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# Can the United States export democracy?

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# Can the United States Export Democracy?

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Today we hear politicians, pundits, and the public grapple with this question, particularly as the United States struggles to guide democratization in Afghanistan and Iraq. This question is far from new, however, as democracy promotion has featured prominently in U.S. rhetoric for some time. In some cases, the U.S. encouraged democratization with carrots, dangling financial incentives in the faces of countries contemplating free and fair elections. In others, the U.S. used a stick, sending the electoral ballots in with the marines. Have these efforts worked? Can the U.S. export democracy with carrots, sticks, or some combination of the two? A historical review of the empirical evidence provides some fascinating answers to these questions. Based upon this evidence, this paper argues that the method of exporting democracy is not nearly as important as commitment: be it through the carrot or the stick, to export democracy successfully the United States must fully fund and staff its democratization efforts.

## Promoting Democracy: A Historical Overview

Democracy promotion first featured prominently in U.S. foreign policy rhetoric in the aftermath of the 1898 Spanish American War. Defeat of the Spanish propelled the U.S. to superpower status, and as a superpower, the U.S. sought to increase its influence in the western hemisphere. From 1898–1933, the marines were dispatched approximately 30 times to Latin American countries and occupied some nations as long as 34 years. Frequently, the U.S. cloaked its interventions under the guise of democracy promotion. U.S. leaders argued that such active intervention was necessary in order to promote democracy throughout the region. However, critics noted that the countries with the most U.S. intervention (e.g., El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua) also had repressive authoritarian governments. Furthermore, critics pointed out that patterns of U.S. intervention were not conducive to democratization, but they did succeed in

promoting U.S. economic interests. Indeed, President Teddy Roosevelt's foreign policy was known as "Dollar Diplomacy" due to its heavy focus on the protection of U.S. economic interests.

As early as 1928, U.S. officials themselves began to criticize democracy promotion tactics. President Hoover argued, "True democracy is not and cannot be imperialistic," and he pledged to reverse the policy of democratization by invasion. Five years later President Franklin Roosevelt went even further and launched his "Good Neighbor Policy." Under the Good Neighbor Policy, the U.S. would withdraw all of its troops from Latin America, refrain from future intervention, and emphasize diplomatic consultations and negotiations. The U.S. adhered to this policy until World War II, and while the Good Neighbor Policy promoted trade and U.S. investment, it still did not improve democratization of the region any better than its predecessor.

The Good Neighbor Policy was interrupted by World War II. In the aftermath of this war, the U.S. renewed its commitment to democratization, this time on a much larger global scale. Even the strongest critics of U.S. foreign policy tend to agree that at least in the cases of Germany and Japan, the rhetoric matched the action. The U.S. was genuinely interested in reconstructing Germany and Japan and transforming them into democracies (with capitalist economies). In Japan, democratization was choreographed by approximately 5,500 occupation officials, backed by the power of 150,000 troops. With complete control over Japanese territory, occupation officials moved quickly to dismantle military and police institutions, overhaul legal and educational systems, and author a new constitution. Democratization in Germany followed a similar pattern. Once again, foreign troops fully occupied German territory and became the de facto government for four years. Differences among the victorious Allies led to a division of Germany; however, France, Great Britain, and the U.S. were all committed to establishing a strong democratic state. Meticulous care was taken to design democratic institutions that would rectify the flaws that led to the collapse

of democracy and the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The resulting German system had numerous provisions that staunchly upheld human rights and government stability, while thwarting attempts of one political party to monopolize control of the country. By the end of the 1950s, democratization in Germany and Japan was considered an overwhelming success.

While the U.S. was strongly committed to democratization of Germany and Japan, it would be incorrect to characterize U.S. foreign policy as centered on democracy promotion during the Cold War. Just as democracy was taking root in Germany and Japan, the U.S. pursued a very different strategy in places like Guatemala. In 1954, the U.S. helped to overthrow the leader of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz. Elected democratically in 1950, Arbenz aimed to transform Guatemala's feudal economy into a modern capitalist state. He pledged that this transformation would benefit all Guatemalans, targeting in particular the rural poor, of which 70% were illiterate and only 18% had access to potable water. Unfortunately for Arbenz, the U.S. found two major flaws in his plan for economic transformation. First, his economic plan included the appropriation of unused land owned by the United Fruit Company—a company with strong ties to the Eisenhower administration that did not like the compensation package offered by the Guatemalan government. Second, while Arbenz was not a communist himself, there were communist sympathizers in his government. The U.S. deemed Arbenz too soft on communism as well as too quick to seize the land of an American company. The C.I.A. began to train a group of disenchanting Guatemalan military officers to overthrow the government, and in 1954, they helped launch a successful military coup against Arbenz. The overthrow of Arbenz plunged the country into four decades of civil war; not until 1996 would Guatemala find itself at peace, ready to start the process of democratization again.

Another prominent case of the U.S. reversing democratization occurred in Chile, which up until 1973 enjoyed a long democratic tradition. Chileans democratically elected President Salvador Allende with a razor thin plurality of the vote in 1970. Allende was a self-proclaimed Marxist who pledged to find a “Third Way” for Chilean economic development by incorporating some elements of socialism into Chilean democracy. Allende aimed to fund his poverty-reducing initiatives by expanding state ownership of key economic areas—particularly the copper industry. American companies were heavily vested in the Chilean copper industry, and American investment in Chile was estimated at \$1 bil-

lion. The Nixon administration labeled Allende a threat and aimed to overthrow him. In 1973, the U.S. supported Augusto Pinochet's military attack that led to the death of Allende as well as Chile's long democratic tradition. Pinochet ruled Chile with an iron fist until the end of the Cold War.

U.S. policy throughout the Cold War is marked by examples of democracy promotion as well as democracy reversal. However, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the U.S. began to take the task of democracy promotion more seriously, assisting democratization in the developing world in myriad ways. In some cases, the U.S. used financial incentives, or carrots, encouraging authoritarian regimes to democratize by providing technical assistance, loans, and grants. If such regimes proved hesitant to start democratic transformations, the U.S. would take these carrots away, leaving developing countries without access to the economic assistance they desperately needed. On the other hand, the U.S. has demonstrated that it is not averse to using a stick either. In Panama, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the U.S. democratized from the barrel of a gun, invading countries and leaving democratic institutions in its wake.

### Assessing the Success of Carrots and Sticks

When one examines the track record of U.S. democracy promotion after the Cold War, the results are mixed. In some cases, the carrots have worked extraordinarily well, as nations have begun to adopt democratic institutions and procedures in response to U.S. financial incentives. Such was the case in Chile, where in a dramatic turnaround the U.S. pressured Pinochet to step down and provided financial support to pro-democracy groups challenging his reign. These financial incentives worked extraordinarily well, leading to the downfall of Pinochet and the renewal of a strong and vibrant democratic government. In South Africa, the racist regime of apartheid crumbled in the face of U.S. and international economic sanctions and boycotts. The U.S. banded together with the rest of the global community to support democracy activist Nelson Mandela as he emerged from decades of imprisonment to become the first black South African president. With international assistance and against all odds, Mandela led his country from the brink of civil war to establish the first multiracial, democratic government in South African history.

In other cases, however, the carrots have languished. For example, while Guatemala received substantial amounts of U.S. aid, democracy has proven to be quite hollow, as former coup plotters and human rights abusers have undermined the constitution in order to run

for office. Guatemalans tend to evaluate democratic progress in their country in negative terms; in some cases, up to 30% of the population believes that democracy does not really exist in the country. Venezuela also received substantial sums of U.S. and international assistance throughout the 1990s, particularly to reform its judicial branch. This assistance did not succeed in halting the demise of the party system in the country, or in preventing the rise of a former coup plotter, Hugo Chavez, to the presidency. In yet another twist, from the U.S. perspective democracy worked perhaps too well in Nicaragua, where last year Nicaraguans democratically elected longtime U.S. nemesis Daniel Ortega to the presidency. Still, while financial incentives are not always sufficient to establish democracy, on average the track record is positive. A recent cross-national study of U.S. foreign assistance on democracy building found that while there are exceptions (and these exceptions should not be overlooked), countries that have received U.S. financial assistance to promote democracy have succeeded in doing so. That is, recipients of U.S. aid *on average* tend to be more democratic than non-recipients.

Democracy with a stick has a more checkered past in the post-Cold War era. Invasion was eventually successful in promoting democracy in Panama, yet has become mired in insurgency in Iraq. In Panama, the U.S. was guided by the Powell Doctrine, which stated that if the U.S. were to invade, it must do so with overwhelming force. To invade a country of approximately 2.5 million, the U.S. relied upon 26,000 troops. While the U.S. quickly ousted dictator Manuel Noriega and secured control of Panamanian territory, democratization was a long and tenuous process. The U.S. invaded Panama at the end of 1989, ostensibly to arrest Noriega for drug trafficking, yet realistically democracy did not take root until 1994, when the economy began to recover and newly elected President Balladares began to overhaul and democratize Panamanian institutions.

In contrast to the successful (albeit slow) democratization of Panama, subsequent attempts at democratization by invasion have proven less successful. Today Iraq and Afghanistan feature most prominently in the media; however, in 1994 the U.S. encountered similar problems on a much smaller scale in Haiti. To address massive human rights abuses occurring in Haiti and stem the tide of refugees headed towards the U.S., President Clinton authorized an invasion to remove the dictator Raoul Cédras from power and establish a democratic regime. Six hours after launching the invasion, the dictatorship agreed to step down, opening the path for democracy. Skipping the invasion, the U.S. moved to

the occupation phase, using more than 20,000 troops to control Haiti and assume temporary control of the government. While a large force was initially sent to occupy Haiti, by 1995 this force was replaced by 6,000 U.N. peacekeepers. By 1996, this mission had dwindled to 600. As U.S. and international commitment waned, so did prospects for democracy. Political instability, lackluster economic performance, and social unrest spiraled out of control, engulfing the nation in violence and chaos. Today prospects for democracy in Haiti remain dim, as pro-democracy leaders have not succeeded in maintaining control over the country.

These contrasts between Panama and Haiti raise several interesting questions concerning U.S. strategies for democracy promotion in Iraq and Afghanistan today. What can we learn from past experiences with democracy promotion to inform U.S. strategies today? First, it appears that success is possible with both carrots and sticks, yet so is failure. When distinguishing between the successful and unsuccessful cases, it appears that the deciding factor is commitment. Democratization is a long process that requires sustained commitment in terms of monetary and personnel resources. Second, democratization rarely proceeds in a linear fashion. Rather, it advances in spurts and occasional setbacks. Initial successes can easily be reversed, which is why it is essential to sustain close ties with democratizing countries to provide the needed assistance—not leave prematurely as soon as things start to improve. Finally, it is important to remember that the rest of the global community might be suspicious of U.S. motives for promoting democracy. While the U.S. most certainly was dedicated to promoting democracy in places like Japan and Germany, in cases like Chile, the record is a bit uneven, as the U.S. was willing to promote as well as reverse democratization. A familiarity with past efforts of democracy promotion can help the U.S. formulate successful foreign policy and understand global perceptions of U.S. efforts.

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