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WHAT WILL DEMOCRACY SOLVE?

When Bush administration critics say the United States needs a more effective policy to stem the spread of weapons of mass destruction, administration officials say “democracy.” When critics say the United States needs to do more to assist countries whose people are starving, Bush officials reply “democracy.” When Bush critics question how well we’re combating terrorism worldwide, administration officials retort “democracy.” Whenever those outside government point out deficiencies in U.S. policy, the Bush administration implies that spreading democracy worldwide will address these problems.

Scholars have studied the behavior of democratic and totalitarian societies, and they have concluded that democratic societies go to war less frequently, commit fewer human rights violations, rarely invade their neighbors and provide higher standards of living for their people than countries governed by authoritarian regimes. The comparisons are obvious – the Soviet Union that dominated Eastern Europe and sent its citizens to the gulag, versus the United States or Britain; Germany and Japan as totalitarian countries during WW II, and then as democratic societies after the war.

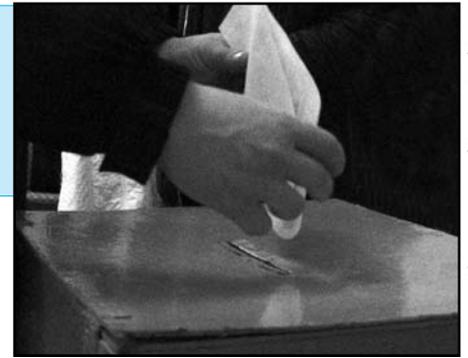
Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s clear message as she meets with foreign leaders and speaks publicly, as she did in May at The Commonwealth Club, is that the promotion of democracy is now the highest goal of American foreign policy. This priority rests on the assumption that the more countries turn to democratic principles, the less they will threaten the international community and the United States itself.

This approach begs the question of whether promoting democracy abroad will in fact address most of the challenges the United States and the world commu-

nity face. My view is that if the campaign for democracy is successful in many of the regions where the United States is pursuing it – including Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia, Central Asia, and the Balkans – over time this will indeed make our nation and the world community safer.

Democratic governments are more accountable and more transparent than authoritarian systems, and thus more likely to be held in check by their people against repression at home and abroad. They are more likely to respond to their people’s needs for jobs and economic benefits than despotic regimes. They are less bellicose – although, it should be added, that despite our role as a leader of the community of democratic countries, the United States has actually been involved in a long list of wars, from Vietnam to Grenada to Panama to Iraq to Haiti, since the end of World War II. Many of these wars have arguably been to combat despots or safeguard our economic interests, not to impose our dominion over other countries, although some would believe otherwise.

While a good goal, I don’t see democratization as a solution that by itself will eliminate the international threats challenging the United States and global stability. The first caveat to the theory of peace-through-democratization is the big “if” about whether we will be able to bring about democratic change in the countries where we seek it. The historical record is not all that encouraging about the prospects for introducing democracy in countries lacking a background of democratic principles and institutions. Russia is a good example. Even with a few shreds of democratic past – the village soviets and the Provisional Government in 1917 – Russia’s path to democracy since 1991 has not exactly



Polling station in Moldova during March elections.

Photo courtesy of Steven Boyd Stamm

been straight. Surely Russia today is a better international citizen than in the Soviet past, but oligarchs continue to have undue influence internally, the media is not entirely free, Russia has continued to provide dual-use nuclear technology to Iran, and it has pursued armed conflicts with Georgia, in Chechnya and elsewhere in its region. The path to democracy is likely to be even more halting in countries like Afghanistan and Iran, with zero democratic past.

The second caveat is that not all threats come from countries (terrorist groups, for instance, or global warming) and the level of democracy around in the world may or may not provide the key to addressing them. Will countries have better environmental records or be less prone to harboring terrorist groups because they are democratic? Perhaps not.

Finally, while promoting democracy worldwide is a positive approach for the United States and its allies, achieving success in this drive is a long-term proposition. And some of the problems we face are very time-urgent. For example, it is great to pursue ultimate democratization for North Korea and Iran. But both countries are moving towards obtaining nuclear weapons on a much faster timetable than they will ever experience the outbreak of democracy. Threats such as this must be dealt with in the short term, through the old, tried and true mechanisms of diplomatic measures, pressure, leverage, sanctions, multilateral negotiations and international institutions, even while we pursue the noble but often elusive goal of universal democracy. Ω