

Democracy Promotion and American Foreign Policy

Gideon Rose

A Review Essay

Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999

Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999

As a nation “dedicated to a proposition,” the United States has always believed that its political ideals and principles are in theory universally applicable. The Declaration of Independence, in Lincoln’s words, gave liberty “not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.”¹ From the founding onward, accordingly, Americans have been concerned with—and judgmental about—the domestic order in other countries. The relativist view that foreigners’ political practices are presumptively legitimate is not only unusual in U.S. history, but in a real sense profoundly un-American.²

If the universal significance of the American national experiment has rarely been disputed, however, its implications for American foreign policy have been, and vigorously. The classic division pits those who believe that the nation should rest content with setting an example for the world against those who believe that the nation should try to shape political developments abroad

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1. “Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, February 22, 1861,” in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859–1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), p. 213.
 2. For an example of such a view, see George F. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Winter 1985/86), pp. 205–218.

International Security, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 186–203
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in accordance with American ideals.³ First emerging in the 1790s in the clash between Republicans and Federalists over whether to ally with newly democratized France against monarchical Britain, this debate has continued to the present with little change in the basic positions on either side.

“Exemplars” are wary of the costs associated with a messianic foreign policy and skeptical about U.S. ability to effect true political change in other countries. They prefer to cheer history along from the sidelines.⁴ “Crusaders” are more optimistic about the possibility of shaping political development elsewhere and more willing to bear costs in the attempt. They think that the United States should step in and give history a push.⁵ It is entirely fitting, therefore, that from Chile to China, from Poland to Peru, the question of what the United States should do to promote democracy and liberalism abroad remains at the forefront of American foreign policy today.

Because of its dualities, the post-Cold War environment simultaneously spurs hope among crusaders and caution among exemplars. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left the United States as the global hegemon—but its strength relative to the international system at large has decreased from its postwar peak, its hegemony provokes resentment, and its public is increasingly chary of foreign entanglements.⁶ The collapse of communism has left

3. See Robert W. Tucker, “Exemplar or Crusader? Reflections on America’s Role,” *National Interest*, No. 5 (Fall 1986), pp. 64–75. For an extended gloss on Tucker’s categories, see H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4. The most eloquent statement of this view came from John Quincy Adams, in defense of his policy of nonintervention during the Greek revolution: “Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.” “Address of July 4, 1821,” in Walter LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire* (Chicago: Times Books, 1965), p. 45.

5. The most eloquent spokesman for this camp was Woodrow Wilson, who in 1917 went so far as to call on the nation to take up arms “for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples . . . for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy.” “Address Recommending the Declaration of a State of War,” April 2, 1917, in James B. Scott, ed., *President Wilson’s Foreign Policy: Messages, Addresses, Papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1918), pp. 284, 287.

6. On America’s relative power position and its implications, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Charles A. Kupchan, “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–79; Samuel P. Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (March/April 1999), pp. 35–49; and William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41. For an example of foreign resentment of American hegemony, see Craig R. Whitney, “France Presses for a Power Independent

democratic capitalism as the world's dominant political and economic ideology—but resurgent national, religious, and communal passions create turmoil in many regions. International organizations such as the United Nations have increasingly become the prime source of legitimacy for authorizing external interventions and a key vehicle for implementing them—but recent United Nations' failures have revealed critical weaknesses and dramatically lessened expectations.⁷ Academic research, finally, suggests that liberal democracies do not go to war against each other—but also that transitions to democracy may lead initially to more rather than less conflict.⁸

In these circumstances, what can and should the United States do to promote and sustain democracy and liberalism abroad? Not much, say latter-day exemplars. “A workable foreign policy,” one writes, “cannot indulge in flights of rhetoric, dedicating itself to the pursuit of vague objectives like ‘democracy’ or ‘pluralism’ in lands inhospitable to these values and of no threat to the United States.” A great deal, counter latter-day crusaders. American foreign policy, they argue, “must be ideological—must be designed to advance freedom.” It should “make the promotion of democracy its main objective.”⁹

At least rhetorically, the Clinton administration fell into the crusader camp. It declared that “promoting democracy” was one of the three pillars of its na-

of the U.S.,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1999. For public skepticism about making democracy promotion a major goal of U.S. foreign policy, see Ole R. Holsti, “Promotion of Democracy as Popular Demand,” in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry, and Takashi Inoguchi, eds., *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 151–199. For a more optimistic picture of American attitudes toward foreign engagement, see Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, *Misleading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1999).

7. For a useful survey of recent democracy-related interventions, see Morton H. Halperin and Kristen Lomasney, “Guaranteeing Democracy: A Review of the Record,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (April 1998), pp. 134–147.

8. For an overview of the “democratic peace” debate, see Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Debating the Democratic Peace: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); and Steve Chan, “In Search of Democratic Peace: Problems and Promise,” *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 41, Supp. 1 (May 1997), pp. 59–91. Recent entries on opposite sides include Spencer R. Weart, *Never at War: Why Democracies Will Not Fight One Another* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998); and Joanne Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets: The Elusive Democratic Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). On the connection between democratization and conflict, see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 5–38; and Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

9. The quotations are from, respectively, Ronald Steel, *Temptations of a Superpower* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 125; Michael A. Ledeen, “A Republican Contract with the World,” *Weekly Standard*, May 13, 1996, p. 25; and Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1991), p. 8. For a survey of the arguments on both sides, see Christopher Layne and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, *Should America Promote Democracy? A Debate* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming).

tional security strategy, because “democratic states are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the United States to meet security threats and promote free trade and sustainable development.” In practice the other two pillars (“enhancing U.S. security” and “promoting prosperity at home”) carried greater weight, but the administration did support a variety of democracy assistance programs, intervened militarily in Haiti to restore an elected president to power, and pressed for expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in large part for its potential contribution to democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe.¹⁰

Which camp one belongs to will depend to some extent on subjective judgments about where democratization should be ranked relative to other foreign policy goals and what price should be paid for it. The level and nature of activism desired will also depend, however, on the theories one holds about what factors cause liberal democracies to emerge and thrive and how manipulable these factors are by outside actors—for unless one has good reason to believe that democracy promotion policies can in fact promote democracy, spending a great deal of time, money, and effort on them makes little sense.

These latter questions cry out for two kinds of dialogue: between scholars and policymakers and among scholars themselves. The first is necessary because democracy promotion is an exercise in applied political development; the second is necessary because it involves the application of the tools of international relations to the subject matter of comparative politics. The goal of both discussions should be to clarify the expected utility of alternative policies under various circumstances and establish a dispassionate intellectual framework within which the more emotional debates—over how much blood and treasure the United States should spend in this area—can be fought. Yet because scholars in the subfields of political science rarely speak to each other, let

10. “A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement,” in Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Coté, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *America’s Strategic Choices: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 298–299, 286. On democracy promotion and the Clinton administration, see Rick Travis, “The Promotion of Democracy at the End of the Twentieth Century: A New Polestar for American Foreign Policy?” in James M. Scott, ed., *After the End: Making U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 251–276; Michael Cox, “Wilsonianism Resurgent? The Clinton Administration and Democracy Promotion,” in Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi, *American Democracy Promotion*, pp. 218–239; and Douglas Brinkley, “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 106 (Spring 1997), pp. 111–127. For the administration’s thinking on this issue, see Strobe Talbott, “Democracy and the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (November/December 1996), pp. 47–63. The most perceptive discussion of how the administration’s efforts fit into the general pattern of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy is G. John Ikenberry, “America’s Liberal Grand Strategy: Democracy and National Security in the Post-war Era,” in Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi, *American Democracy Promotion*, pp. 103–126.

alone to practitioners and the public, only recently has a sophisticated literature on these topics begun to emerge.¹¹

The simultaneous appearance of two major scholarly works on democracy promotion, therefore, Thomas Carothers's *Aiding Democracy Abroad* and Larry Diamond's *Developing Democracy*, represents a quantum leap forward for the field.¹² Together they summarize the current status of the "third wave" of global democratization and help the reader see just where and how U.S. officials and other outside actors might be able to help it along. Would-be democracy promoters, it appears, need to be much more modest in some areas (including some of their favorite stomping grounds), but much more ambitious in others. Carothers in particular carves out an impressive middle ground between the pessimism that comes from looking only at structure and the naïveté that comes from looking only at agency. His call for policies "based on idealistic aspirations tempered by deeply realist considerations" (p. 352) will inevitably disappoint partisans on both sides, but holds out the best pros-

11. Notable examples include Sarah E. Mendelson and John K. Glenn, *Democracy Assistance and NGO Strategies in Post-Communist Societies*, Working Paper No. 8 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2000); Mark Peceny, *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (November/December 1997), pp. 2–43. Kevin F.F. Quigley, *For Democracy's Sake: Foundations and Democracy Assistance in Central Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997); Joel D. Barkan, "Can Established Democracies Nurture Democracy Abroad? Lessons from Africa," in Axel Hadenius, ed., *Democracy's Victory and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 371–403; Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, "The Rise of 'Political Aid,'" in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-Han Chu, and Hung-Mao Tien, eds., *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Regional Challenges* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 295–324; Howard J. Wiarda, *Cracks in the Consensus: Debating the Democracy Agenda in U.S. Foreign Policy*, Washington Paper No. 172 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997); Thomas Carothers, *Assessing Democracy Assistance: The Case of Romania* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996); Laurence Whitehead, ed., *The International Dimensions of Democratization: Europe and the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Larry Diamond, *Promoting Democracy in the 1990s: Actors and Instruments, Issues and Imperatives* (New York: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, December 1995); Geoffrey Pridham, Eric Herring, and George Sanford, eds., *Building Democracy? The International Dimension of Democratization in Eastern Europe* (London: St. Martin's, 1994); Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Abraham F. Lowenthal, ed., *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). On the gap between scholars and practitioners in this area, see Kevin F.F. Quigley, "Political Scientists and Assisting Democracy: Too Tenuous Links," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (September 1997), pp. 564–567.

12. Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999); and Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Subsequent references to these books appear in parentheses in the text.

pects for achieving real if modest results on an issue whose outcome will help determine the shape of international politics in the twenty-first century.

Surfing the Third Wave

A generation ago, the most prevalent academic understandings of what contributed to successful democratization emphasized various national preconditions and deep structural factors: levels of socioeconomic development; degrees of socioeconomic equality and group polarization; patterns of land ownership or agricultural production; the prevalence of certain beliefs or cultural traits; and so forth. Where certain configurations of these factors were present, it was believed, successful democratization was likely; where they were absent, it was unlikely. The basic factors involved were relatively stable and not particularly manipulable by outsiders.¹³

Summing up this conventional wisdom in 1971, Robert Dahl argued that “the safest bet about a country’s regime a generation from now is that it will be somewhat different, but not radically different, from what it is today.” “It follows,” he continued, “that policy makers in a country like the United States who may wish to transform a country from a hegemonic or mixed regime into a polyarchy [i.e., pluralistic liberal democracy] face formidable and complex problems, not the least of which is our lack of knowledge about the long causal chains running from outside help to internal conditions to changes of regime.”¹⁴

During the heated foreign policy debates of the Reagan era over how aggressively the United States should promote democratization, those holding “precondition” theories delivered a clear message: The notion that many of the nondemocratic regimes in question could “be converted into democracies by means of American assistance, guidance, and intervention” was “a faulty assumption.” U.S. policymakers had to accept the “disagreeable, perhaps even

13. Classic works from this era include Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (March 1959), pp. 69–105; Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Basis of Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963); Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1967); Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969); and Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971). See also Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

14. Dahl, *Polyarchy*, pp. 209–210.

tragic, fact that in much of the world the conditions most favorable to the development and maintenance of democracy are nonexistent, or at best only weakly present.”¹⁵

Beginning in 1974, however, what scholars have come to call the “third wave” of democratization swept over the globe, and dozens of countries shifted into the democratic camp. The converts included one-party systems, military regimes, personal dictatorships, and oligarchies; they were located in every region of the globe; and they included many countries that according to the “precondition” arguments should not have been ripe for democratization.¹⁶ Consequently, during the 1980s “the manner in which theorists of comparative politics . . . sought to understand democracy . . . changed as the once-dominant search for prerequisites of democracy [gave] way to a more process-oriented emphasis on contingent choice.”¹⁷

This new perspective led contemporary crusaders to jump on the bandwagon and argue with renewed vigor for an aggressive policy stance. Because “democratization is triggered mainly by political factors,” they contended, “given the precarious balance of political and social forces in many newly democratic and transitional countries, international actors would appear to have real scope to influence the course of political development.”¹⁸ Activists both in and out of government, meanwhile, had not waited for academic scholarship to change course, and sought to push events along through a welter of different programs.

As the 1990s progressed, however, the bloom came off the rose. After a final surge the third wave crested, with few new transitions taking place and some

15. Robert A. Dahl, “The Democratic Mystique: How the United States Misconstrues Central America,” *New Republic*, April 2, 1984, p. 17. On U.S. policies toward democratization during the Reagan era, see Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977–1990* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

16. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). See also Doh Chull Shin, “On the Third Wave of Democratization: A Synthesis and Evaluation of Recent Theory and Research,” *World Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (October 1994), pp. 135–170; and Renske Doorenspleet, “Reassessing the Three Waves of Democratization,” *World Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (April 2000), pp. 384–406.

17. Terry Lynn Karl, “Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (October 1990), p. 1. Examples of this trend include Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

18. Diamond, *Promoting Democracy in the 1990s*, pp. 60–61. A good example of this shift in thinking is Graham T. Allison, Jr., and Robert P. Beschel, Jr., “Can the United States Promote Democracy?” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 81–98.

of the earlier ones even reversing themselves. Despite the expenditure of billions of dollars and countless hours of effort, moreover, most of the various democracy promotion efforts had little to show for themselves. Skeptics pointed out that it was liberalism rather than democracy that produced many of the benefits that the United States really sought, and that it was precisely this quality that the post-transition countries often lacked. "Far from being a temporary or transitional stage," Fareed Zakaria noted, "it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism. . . . Western liberal democracy might prove to be not the final destination on the democratic road, but just one of the many possible exits."¹⁹

It is against this background that Larry Diamond's *Developing Democracy* should be read. A masterful synthesis of the vast recent literature on democratic transitions, it fleshes out the empirical observations of skeptics such as Zakaria with reams of data even as it tries to keep hope alive. "The tentative conclusion of this book," Diamond writes, "is that the third wave of expansion in electoral democracies is drawing to a close. The best that can be realistically hoped for in the next decade is the consolidation of many of the fifty or so electoral democracies that remain in a twilight zone of persistence without legitimation and institutionalization" (p. 23).

Much of the transition literature has embraced a definition of democracy that centers on a free political process. Samuel Huntington, for example, sees a contemporary political system as democratic "to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote."²⁰ Such definitions incorporate the existence of a few basic rights such as freedom of speech and assembly, but regard them as important less for their intrinsic value than for how they contribute to a free and fair electoral process.

But to understand the true state of democracy in the world today, Diamond argues, one needs to look beyond narrow procedural issues to broader notions of civic liberty.²¹ He therefore distinguishes between "electoral" and "liberal"

19. Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," p. 24.

20. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, p. 7. Modern procedural definitions stem from Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper, 1947). For works that use similar definitions, see Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, p. 284, n. 33.

21. Although Diamond expands the concept of democracy from the political into the social sphere, he stops short of taking it into the economic sphere as well. This leaves him, along with the entire

democracies. In addition to free and fair elections with universal suffrage, the latter also have no “reserved domains of power for the military or other actors not accountable to the electorate”; constitutional checks and balances; “extensive provisions for political and civic pluralism as well as for individual and group freedoms”; and the rule of law (pp. 10–11). “The first half of the 1990s,” Diamond writes,

witnessed two contradictory trends: continued growth in electoral democracy but stagnation in liberal democracy. Juxtaposed, these trends signaled the increasing shallowness of democratization in the late period of the third wave. . . . Some new democracies have become more substantially democratic in recent years, but a surprising number are less so, at least in important dimensions. In much of the postcommunist and developing worlds, democracy appears stuck in a twilight zone of tentative commitment, illiberal practices, and shallow institutionalization. (pp. 27–28, 20)

Diamond believes that this situation is not stable, and that unless many of the troubled third wave countries move forward, they will eventually start moving backward, toward regimes that are nastier to both their subjects and their neighbors. Because the United States, the world, and citizens of the countries themselves will reap the rewards or suffer the consequences together, he argues, today’s “overriding imperative is to consolidate those democracies that have come into being during the third wave (and to reconsolidate those that have lost their institutional effectiveness in this period)” (p. 64). Consolidation will consist of a change in political culture such that all major domestic actors “come to regard democracy (and the laws, procedures, and institutions it specifies) as ‘the only game in town,’ the only viable framework for governing the society and advancing their interests” (p. 65). This will occur, in turn, as a result of progress in three areas: democratic deepening and liberalization, political institutionalization, and regime performance.

mainstream debate, open to the radical charge that such a choice “pre-configure(s) the political,” limiting discussion to nearly indistinguishable variants of “low-intensity democracy” in which “the transformatory capacity of democracy is limited in order to facilitate neoliberal economic politics.” True democracy, in this interpretation, is inconsistent with the persistence of a capitalist economic system. Barry K. Gills, “American Power, Neoliberal Economic Globalization, and Low-Intensity Democracy: An Unstable Trinity,” in Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi, *American Democracy Promotion*, p. 326. For the radical perspective on democracy promotion, see also Steve Smith, “U.S. Democracy Promotion: Critical Questions,” in *ibid.*, pp. 63–82; William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora, and Richard Wilson, eds., *Low-Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (London: Pluto, 1993); and Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Vintage, 1992).

The initial chapters in *Developing Democracy* do an excellent job of laying out the challenge facing new democracies and their well-wishers abroad. The later chapters of the book, however, constitute less a practical argument about how to rise to that challenge than loose essays on various consolidation-related topics such as political culture and civil society. They offer occasional suggestions for outside policymakers (e.g., support federalism, reduce trade barriers, get militaries involved in international peacekeeping), but fall back all too often on a milquetoast construction one might call the “hortatory passive”: “Access to power must continue to expand to women and minorities. Political parties must find new ways to elicit commitment and engagement from citizens. Many systems of party and campaign finance must be reformed. . . . Continued economic dynamism must be secured” (pp. 274–275). Such rhetoric merely restates the problem rather than pointing the way toward a solution.

The Problems with Promotion

Diamond can hardly be accused of excessive optimism, but he does attempt to construct a theoretical case for active efforts by American officials and others to help fledgling democracies make the leap forward to liberal maturity. “Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the third wave,” he writes, “is the considerable contribution that international actors have made to democratic development by enhancing the resources, skills, techniques, ideas, linkages, and legitimacy of civil society organizations, civic education efforts, the mass media, legislatures, local governments, judicial systems, political parties, and election commissions in the developing and postcommunist worlds. The prospects for democracy in the world will be much brighter if these many currents of practical engagement are sustained, refined, and widened” (p. 272).

Thomas Carothers’s *Aiding Democracy Abroad*, however, is a comprehensive analysis of exactly these programs that throws cold or at least cool water on all such claims. Intended as a “constructive critical inquiry,” *Aiding Democracy Abroad* picks up where *Developing Democracy* leaves off, delving into the details of every major type of democracy promotion activity and using four country case studies (Guatemala, Nepal, Zambia, and Romania) to illustrate what they mean in practice. Thanks to a relentlessly forward-looking operational focus and a conviction “that their work is of unquestionable value and needs no assessing,” Carothers writes, “democracy aid providers have accumulated almost no systematic knowledge about the long-term effects of their efforts” (pp. 285–286). His book is an attempt to remedy that situation, and succeeds

admirably. It is not just the best thing ever written on democracy promotion, moving the debate from homilies and assertions to evidence and argumentation, but also a model for anyone interested in applying intellectual rigor to practical policy issues.

Carothers paints a searingly honest picture of the limited accomplishments in the field to date:

By the end of the 1990s the U.S. government was spending more than \$700 million a year on democracy aid in approximately 100 countries, with five U.S. government agencies, three major quasi-governmental organizations, and dozens of government-funded American NGOs actively involved. . . . Although the current wave of democracy programs has forerunners . . . it is the most extensive, systematic effort the United States has ever undertaken to foster democracy around the world. . . . [Nevertheless, the record shows that] democracy aid generally does not have major effects on the political direction of recipient countries. The effects of democracy programs are usually modestly positive, sometimes negligible, and occasionally negative. (pp. 332, 308)

In area after area, he is forced to conclude, the story is basically the same:

If asked to name the area of democracy assistance that most often falls short of its goals, I would have to point to legislative assistance. The record is riddled with disappointment and failure. . . . All too often, . . . legislative aid efforts have barely scratched the surface in feckless, corrupt, patronage-ridden parliaments that command little respect from the public and play only a minor role in the political process. (pp. 181–182)

What stands out about U.S. rule-of-law assistance since the mid-1980s is how difficult and often disappointing such work is. In Latin America, for example, where the United States has made by far its largest effort to promote rule-of-law reform, the results to date have been sobering. Most of the projects launched with enthusiasm—and large budgets—. . . have fallen far short of their goals. They have had some positive effects, yet have made only a dent in the grievously flawed situation of rule of law around the region. (p. 171)

Although the domain of civil society is often more accessible and responsive to external aid than that of state institutions, it is even more vast and more rooted in underlying socioeconomic, cultural, and historical conditions and patterns. Democracy promoters are starting to learn more [about] what they are doing in this complex domain, but a central element of their self-education is realizing just how inflated their expectations have been and how limited their capabilities to produce broad-scale change really are. (pp. 250–251)

This poor showing, Carothers argues, stems from both the flawed nature of the aid programs themselves and the sheer magnitude of the problems they try to address. Democracy promoters generally begin, he notes, with a simple

model of what democracy means: national elections involving a few moderate, ideology-based parties; a tripartite government composed of executive, legislative, and judicial branches; and a civil society sector composed of independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) devoted to public interest advocacy. They marry this to a simple model of the democratization process, consisting of linear movement from liberalization through transitional elections to eventual consolidation. Together these yield a universal template for locating where a country is in its political development and what needs to be done to move it forward: "Each of the institutions in the country corresponding to the template—the legislature, judiciary, media, NGO sector, and so forth—is analyzed to determine its divergence from the ideal form. The aid providers then prescribe assistance programs to help strengthen the various institutions so as to make them fit the template models" (pp. 89–90).

All three aspects of this "core strategy," Carothers notes, are riddled with problems. The model of democracy that activists rely on, for example, is simply current U.S. practice, which may or may not be appropriate for local circumstances. Programs based on assumptions of constant gradual progress in consolidation, moreover, run into trouble when a country's forward movement stalls or reverses. And mechanistic, apolitical attempts at "institutional modeling" usually founder on local structures of power and interest that work to frustrate any significant reform.²²

If the only problems with democracy promotion were strategy and competence, crusaders could still take heart, because these should be within the power of American officials to fix. But even the most sensitive, well-designed, and well-implemented efforts, Carothers shows, have difficulty overcoming formidable local barriers to progress:

Various mixes of democracy-related workshops, training courses, equipment donations, study tours, expert consultancies, and small grants may certainly reach many of the main political elites. They do not, however, fundamentally reshape the balances of power, interests, historical legacies, and political tradi-

22. Thus Carothers relates one of his own learning experiences, as a young activist in the field trying to promote judicial reform in Haiti following Jean-Claude Duvalier's ouster: "I talked one afternoon with the head of Haiti's labor court, an institution that for years had done little to uphold workers' rights. I discussed the state of justice in Haiti with the genial, corpulent judge, who was attired in a heavy black robe despite the 100-degree heat in the dilapidated court building. After some time he pressed me about the purpose of my visit, listened carefully to my explanation, then repeated my answer carefully in his own words. So you are here, he said, to find out how the American government can help make our courts work properly? I nodded brightly, pleased that I was getting through. He looked at me wide-eyed for a moment, then burst out laughing, tipping back his head in unrestrained hilarity, laughing until the tears ran down his cheeks. As I slipped out the door he was still laughing" (p. 158).

tions of the major political forces in recipient countries. They do not neutralize dug-in antidemocratic forces. They do not alter the basic economic level or direction of countries. (p. 305)

It would be easy for opponents of active democracy promotion to come away from Carothers's book feeling that their skepticism was confirmed and the debate ended. Easy, but wrong. For as the author himself takes great pains to point out, it is a mistake to conclude that nothing at all can be usefully done. Skills can be transferred, resources supplied, and solidarity demonstrated. In the end, he maintains, "Accepting that most democracy promotion efforts do not bring about rapid or decisive change does not imply that the United States should downgrade or abandon its commitment to advancing democracy abroad. It means that democracy promotion must be approached as a long-term, uncertain venture. . . . The challenge, in short, is to build a cautious, realistic understanding of capabilities into the commitment" (p. 351).

What Is To Be Done?

Reading the Diamond and Carothers books in light of the broader literature on democratization, four basic conclusions emerge. The first is that American policymakers should indeed view the democratic consolidation of post-transition countries as a legitimate foreign policy objective, and their most important democracy-related policy challenge over the next decade. Consolidation, understood as a durable move toward liberal thought and practice, merits attention because it is *the* key challenge facing several major countries including Russia and much of Eastern Europe and Latin America. It gains added importance because few new transitions from authoritarianism are likely in the immediate future. Recent transitions, Huntington notes, have extended democracy "throughout almost all the wealthier countries in the world and almost all the countries that have largely Western cultures," and thus "efforts to extend democracy further face much more significant economic and cultural obstacles than did the democratizations of the past two decades."²³ And con-

23. Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy for the Long Haul," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 1996), pp. 5–6; see also Huntington, "After Twenty Years: The Future of the Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (October 1997), pp. 3–12. For suggestions on how the United States can most successfully contribute to positive political change in the remaining authoritarian regimes while minimizing adverse consequences to other national interests, see Catharin E. Dalpino, *Deferring Democracy: Promoting Openness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2000).

solidation is worth concentrating on, finally, because of all stages in the democratization process it is the only one that from a foreign policy standpoint represents pure gain and no loss: “Democracy without constitutional liberalism is not simply inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war.” Liberal democracy, in contrast, is indeed a boon not just to its citizens but to the world at large: “The democratic peace is actually the liberal peace.”²⁴

The second conclusion one comes to is that in spite of their poor track record, many of today’s democracy promotion programs deserve to be continued into the future, albeit with far more self-awareness, humility, sensitivity, and honest self-assessment. Carothers puts it best when he writes that “the policy community must do a simple but difficult thing. It must accept democracy aid for what it is—a useful element of American foreign aid and foreign policy that is gradually gaining coherence, one that is rarely of decisive importance but usually more than a decorative add-on” (p. 347). To increase their odds of success, however, democracy promoters must get out of the habit of shoving American-made institutional blueprints down foreigners’ throats and learn to take their cue from local contexts and desires. “Assistance can make a difference if strategies are derived from local ingredients rather than a global cookbook,” one recent study concludes.²⁵ “Empowering local partners with decision-making authority is essential to any project’s long-term success,” agrees another.²⁶ Treating foreigners like children not only breeds resentment and fails to work, but is also philosophically inconsistent with the emergence of durable and responsible self-government abroad—the prime objective of democracy promotion in the first place.

Assessment and midcourse correction of democratic aid programs will always pose a problem because of the long-term and relatively intangible nature of the effects being sought. That should not serve as an excuse for abandoning the effort, but it does imply that simplistic bureaucratic checklists—the political equivalents of Vietnam-era “body counts”—are inappropriate and ineffective. “If evaluation of democracy programs is to improve,” Carothers observes, “aid providers must give up the false dream of science, the notion that the ef-

24. Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” pp. 42–43; see John M. Owen IV, *Liberal Peace, Liberal War: American Politics and International Security* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 15–17.

25. Mendelson and Glenn, *Democracy Assistance and NGO Strategies in Post-Communist Societies*, p. 61.

26. Quigley, *For Democracy’s Sake*, p. 111.

facts of democracy aid can be measured with calculators. They must accept that in-depth qualitative analysis is the only way to gain an understanding of political events and effects, and that many of the most important results of democracy programs are psychological, moral, subjective, indirect, and time-delayed" (p. 340).

The third conclusion that emerges is that given the inherent limitations of standard democracy aid, those truly interested in transforming other countries' political development need to hunt for bigger game. The basic problem with most activist democracy promotion is that it floats on the surface of current politics, never affecting the broader structural tides beneath. "On the whole," Carothers writes, "democracy programs are at best a secondary influence because they do not have a decisive effect on the underlying conditions of society that largely determine a country's political trajectory—the character and alignment of the main political forces; the degree of concentration of economic power; the political traditions, expectations, and values of the citizenry; and the presence or absence of powerful antidemocratic elements" (p. 341). This verges on being a restatement of the old arguments about the structural preconditions for successful democratization, and needs to be frankly recognized as such for the discussion to move forward.

Diamond recognizes that many of the third wave countries lack what Seymour Martin Lipset once called the "social requisites of democracy," and that this hinders their progress toward consolidation. But he "explicitly reject[s] any view of these variables as preconditions, preferring to treat them as facilitating or obstructing factors" (p. 57). Elsewhere Diamond, Lipset, and Juan Linz have observed that

Development enhances the prospects for democracy because—and to the extent that—it enhances several crucial intervening variables: democratic values and beliefs, capacities for independent organization and action in civil society . . . , a more equitable class structure (with reduction of absolute poverty), and a less corrupt, interventionist, rent-seeking state. Where . . . economic growth far outstrips these deeper structural and cultural changes, the level or probability of democracy will be much lower than that expected from the country's level of economic development. But where . . . these intervening variables have emerged through different historical processes—including tradition and the deliberate and effective innovation of political leaders—the level of probability of democracy will be much greater than that which would be predicted merely from the country's per capita GNP.²⁷

27. Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, "Introduction: What Makes for Democracy?" in Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, eds., *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experi-*

This is certainly true, and it would indeed be both unwise and offensive to turn a cold shoulder to democratic reformers anywhere simply because their country happens to be less fortunate than others. But while the race may not always be to the swift nor the battle to the strong, as Damon Runyon once observed, that is the way to bet. It now seems clear that a major reason for the stalling of so many third wave transitions well short of liberal democracy is not unrelated to their developmental status, and an important task—perhaps the central task—of democracy promotion should therefore be to speed up development in whatever ways possible. It is necessary, in other words, to reconnect the socioeconomic and political spheres in both theory and practice.²⁸

It is all well and good, some might say, to talk about jump-starting development as a way to further democratic consolidation. But hasn't the experience of U.S., foreign, and international aid in that area been just as barren and unsatisfactory as in the political realm? To some extent, the answer is certainly yes. There is no magic bullet for foreigners seeking to generate economic development in other countries, and vast sums and efforts have been expended over decades in often fruitless attempts to do so. Still, focusing on the real obstacles standing in the way of consolidation makes it possible for would-be crusaders to understand what the scale and nature of a serious democracy promotion effort would look like. It would have to employ not just a few million dollars in grants here and there, but the major tools of American foreign and economic policy. It would use conditionality to leverage the power of bilateral relationships and multilateral institutions to shift the incentive structure facing foreign actors, coordinate security and trade policies with political conditions, and generally make development a major foreign policy priority. Crusaders, in other words, should care at least as much about the World Trade Organization as they do about sponsoring journalistic watchdog groups; they should debate sanctions policy or NATO and European Union admission with the same fervor that they bring to election monitoring.²⁹ For a true crusader, in short, the National Endowment for Democracy might not be the sole or even the primary locus of democracy promotion efforts, but rather one tool among many.

ences with Democracy (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 24 (emphasis in original). See also Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 59 (February 1994), pp. 1–22.

28. In addition to any direct effects development might have on democratic consolidation, there are clear indirect effects as well, such as a dramatically reduced incidence of reversion to authoritarianism. Advanced development seems to act like a "roach motel"—democracies can check in, but they can't check out. See Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Facts," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (January 1997), pp. 155–183.

29. The sanctions employed during the early 1990s in an attempt to restore President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in Haiti, for example, nearly wiped out that unfortunate island's

The final conclusion concerns the depressing resiliency of Dahl's thirty-year-old argument that a central obstacle to effective democracy promotion is our lack of knowledge about the basic causal connections involved.³⁰ Understanding what *can* be done is logically prior to having strong opinions on what *should* be done, yet that crucial topic has received surprisingly little attention and is likely to remain obscure—for thinking about the subject seriously requires immersing oneself in both theory and practice, and indeed multiple kinds of theory and practice, in a way that has become deeply unfashionable both inside the academy and out.

"Men make their own history," Karl Marx wrote, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but rather under circumstances found, given, and transmitted."³¹ Comparative politics theories about what factors drive and sustain democratization represent the best thinking available on those "circumstances": They illuminate the constraints on political actors in developing countries that limit their freedom of action and narrow their range of choice. But it is precisely where circumstances leave off that the local democratizers' freedom of action begins. Good theorizing, therefore, is hardly the mere academic exercise that many democracy promotion activists believe, but rather a necessary and crucial ingredient for successful political action: The better and more accurate one's theories, the more precisely one understands just what is possible and what is not, and can plan one's actions accordingly.

Foreigners trying to facilitate local political development, however, need to go beyond comparative politics to international relations, familiarizing themselves intimately with the nature and limitations of a wide range of foreign policy tools. At one level, well-designed democracy promotion strategies must incorporate answers to broad, almost philosophical questions such as whether efforts should be focused on countries where success is most probable, where the outcome is most important, or where the need is greatest. At another level, the strategies must be based on informed judgments about practical issues such as what kinds of diplomatic tools produce what kinds of results; what

fledgling middle class while further impoverishing its desperate poor and contributing to the devastation of its environment. Even with Aristide's ultimate return, therefore, it is unclear whether the net impact of the sanctions was to advance the prospects for the eventual emergence of liberal democracy in Haiti. See Gideon Rose, "Haiti," in Richard N. Haass, ed., *Economic Sanctions and American Diplomacy* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1998), pp. 57–84.

30. Dahl, *Polyarchy*, pp. 209–210.

31. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," reprinted in Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 595.

scale of involvement by outside actors is required, over what time frame; which agencies or organizations are best suited to effective action; and whether positive or negative incentives are more effective.

A sophisticated literature on democracy promotion would explore the relationship of structure and agency not only within political systems, but also between them. It would focus, that is, on how one country's agency could affect another country's structure. Both exemplars and crusaders, activists and academics, would benefit from good work along these lines. It is a research program, in short, that could not only provide the basis for more effective policies, but also bring the subfields of political science together in the sort of challenging and useful endeavor they seem to have lost interest in long ago.