Barack Obama consistently has called upon the US to support what he calls “sustainable democracy.” Such a commitment to promoting democracy abroad is a common theme among postwar American presidents, but often there are disconnects between America’s ideals and interests as well as between the rhetoric and actual concrete action. This paper introduces democracy promotion activities in recent US history, then turns to the words and deeds of candidate and now, President Obama and his administration. In short, the Obama administration’s first year in office has been marked by grand rhetoric, general continuity with the previous administration in democracy funding, but a lack of policy coherence and leadership on these issues. The paper concludes with a series of lessons and recommendations for the Obama administration on sustaining democracy worldwide gleaned from the shortcomings of the Bush administration.

Keywords: democracy, foreign policy, Barack Obama, Cairo speech, Arab spring, democracy promotion

In a speech to Ghana’s parliament that was broadcast across Africa, President Obama committed to support what he calls “sustainable democracy”:

We must support a strong and sustainable democratic government...history offers a clear verdict: governments that respect the will of their own people, that govern by consent and not coercion, are more prosperous, they are more stable, and more successful than governments that do not...

In fact, support for democracy is an ongoing theme of American presidents, particularly in the postwar era, but what does Obama mean by “sustainable democracy,” a term he used both as candidate and as president? Furthermore, are there deeds to match the rhetoric? What should the administration do to promote “sustainable democracy” in an uncertain world?

This paper introduces democracy promotion activities in recent US history, particularly the philosophy and activities of President George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda, then turns to the words and deeds of candidate and now, President Obama and his administration. In short, the Obama administration’s first year in office has been marked by grand rhetoric, general continuity with the previous administration in democracy funding, but a lack of policy coherence and leadership on these issues. The paper concludes with a series of lessons and recommendations for the Obama administration on sustaining and extending democracy worldwide gleaned from the shortcomings of the Bush administration. This is particularly urgent as the new administration presently seems determined to make many of the same missteps.
The notion of spreading the American way of life has long been part of US foreign policy, from a belief in Manifest Destiny to the democratic expansions of the last 60 years. As one scholar observes, “advancing freedom is an expression of the United States’ most sacred ideals” and has an “established parentage” of American executives, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. In the twentieth century, the patriarch of this tradition was President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was reluctant for the US to engage in World War I with good reason: the US lost the equivalent of 10,000 troops per month during its short, active involvement in the European theater.

President Wilson, a constitutional historian, former Princeton University president, and keen observer of world affairs, concluded that the best way to avoid future wars like World War I was to deal with what he understood to be the domestic and international structural causes: the web of secret alliances between nondemocratic states, the imperial system that kept authentic national groups from exercising their sovereignty (and thus spurred them to violently attack the system), and the anti-transparent, semi-authoritarian political systems that characterized not only the defeated Entente but also the US’ allies as well. In short, Wilson’s Fourteen Points offered a revision of the international status quo that was, ironically, in line with many of the noble goals espoused by Paris and London and Rome (though not consistently followed): national self-determination, freedom of the seas, free trade, representative governance, open treaties “openly arrived at,” end to imperialism, and the establishment of the League of Nations. In the short term, Wilson’s vision informed the Treaty of Versailles, the establishment of the League of Nations, and major treaties such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact (outlawing war). As historian Frank Ninkovich argues, Wilson’s vision was not utopian, but a pragmatic and ethical reaction to the causes of World War I. Consequently, the Wilsonian vision of self-determination, active US support for freedom and democracy for the oppressed, free trade within a global rule of law, and collective security was to be embraced, both in rhetoric and in principle, by presidents from both political parties from World War II through the present. Moreover, the ghastliness of the Holocaust added a new impetus to ideas that Wilson supported, and a new lexicon for integrating them in the larger democracy-supporting agenda of the US: “human rights” and its opposite, “genocide.”

However, that is not to say that there has not been a recurring ambivalence; a tension between deeply held ideals and immediate interests, when it comes to supporting democracy abroad. From the earliest days of the Cold War, the United States chose a situational approach by supporting political and economic liberalization when possible, but responding pragmatically to the demands of power politics when the former course seemed inaccessible. The process of liberalization was pursued in Europe with the Marshall Plan and the formulation of NATO to counterbalance an expansionist and threatening Soviet Union. Indeed, President Truman’s articulation of what came to be called the Truman Doctrine in 1947 foreshadows the language George W. Bush used in his second inaugural address. Truman declared, “I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”

During the early Cold War, US support for democracy also advanced, albeit at a slower pace, in Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Even
the Middle East was not immune to this expansion with Truman recognizing the State of Israel in 1948.

However, the United States also buttressed dictatorships when practical. Two days following the Yalta Conference, Franklin Roosevelt met with King Absulaziz of Saudi Arabia, establishing good relations that are still largely intact as the Saudis continue to be a major source of petroleum. Truman, lacking a liberalizing ally in China, aided a nationalist authoritarian, Chiang Kai-shek, against the communists led by Mao Zedong. Fearing a communist takeover in Iran, the Eisenhower administration even went as far as deposing the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, for his radicalism and nationalization of the oil industry.1

Since the immediate postwar period, major shifts in US foreign policy occurred in the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, which are directly relevant to the eventual formulation of foreign policy of later presidents. President Carter distanced himself from the policy of containment and instead focused on human rights. Many criticized this concern for human rights and Carter’s disregard for geopolitical realities and the national interests of the United States, as well as his tendency to morally equivocate the United States and the Soviet Union, though he did shift the rhetoric and priorities of Washington with the adoption of advancing human rights as an objective.2 Nonetheless, Carter supported strategic Cold War allies despite their lack of democratic bona fides, most notably the Shah of Iran and oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

Ronald Reagan took a different approach from Carter in most areas, yet he also emphasized human rights violations by the Soviet Union toward its own people: the jailing of political prisoners, the prohibition against Jews emigrating to Israel, and the asphyxiating lack of political and economic freedoms. Reagan contested the Soviet Union’s right to exist as an “Evil Empire,” a political, economic, and social system whose very existence was an affront to God, human decency, and individual liberty. Yet, Reagan’s policies also demonstrated American ambivalence, with the usual US alignment with resource-rich and/or anti-communist regimes (for example, in Latin America), despite the fact that many were authoritarian and repressive of segments of their own populations.

George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda

A decade later, George W. Bush entered office in a changed world: the Cold War was over, and the previous decade had been characterized by military humanitarian intervention abroad. Pledging to follow a “humble” foreign policy and concentrate on domestic reform, Bush pursued this path until 9/11, which goaded the president to formulate a new approach to address the dangers of state-sponsored terrorism. Traditional approaches to foreign policy, such as realism and liberal internationalism, were powerless to address the exigencies of the current strategic dilemma. The principles underlying this approach began taking form in a number of speeches until they were first articulated in a uniform approach in the National Security Strategy of 2002 and ultimately

1This ambivalence between democracy promotion and the US interest is discussed throughout Lloyd E. Ambrosius’ Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations (New York: Palgrave, 2002), especially Chapters 3 and 8.

fleshed out as the Bush Doctrine. An important component of the Doctrine, that of promoting and supporting human liberty worldwide, was later fully developed as the Freedom Agenda and expounded in his second inaugural address.

The language and worldview of the Freedom Agenda directly descend from the Declaration of Independence, and repeatedly Bush underscored the philosophical foundation of the Agenda: the moral nature of politics, the worth of the individual, humanity’s right to and desire for freedom, the responsibility of free societies to help those who are oppressed, and an optimism that the general trend of history is toward greater freedom for all. For President Bush, the Freedom Agenda was not a tertiary policy priority, nor was it rhetoric without action. It was an integral part of his foreign policy, a key element of the Bush Doctrine, and was repeatedly called one of America’s “vital interests.”

In a series of “fact sheets,” the Bush Administration trumpeted its actions to promote democracy and human freedom worldwide. It tripled the amount of funds for democracy and human rights programming (FY2009 budget requested $1.72 billion for such activities, as compared to $650 million in FY 2001). The president routinely met with democracy activists and dissidents as well as initiated awards to highlight such service like the Human Rights Defenders Fund. The Administration engaged in multilateral democracy promotion by proposing and launching the UN Democracy Fund, the Roundtable on Democracy at the UN General Assembly, the G-8’s Partnership for Progress, and a Common Future for countries in the “Broader Middle East and North Africa” (BMENA). The president and secretary of state privately “pressed” regimes like Egypt and Saudi Arabia on democratic reform. Furthermore, the administration “smartened” foreign-aid programming to focus on good governance, such as through the Millennium Challenge Accounts, promoted free trade bilaterally and multilaterally, and increased humanitarian aid (for example, the president’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief-PEPFAR). Much of this was possible as the administration induced Congress to pass the landmark Advance Democracy Act in 2007 and sought to institutionalize the Freedom Agenda in the executive branch through a classified national security presidential directive (NSPD-58) in July 2008 that reinforced the obligations of various government agencies to promote democracy.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration’s policies demonstrated American ambivalence about democracy promotion in many ways, most notably the Iraq war in 2003, which did not have a democracy promotion rationale at the beginning, but gained one over time, and what appeared to be backtracking on the commitment to democracy in 2007, particularly in the wake of Hamas’ surprise electoral victory in the Palestinian territories. Although it is beyond the scope of

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3There is some debate about whether or not Bush was fully in control, operationally and philosophically, of these policies. Perhaps the best analysis is that of Daalder and Lindsay, who though critical, provide a great deal of evidence that President Bush was firmly driving these policies from the White House and that he, though not a neo-conservative, had embraced a general worldview of America’s role as the critical supporter of global freedom in a dangerous age. Political scientist Robert Jervis and historian Robert Gaddis likewise argue that the elements of the Bush Doctrine were a consistent, well-developed paradigm for US foreign policy—whether or not one agrees with them. See Ivo Daalder and John Lindsay, America Unbound (New York: Wiley, September, 2005); John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy” in Foreign Policy (November/December 2002). Robert Jervis, “Why the Bush Doctrine Cannot Be Sustained” in Political Science Quarterly 120, no. 3 (2005).

4For a detailed documentation of President Bush’s philosophy and rhetoric on democracy promotion, see Eric Patterson and Jonathan Amaral, “Presidential Leadership and Democracy Promotion” in Public Integrity vol. 13, no. 1 (Summer 2009).


this essay—focused on Obama—to go into great detail on the Bush years, it is worth noting that a general critique that can be made of Bush, and by extension all presidents, is that of Walter McDougall’s 1998 book, *Promised Land: Crusader State*. McDougall argues that the US, particularly in Wilsonian foreign policies, projects US values (for example, democracy) on other countries and then expends massive amounts of diplomatic, military, and financial capital in trying to make reality fit with America’s idealized view. McDougall’s analysis, and that of those like him, suggests that US experience from the Philippines through Iraq and Afghanistan is consequent to this idealized vision of America’s place in the world.

*Senator Obama and the Advance Democracy Act of 2007*

Barack Obama’s meteoric rise from a state office holder to US senator to national candidate and ultimately president of the United States took place in a relatively short time, and much of his career focused on domestic political issues. However, observers do have two important clues from his years in the US Senate, from which to glean his ideas on democracy: his cosponsorship of the Advance Democracy Act of 2007 and his national foreign policy debut speech in Chicago in the same year.

Historically, Congress gave little attention to democracy promotion. For instance, the 107th Congress’ fiscal year (FY) 2003 budget had two brief mentions of support for democracy. More specifically, the State Department Authorizations Act for FY 2003 (passed just a year after 9/11 as part of Public Law 107–228) “expressed the sense of the Congress that the budget for the [State Department’s] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor should be substantially increased,” but did not provide extra funding to that end. Congress also established and funded a modest “Human Rights and Democracy Fund” administered by the Bureau to “support defenders of human rights” and “promote and encourage the growth of democracy...in other countries.” That was all—two short paragraphs tucked into a massive authorization bill.

By 2005, a far more robust set of legislative options were promulgated by the Congress. Senators John McCain (R) and Joe Lieberman (D) introduced the “Advance Democracy Act of 2005” just six weeks after President Bush’s Second Inaugural. The bill was simultaneously presented in the House of Representatives by Tom Lantos (D) and Frank Wolfe (R). Although the legislation did not proceed far in the 109th Congress, the original version of the Advance Democracy Act of 2005 would have instituted the following:

- Spent approximately two pages defining and defending human liberty and representative government.
- Declared that freedom and democracy in foreign countries is “a fundamental component of US foreign policy.”
- Elevated issues of democracy promotion by adding it to the title of an existing Under Secretary of State: the Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs.
- Created a new office of Democratic Movements and Transitions as well as Regional Democracy Hubs in US missions in six regions.
- Established a Democracy Promotion and Human Rights Advisory Board to advise the secretary of state.
- Called for a Web site reporting on democracy and human rights.
- Required each embassy in nondemocratic countries to develop a plan to promote democracy and support individuals and organizations committed to democratic ideas.
• Provided monies for various funds on democracy promotion and human rights.
• Expressed the “sense of the Congress” that the US government should strengthen its ties to other democratic countries and multilateral institutions (for example, the Community of Democracies).
• Authorized an additional $250 million for democracy promotion over the next two years.

In 2005, the Advance Democracy Act failed to pass the 109th Congress. However, the 110th Congress folded it into Public Law 110-53 as Title XXI, the “Advance Democratic Values, Address Non-Democratic Countries, and Enhance Democracy Act of 2007” or the “ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2007” which was signed by the president in August 2007.7 Importantly, one of its numerous cosponsors was then-Senator Barack Obama. The 2007 law closely mirrored the original version from 2005, and although it did not set up a new Office of Democratic Movements and Transitions, it did implement most of the other points adumbrated above, as well as the following:

• Directs the secretary of state to staff new “Democracy Liaison Officers” assigned to regional and multilateral organizations, combatant commands, and regional public diplomacy centers.
• Directs the assistant secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor as well as Chiefs of Mission abroad to seek out, consult, support, and provide assistance to democratic actors in civil society as part of country-specific strategies for democracy promotion, including “issuing public condemnations of violations of...human rights, including violations of religious freedom, and visiting local landmarks and other local sites associated with nonviolent protest in support of democracy.”
• Mandates that the secretary of state provide training (for example, Democracy Fellows) and recognition (awards, incentives) for Foreign Service officers engaged in democracy promotion.
• Funds US government and international democracy programs, such as $28 million for the UN Democracy Fund (2008–2009) and $3 million for Hungary’s International Center for Democratic Transition (2008–2010).

What is striking is that this fiscal authorization bill is unusual in its rich language of liberty and representative government. At times, the document reads like Bush’s Freedom Agenda speeches, referencing the Declaration of Independence and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. For instance, early in the Advance Democracy Act, a lengthy justification of democracy and democracy promotion is advocated:

It is the policy of the United States to promote freedom and democracy in foreign countries as a fundamental component of the United States foreign policy...to affirm fundamental freedoms and international recognized human rights...to condemn offenses against those freedoms and rights as a fundamental component of United States foreign policy...to protect and promote such fundamental freedoms and rights, including the freedoms of association, of expression, of the press, and of religion, and the right to own private property; to commit to the long-term challenge of promoting universal democracy...to support...free, fair, and open elections, ...to strengthen cooperation with other democratic countries...8

7PL 110-53 is the “Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007” and it is a large, consolidated bill covering many agencies that includes much of that year’s Foreign Relations Authorization Act. The bills mentioned in this essay can be found at the Library of Congress Web site, http://www.thomas.loc.gov.
8The Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports can be found at the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Labor, and Human Rights’ Web site at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/afdr/2008/.
Finally, it is worth noting that the presidential campaign of Barack Obama focused heavily on domestic issues and a critique of the previous administration’s war in Iraq, not on foreign policy. There is little in then-candidate Obama’s campaign record on the issue of democracy promotion, except his cosponsorship of the Advance Democracy Act. However, in what is considered Obama’s foreign policy debut of the campaign, he did articulate a vision for US support for “sustainable democracy” that aligns with his presidential addresses over the past year. At the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in April 2007, Senator Obama said,

We have heard much over the last six years about how America’s larger purpose in the world is to promote the spread of freedom—that it is the yearning of all who live in the shadow of tyranny and despair.

I agree. But this yearning is not satisfied by simply deposing a dictator and setting up a ballot box. The true desire of all mankind is not only to live free lives, but lives marked by dignity and opportunity; by security and simple justice... It also requires a society that is supported by the pillars of a sustainable democracy [italics added]: a strong legislature, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, a vibrant civil society, a free press, and an honest police force. It requires building the capacity of the world’s weakest states and providing them what they need to reduce poverty, build healthy and educated communities, develop markets, and generate wealth... As President, I will double our annual investments in meeting these challenges to $50 billion ... Part of this new funding will also establish a two billion dollar Global Education Fund that calls on the world to join together in eliminating the global education deficit, similar to what the 9/11 commission proposed. Because we cannot hope to shape a world where opportunity outweighs danger unless we ensure that every child, everywhere, is taught to build and not to destroy... Finally, while America can help others build more secure societies, we must never forget that only the citizens of these nations can sustain them.9

With his support of the Advance Democracy Act and the Chicago speech in mind, it is time to turn to the words and deeds of President Obama and his administration over the past year.

The First Year: The Obama Administration and Sustainable Democracy

The Rhetoric of “Sustainable Democracy”

President Obama and his administration have been on the job for three years now so evidence is mounting about the administration’s perspective and commitment to promoting democracy abroad. What is the administration saying about democracy? What is the administration doing to promote democracy?

When it comes to words, President Obama has said a great deal about democracy. Indeed, despite his criticisms of George W. Bush, much of Obama’s rhetoric sounds identical with that of his predecessor. The following examples are from four different speeches given in a six-month period:

The United States of America stands for peace and security, justice and opportunity. That is who we are, and that is what history calls on us to do once more.

I do have an unyielding belief in government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just

9The transcript of this address is available at: http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/dynamic_page.php?id=64.
American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.

Across Africa, we’ve seen countless people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; countless examples of people taking control of their destiny, and making changes from the bottom up. We saw it in Kenya...in South Africa...in Zimbabwe...Now make no mistake: history is on the side of these brave Africans, not with those who use coups or change constitutions to stay in power.

I pledge that America will always stand with those who stand up for their dignity and their rights—for the student who seeks to learn; the voter who demands to be heard, the innocent who longs to be free; the oppressed who yearns to be equal...These are basic principles that are universal; there are certain truths which are self evident—and the United States of America will never waver in our efforts to stand up for the right of people everywhere to determine their own destiny.

The key themes of the president’s speeches can be most clearly found in his address to the Muslim world on a “new beginning” in Cairo on June 4, 2009 and his address to Ghana’s parliament a month later. Of the seven key issues he discussed in the Cairo speech, four of them relate to policies of political and economic liberalization: democracy, religious freedom, women’s and minority rights, and economic development. President Obama avoided discussing US history, democratic or institutional theory, or academic models of pluralism but he did emphasize the importance of representative governance and religious freedom. President Obama characterized democratic government as having freedom of speech, the right of citizens to have a say in how they are governed, the rule of law, the equal administration of justice, government transparency and accountability, and freedom to “live as you choose.” President Obama concluded, “these are human rights...we will support them everywhere.” President Obama noted that “elections alone do not make true democracy,” and he denounced movements that want to achieve power through elections and then throw off the restraints of democracy upon achieving power. This seemed a powerful warning against Islamist groups from Sudan to the Palestinian territories to Indonesia.

What of democracy promotion? President Obama assented, “no system of government can or should be imposed on one nation by any other.” This and other remarks distanced the new administration from the Iraq war of 2003 and the policies of the Bush administration. However, it is clear that many of the democracy-supporting policies of the Bush era will be maintained by the Obama administration. For example, much of the speech focused on the intertwined issues of security, democracy, religious freedom, gender equality, and economic development. President Obama recommitted the US to supporting women’s and minority rights and providing economic assistance for long-term political and economic development.

In Cairo, the president wisely focused on the nexus of democracy, individual liberty, and religious freedom. Indeed, early in the speech he declared, “Freedom in America is indivisible from freedom to practice one’s religion.” In the section on religious freedom he asserted, “People should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul.” He approvingly cited the ways that religious freedom is good for a society: respect for others, tolerance for diversity, interfaith dialogue, and “interfaith service...[such as] combating malaria in Africa, or providing relief after a natural disaster.”

The Cairo speech did refer to the plight of non-Muslim religious minorities under pressure, such as the Maronites and Copts, but did not forcefully
condemn the widespread atrocities against such groups and others, such as Shias in Saudi Arabia or Christians in Iraq. Indeed, the president said little about the radically repressive policies of governments like Sudan and Saudi Arabia, going so far as to praise the latter’s interfaith dialogue. Finally, the president’s comments were limited in not explicitly criticizing radical separations of church and state (for example, French and Turkish laïcité), nor did he explicitly defend the right to exit one’s former faith community (for example, convert to Christianity), nor the right to share one’s faith (e.g., evangelism, proselytism).

Finally, a portion of the Cairo speech challenged the Muslim world to fully live up to its potential in terms of human and economic development and pledged new partnerships in the areas of education, health, and business. Those development themes were addressed more fully a month later when President Obama spoke to Ghana’s parliament in a speech carried across Africa and beyond. In the Ghanaian address, Obama returned to themes of development and institutions that characterized his Chicago Council speech in 2007.

We must support strong and sustainable democratic governments...history offers a clear verdict: governments that respect the will of their own people, that govern by consent and not coercion, are more prosperous, they are more stable, and more successful than governments that do not...This is about more than just holding elections. It’s also about what happens between elections. In the twenty-first century, capable, reliable, and transparent institutions are the key to success—strong parliaments; honest police forces; independent judges; an independent press; a vibrant private sector; a civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in people’s everyday lives.

This theme of promoting sustainable democracy and human rights through enhanced support to government institutions is apparent in the remarks of other Administration officials. For instance, Secretary of State Clinton’s ambitious Council on Foreign Relations address in July, 2009—wherein she laid out five policy approaches for the future—stated, “democracy is about more than just elections...it must also protect minority rights and press freedom, develop strong, competent and independent judiciaries, legislatures, and executive agencies, and commit for democracy to deliver results...this administration will stand for accountable and transparent governance and support those who work to build democratic institutions wherever they live.” Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Karen Stewart asserted, “human rights abuses remain a symptom of deeper dysfunctions within political systems...countries in which human rights were most protected and most respected were characterized by the following...free and fair electoral processes...representative, accountable, transparent democratic institutions of government, including independent judiciaries under the rule of law...” Likewise, the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources called increased funding for “economic growth and democratic progress” as “critical to achieving sustainable development and accountable governance.”

With this theme in mind, what actions have the administration taken since taking office to promote “sustainable democracy?” The focus will be on funding requests and spending on existing or novel democracy promotion strategies from the first two years of the administration.

**Funding Priorities and Programming**

It is one thing to talk about the importance of democratic institutions, civil society, and human liberty—it is another thing to tangibly support them through budget justifications and spending. A review of the FY 2011 budget priorities of
the Obama administration suggests three related trends. First, continuity of funding (with some increases) for most targeted Bush-era democracy initiatives including the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Second, a drop in general democracy funds via the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), but increases in country-specific democracy funding, most notably in the greater Middle East and Central Asia. Third, a tension between promoting democracy and supporting autocratic regimes that advance immediate US interests, such as in Egypt and Jordan.

Funding for Targeted Democracy Initiatives

Many felt certain that the Obama administration would reduce, or seek to dismantle, Bush’s signature “Freedom Agenda” and related initiatives, most notably the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which forces developing countries to meet basic conditions of accountability and just governance before receiving economic assistance. The same holds true for Bush’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which many expected to be folded into more traditional State Department structures. The uncertainty was exacerbated by an interval in which no new CEO was named to head the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the fact that the president’s party in Congress cut $25 million from the MCC’s budget. That cut aligned with FY 2009 actual cuts of $15 million to the National Endowment of Democracy and a half million dollars from the OAS Fund for Strengthening Democracy, as well as proposed cuts for FY 2010 in the tens of millions to other key Bush initiatives, including the Middle East Partnership Initiative ($16 million) and the UN Democracy Fund ($9.3 million).

However, the actual state of affairs is much more promising for democracy promotion funding, especially in the greater Middle East—if Congress provides the funding requested by the president. This point is important—Congress only provided President Bush with about a third of the funding he requested for many such programs over the last three years of his administration. In his first year, President Obama requested an increase of 70% in MEPI and MCC funding for the greater Middle East and signed a new Millennium Challenge compact with Senegal in September 2009. For FY 2011, the administration requested $86 million for MEPI, and if granted by Congress, it will provide a 32% increase from FY 2010 actual funding. Moreover, 61.5% of MEPI requested funding is targeted at governance and democratic programming. Despite previous uncertainty about its future, MEPI now has strong leadership, funding, and a solid place in the State Department’s Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA); it has quickly become one of President Obama’s most important centerpieces demonstrating his commitment to Middle East democracy and human rights. Despite these funding increases, there has only been one new initiative to promote democracy

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11 This is best chronicled in the Congressional Research Service report, “U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends” by Jeremy M. Sharp (July 17, 2009). Available at: http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/128331.pdf

12 “Greater Middle East” in this usage applies to the 18 countries traditionally associated with the Middle East (or North Africa and the Middle East) as well as Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Malawi. An excellent analysis of this funding is “The Federal Budget and Appropriations for FY 2010: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East” by Stephen McInerney, Project on Middle East Democracy (July 2009). Available at: http://pomed.org/mcinerney-appropriations-fy10.
(related to technology grants) since the Cairo speech. No new initiatives have been established in such areas as religious freedom or women’s rights.

**Funding for General Democracy Activities**

A key department responsible for democracy programming is the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). DRL is described by the State Department as the “lead bureau in the broad effort to support human rights and democracy worldwide.” DRL’s actual Democracy Fund was $162,672,000 in FY 2008, but its FY 2009 was $79 million and its FY 2010 and FY 2011 requests were $70 million. However, country-specific democracy programming—especially in the greater Middle East—increased. For instance, the administration requested $1.54 billion last year for democracy initiatives in the region, but 86% of it was designated specifically for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan (following trends in the Bush administration).

**Transfer of Priorities**

Of critical interest is not simply whether or not the administration is funding some sort of democracy efforts but the specific types of programming. President Obama’s speeches have made clear his interest in supporting governmental institutions, such as accountable executives, functioning legislatures, and independent judiciaries. Although it is early in the administration, it appears that such a shift is underway in such programming, with a de-emphasis on support to civil society and an increase in funding for institutions.

A comparison of funding objectives for the region identified by the Obama administration as most critical to US national interests—the greater Middle East—demonstrates a shift from security to governance over the past four years. More specifically, Peace and Security dropped from 68% to 56% of the funding total from FY 2006 to FY 2010, with the Governing Justly and Democratically objective increasing from 5% to 8%. For FY 2011, the administration has requested 1.98 billion for the Governing Justly and Democratically objective, representing 6% of the total. The 2% decrease from FY 2010 can be accounted for in decreased democracy and governance programming in Iraq as the US draws down its presence there; with Iraq omitted, the request represents a slight increase from previous years.

The Governing Justly and Democratically focus is made up of four areas: Rule of Law and Human Rights, Good Governance, Civil Society, and Political Competition. For FY 2011, governance and democracy funding will increase 10%, from $204.3 million to $225.7 million (if Iraq is omitted). Within this programming, there are increases of 39% for the Rule of Law and Human Rights, 13% for Political Competition and Consensus Building, and 3% for Civil Society; only Good Governance is decreased by 8%. However, there are some alarming trends that demonstrate backtracking on democracy promotion by the Obama administration. Funding for democracy and governance in Egypt, for example, has been sharply reduced since March 2009 and has been accompanied by steep cuts to civil society. Furthermore, USAID has continued its 2009 decision to only provide funding to those organizations approved by the Egyptian

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13 The State Department’s FY 2010 Congressional Budget Justification in its entirety, as well as related links, can be found at [http://www.state.gov/f/releases/iab/fy2010cbj/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/f/releases/iab/fy2010cbj/index.htm). The DRL summary with specific funding requests, as cited here, is on pp. 107–108.

government. Similarly, despite recent political turmoil in Jordan, the administration has requested 26% less for democracy and governance programs there. President Obama’s inconsistency is representative of the historic tension presidents have faced between supporting long-term democratic goals and immediate US interests.

In conclusion, at the time of this writing, we are only half-way through Obama’s term of office, and the trends are noteworthy. It seems clear that at present, there is to be a great deal of continuity on democracy programming with a focus on the greater Muslim world, including Bush’s signature initiatives like the MCC and MEPI. It also appears that the definitions and boundaries of democracy programming, such as a focus on governance, institutions, and elections without clear integration of other human liberty programming—most notably religious freedom and human rights—follows the pattern established by previous administrations. Finally, concerned observers of the administration point to the sluggish pace of senior appointments to key positions on sustainable democracy as evidence that the issue has not been consistently considered by the president or the secretary of state, both concerned with “resets” of relationships: six months before the naming of an assistant secretary of state for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; eight months before the nomination of an MCC CEO, nearly a year before the nomination of a USAID Administrator, and 18 months before the nomination of a US ambassador for International Religious Freedom (still unconfirmed as of December 2010).

Lessons for the New Administration

So, what lessons on democracy promotion can the Obama administration learn from its predecessors, and what challenges does it face in the future? Now is the time for policymakers and planners to decide on a way forward in supporting sustainable democracy in the future. Indeed, this Fall’s Presidential Study Group on development activities and the State Department’s embryonic “QDDR” process make reflection and resolution on these issues critical.

First, democracy promotion policies were not, and are not, without their skeptics in government. The most important of those skeptics are those within the administration or within the bureaucracy who do not support the effort, or in the latter case, do not support the president. It was telling, for instance, how rarely senior Bush administration officials spoke about the president’s Freedom Agenda, human liberty, and democracy in their speeches. This silence is obvious and deafening when one combs through the speeches of former Secretary of State Colin Powell and his successor’s first year in office, as well as the language of other senior leaders such as Vice President Cheney, Secretaries of Defense Rumsfeld and Gates, the deputy secretaries at the Departments of State and Defense, and the like.15 Many of these individuals were self-proclaimed “realists” and they may have thought that President Bush’s early speeches on liberty and democracy were just rhetoric at which they could smile. If this is the case, Bush ultimately surprised them with his dogged determination to press the Freedom Agenda. However, he did not convince them.

Ergo, a lesson for the President Obama is that the senior leadership must be on board and must speak consistently about human rights, liberty, and

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15We have done a careful search of the speeches of these individuals and found that until about 2007, administration officials rarely mentioned the Freedom Agenda. Since then, it is primarily Secretary of State Rice and National Security Advisor Hadley who utilize the president’s language on the issue. Bizarrely, Secretary Rice talks about a “democracy agenda” about as much as the president’s “freedom agenda,” suggesting a political scientist’s focus on institutions rather than the president’s emphasis on values.
democratic values, because the world community can easily spot the lacunae. So too can the bureaucrats who populate federal agencies. At present, however, President Obama is in danger of following in Bush’s footsteps on this issue. Although the president has consistently affirmed support for sustainable democracy activities, his Cabinet has been virtually silent on the topic. The same is true on most human rights issues, particularly the obvious signals to authoritarian governments like Moscow and Beijing that a “new realism” will be the basis of the relationship. Indeed, what has not been said—such as on Secretary Clinton’s recent visit to China—as well as the lack of presidential appointments to key development and human rights positions in the federal government, send a clarion message overseas that this administration is not always committed to democracy abroad.

A related, second barrier to promoting sustainable democracy is institutional and bureaucratic resistance. Those who represent the US abroad, be they in military uniform, a government aid worker, or a diplomat, are busy people with a full range of prescribed activities. They feel they do not have time for more work and promoting human liberty, in ways elucidated in the Advance Democracy Act, the International Religious Freedom Act, the Trafficking in Persons Act is not just more work, it is uncomfortable and tiresome work because it demands that US officials at foreign embassies report on barriers to democracy, including religious persecution, as well as meet with representatives from civil society who are challenging barriers to democracy. Such actions are not just more tasks, they have every likelihood of disrupting the relationship between the ambassador’s team and their local interlocutors.

As one goes through the documents and statements of US government agencies such as the State Department, it is remarkable how little Bush’s Freedom Agenda was integrated into the activities of Foreign Service. A single glaring example may suffice: in early 2008, the United States recognized the independence and statehood of Kosovo, a tiny new “country” that had won its freedom from Serbia thanks to a NATO bombing campaign nearly a decade ago. Amazingly, when one goes through the rationale for supporting Kosovar independence in the speeches of Secretary of State Rice, Under Secretary Burns, and Assistant Secretary Fried, there is absolutely no linkage whatsoever to the Freedom Agenda or even normative support for national self-determination and democratization.

It is not hard to imagine a similar “realist” approach shaping up with regard to Afghanistan. Obama’s second “policy review” in the past six years includes high-ranking voices within the administration who argue for a pragmatic model: focus on a limited military footprint with a modest security commitment, rapprochement with anti-democratic actors if possible, and only tepid ongoing lip service to democratic values such as women’s rights and religious freedom.

Consequently, President Obama must have a disciplined message across his administration on advancing freedom and enforce the implementation of such efforts. However, if the President of the United States finds it difficult to control his Cabinet and the massive bureaucracy of the federal government, it is even truer that the US simply cannot control outcomes around the world. The US can speechify, fund, pamphletize, praise, caution, and even invade other countries in order to advance democracy, but its success largely lies in the hands of local leaders in foreign countries. President Obama has publicly said this on more than one occasion. What the president can do concerns himself, and his administration, with what type of activities are most likely to actually promote human liberty and democratic institutions around the world. It may very well be that some of our current efforts do not result in our preferred outcomes and that we will have to change course, such as diverting funds from supporting elections in a specific foreign country to supporting foreign elementary education in order to cultivate a literate citizenry.
A recent study in the journal *Foreign Policy Analysis* should be of particular interest to the Administration on this point. The author reviews three types of economic statecraft to promote sustainable democracy: “top-down” (incentive to elites, such as Millennium Challenge Accounts), “bottom-up” (civil society and election support), and “inside” (technical and financial support to institutions, that is, legislatures, judiciaries, law enforcement). The reports surveyed in the article suggest that *ex ante* conditional “top down” programs, like Millennium Challenge Accounts, and long-term “bottom-up” support to NGOs, journalists, activists, political parties, and elections (such as occurs through the National Endowment for Democracy [NED]), as pursued by the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, are most likely to ultimately nurture and reinforce democratic transitions. The Obama administration’s early budgets appear to express continuity for such measures, including the September 2009 signing of a $540 million Millennium Challenge compact with Senegal, the first new partner of the Obama presidency, and ongoing funding for “bottom-up” activities through the NED and its affiliates.

However, Obama’s speeches largely focus on tangibly supporting government institutions in order to nourish sustainable democracy. For instance, in Obama’s speech to Ghana’s parliament, he argues,

...This is about more than just holding elections. It’s also about what happens between elections. In the twenty-first century, capable, reliable, and transparent institutions are the key to success—strong parliaments; honest police forces; independent judges; an independent press; a vibrant private sector; a civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in people’s everyday lives... what America will do is increase assistance for responsible individuals and responsible institutions, with a focus on supporting good governance.

The *Foreign Policy Analysis* article found that such “inside” activities have “largely failed to balance corruption and enhance professionalism.” In fact, the article cites a major academic study of USAID democracy assistance programming that found a negative correlation between human rights and financial aid to judiciaries. The study concludes, “Perhaps out of all areas, institutional aid has demonstrated to be the weakest democracy promotion instrument.” In sum, the Obama administration needs to weigh the evidence as to what forms of US financial assistance are most likely to reap long-term democratic harvests.

Another problem faced by the Bush administration was the weak connections between democracy promotion and other strands of US foreign policy. This disconnectedness can be seen in at least two areas. The first is the disjointed nature of Bush’s essential freedom argument: the Freedom Agenda spent much of its rhetorical energy on notions of political liberty and democratic structures, but said little about other features such as religious liberty or private property. In other words, the Freedom Agenda as a normative vision privileged certain elements of liberty (for example, voting) over others (e.g., religious freedom). Moreover, government actors engaged in these issues are scattered across multiple bureaus and agencies with little interaction. A good example of this was the complete disconnect between the Freedom Agenda and the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (with its own State Department Office and an independent Commission on International Religious Freedom). In fact, the post of ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom remained vacant for more than a year after Bush came into office; as of this writing, Obama has yet to name either that ambassador or the administrator for USAID. More generally, President Obama should re-tool US democracy promotion policy by explicitly defining how its constituent policies (for example, human rights,
private property, free trade, and religious freedom) relate to and reinforce one another.

Even more problematic, however, is the disjunction between promoting sustainable democracy and other major US foreign policy goals. As Jennifer Windsor has argued, it is simply unclear how democracy promotion relates to energy policy, education, engagement with the UN, and a host of other US priorities. The US government needs to be explicit about the limits of promoting sustainable democracy, about how we try to mediate between this and other vital interests (such as access to petroleum or fighting terrorists), and the fact that valuing democracy will not always trump other strategic objectives. A recent essay by US Congressman David Price (D-NC) makes this argument: American interests will force the US at times to work closely with undemocratic regimes, but US credibility can be sustained by candor and by not retreating from the outcomes of democratic elections (such as in Pakistan and the Palestinian territories in 2007). President Obama and senior officials should engage in this kind of frank discussion rather than avoid it; such will enhance the credibility of US targeted democracy promotion efforts.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration seems to be facing a similar lack of strategic coherence. Although the president’s Cairo speech suggests the interconnectedness of issues such as women’s political equality, human rights, religious freedom, governance and the rule of law, and economic liberty, there seems to be little strategic coordination on these issues. Indeed, the Department of State set up an “implement Cairo” task force after the speech—not in preparation of it. Perhaps though, the establishment of a Presidential Study group on development assistance and a State Department “Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review” modeled on the Defense Department’s QDR process are the first steps toward whole-of-government, strategic efforts in these areas to be launched in the coming year.

By far, the majority of criticism of the Bush administration was about the means of advancing democracy, not its ends. Wittes and Yerkes are among many who argue that linking democracy promotion to the war in Iraq irrevocably harmed the Freedom Agenda worldwide. Larry Diamond, a foremost scholar of democracy and a thought leader for Paul Bremer’s Coalitional Provisional Authority, critiqued the Bush administration as “pretentious, unilateral, and impulsive,” but recently wrote in a “progressive” magazine, “As we disengage from Iraq, we must find ways...to renew the freedom agenda if we are going to serve our long-term security interests in the region.” Thomas Carothers, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, does not dispute that democracy promotion must continue into future administrations, but he scathingly demands a “decontamination” of US foreign policy from George W. Bush’s policies (for example, Guantanamo and the detention of enemy combatants) and a “repositioning” and “recalibration” of democracy promotion.16

The argument that these scholars are making is that democracy can never be promoted by force. The historical record suggests that this is not always true—democracy was imposed at the end of World War II on Germany and Japan but at great expense—hundreds of thousands of troops and hundreds of millions of dollars over the course of a decade. Of course, the Bush

16See Carothers, 2007 and Thomas Carothers, “The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion” in Foreign Affairs (March/April 2006). To be fair, Carothers recognized that the Bush administration had a particularly hard path in front of it in advancing the Freedom Agenda: it did so in the aftermath of 9/11, it took the Agenda to the area least favorable to democracy in the world (the Middle East), it was hampered by a reluctance within the entrenched American bureaucracy and senior officials in the administration itself to move forward on the Agenda, and the US has competing imperatives such as rooting out terrorists and access to oil.
Administration said little about promoting democracy in the lead up to the Iraq invasion—the war was a national security imperative which gained a democracy promotion aspect over time.

Nonetheless, the Obama Administration will undoubtedly confront at least one opportunity for military intervention, most likely in response to an armed crisis in the developing world. Every president faces such moments: Clinton in Haiti, the Balkans, and Rwanda; Bush 41’ in Kuwait, Panama, and Haiti; Reagan in Grenada and Lebanon. The question is whether a stated goal of any military intervention, whether national security or humanitarian in focus, should be human liberty and democratic structures? If the administration is going to employ military force under conditions of violence, poverty, and regime change—it should make a long-term commitment to establishing democracy. In other words, if this administration is committed to sustainable democracy, it needs to think proactively not only about the conditions under which it may feel compelled to intervene military in the next few years, but also under what conditions the US would consider its “Mission Accomplished.” Afghanistan, “Obama’s War,” according to The Economist, is a case in point.

In conclusion, a presidential commitment to “sustainable democracy” is nothing new—it is an expression of American values that hearkens back to the founding of the republic. Nevertheless, the past several years have seen an evolution in context, from the legal commitments under the Advance Democracy Act to Bush’s mixed record implementing his Freedom Agenda to a new president nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize after less than two weeks in office. As it is early in the Obama era, those who envision a deepening and broadening of consistent, rich attention to the promotion of sustainable democracy can hope that the administration will learn from the successes and failures of the past as well as engage and implement smart new thinking on these critical issues, but only time will tell us whether our children’s world will be freer and more prosperous due to the vision and actions of this administration.

References


