suffrage can offer some examples of incremental progress: universal male suffrage is a democratic improvement over suffrage for a propertied class; universal male/female suffrage is a democratic improvement over male suffrage alone. Both are democratic reforms by this definition, although the second is *relatively* more democratic than the first. And the first is a progressive democratic reform compared to what preceded it. Political progress comes incrementally, and should be measured that way. Thus those who criticize early Americans for giving a limited number of white males the vote, but excluding minorities and women, miss the historical significance of the American Revolution. Giving *anyone* the vote in the 18th century was a revolutionary act. Through subsequent incremental progress, we are far more democratic than we were then.

This is a return to an older definition of democracy that sees it as a never-ending process, not a particularly defined end-state. This was also the way we carried out the democratic reforms in Italy, Germany, and Japan following World War II (for example, Japanese women did not get the vote until 1957). Allowing formerly excluded societal groups to participate meaningfully in political life is also a democratic reform under this definition (for example, the civil rights reforms of the 1960s in the United States).

Thus the definitions of democratic progress we utilize in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere need to be more elastic and inclusive. From this pragmatic point of view, the recent elections in Afghanistan and Iraq clearly did not solve the problems facing those countries, and perhaps created new ones. Yet with all their problems, they introduced the idea—the potential possibility—of democratic self-governance. They therefore represent democratic progress, especially compared to the regimes that preceded them, even though they are not yet democratic societies in any meaningful sense.

When fashioning our economic and other policies in those countries, we should use a similar standard of incremental devolution in all sectors of social life, not just political institution-building. Creating a plan to let every Iraqi share directly in a part of the nation's oil wealth (some planners have mentioned the Alaskan model) would be democratic in this sense, would likely be very popular and gain support for the democratic government, and would be a downright revolutionary model in the Middle East. Terrorist attacks on the oil industry would then be seen as attacks on the income of every Iraqi citizen.

Holding up fledgling democracies to the abstraction of some fully-developed—usually utopian—model of democratic progress is self-defeating and creates excessive pessimism as one only sees failure everywhere. It also accounts for much of the extreme criticism of U.S. foreign policy as antidemocratic. Democratic reforms should be judged against the conditions that preceded them, not according to an ultimate set of yet unobtainable goals. In the long run, of course, the ideal result should animate goals and policies, but it must be implemented in an imperfect and at times unforgiving reality.

Slow progress is still progress.

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