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### **Plugging the Democracy Gap**

Promoting democracy around the world is the centerpiece of President George W. Bush's national security strategy. It is also a goal that is strongly supported by all of the leading American presidential candidates - Democrat and Republican. Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama, for instance, both object to many of the means currently being used to implement this goal, but support the goal itself. Senator John McCain would create a League of Democracies; Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, argues that America can "remain a superpower" only by strongly and continuously reaffirming American values in the world.

This bipartisan consensus is all the more striking because it is increasingly out of step with the majority of the American people. A poll conducted by the Washington think tank Third Way in March found that respondents favored protecting the security of the United States and its allies over promoting freedom and democracy in the world by a margin of 3 to 1. More recently, in a poll of Republicans by the Republican consultant Tony Fabrizio, only 16 percent of respondents supported basing U.S. foreign policy on spreading democracy, a dismal result for the Bush doctrine. On the Democratic side, the liberal blogger Ezra Klein recently pronounced himself "fed up with values," calling instead for a foreign policy based on competence and consequences. Klein was sounding a familiar theme in the blogosphere: the idea that because the Bush administration has justified the Iraq war in the name of liberty and democracy, the values themselves are to blame.

Critics of current American strategy make several valid points. First, democracy really cannot be promoted, but only supported. By its nature, democracy requires the people of a particular country to actively want to govern themselves. Where that drive exists, external support can help it grow and flourish, but it cannot be implanted, much less imposed from the outside.

Second, promoting elections around the world often seems to empower governments or parties that don't like the United States - Hamas in the Palestinian territories, the Sadrists in Iraq, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. How then does promoting democracy enhance the security of America and its allies?

The problem lies not in the strategy but in its execution. Democracy is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of securing individual liberty. To see the point, Americans would do well to look to America's own history. The framers of the Constitution wanted a republican government that would represent the people, but represent them in a way that protected against mob rule and maximized opportunities for careful deliberation in the best interests of the country as a whole. They insisted on a pluralist party system, a Bill of Rights limiting the power of the government,

guarantees for free speech and a free press, checks and balances to promote transparent and accountable government and a strong rule of law enforced by an independent judiciary.

These rules and institutions are as essential to sustained government by the people as elections are. Without them, democracy would be nothing more than a recipe for tyranny of the majority or simply a stop on the road to renewed dictatorship.

A sensible strategy of supporting democracy around the world, then, would recognize the long-term and complex nature of the task. It would support liberal democracy and governments with institutions that are accountable to their citizens. It would support parties of any religion and any ideology as long as they are committed to the democratic process, recognize the rights of the opposition and bind themselves internationally to recognizing minority rights and the individual rights of all citizens, and upholding independent courts and honest government. Such a strategy also would recognize that American security is best assured by a world of liberal democracies not because the governments of those countries like or agree with the United States - plenty of European, Latin American and Asian liberal democratic governments oppose American policies - but because the processes that elected those governments and the institutions that keep them honest are the best antidote to extremism, violence and sustained injustice.

Is there really any alternative? Would the newfound adherents of a foreign policy based only on securing U.S. interests really like to return to an era characterized by the apocryphal quote: "He may be a son-of-a-bitch but he's our son-of-a-bitch"? (The quote has been attributed variously to Cordell Hull, speaking about the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, and to Franklin Roosevelt, referring to the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza García.) Isn't that the policy that has landed America exactly where it is today in so much of the Islamic world, with vast majorities of young people hating the United States, in part because America is seen as a key supporter of the governments that oppress them?

Is America really going to ignore groups of brave citizens seeking to fight tyrants like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe or standing up for an independent judiciary against Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf?

If that is where a foreign policy of "pragmatism" or "consequences" would take America, give me liberty, and liberal democracy as its instrument, every time. But it will be up to a new administration in Washington, Democrat or Republican, to convince American voters to stay the course.

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